Chapter V

THE BOOK OF SHADOWS

As a feministic novel, The Book of Shadows is remarkable for describing the bitter truth of life. Here Namita Gokhale has described the humiliation that Rachita feels as a teacher of English. Actually, her fiancé Anand committed suicide due to the breach of trust and he found himself helpless to survive in this cruel world. Rachita tries to explain the concept of alienation to her students in Delhi and tells them: “Alienation is a device to make the unfamiliar familiar or to render the familiar unfamiliar.”

At the very outset, the narrator Rachita asks a philosophical question – Who am I? So far she had defined herself after seeing her face in the mirror. Now her parameter had changed as acid had been thrown upon her face by the sister of Anand. Rachita is left to herself and now “alienation is the loss of identity” (Book 4), for her. She becomes conscious of having betrayed her lover and hence takes shelter in the old house of Ranikhet and compromises with the shadows:

The tall oaks lean against each other, their groping limbs invading the territories of other trees. They draw strange screeching sounds as bark brushes sap, and the shadows of the forest
start speaking in the dark. In the evening the
tortured pines sigh as though with one voice
(Book 3).

The world is cruel to her now as she is unable to face the
reality and the media. She reaches the hills so that she may
forgive others and to be forgiven by others. Her friends failed to
understand her vanity and, like Namita Gokhale, lives in the
house of her mother’s brother. Namita Gokhale admits that she
has lived in the house she has written about and hence does not
want any doubt about its truth. As she had suffered depression at
that time due to death of her husband, she resolved to express her
personal pain in The Book Of Shadows. Rumina Sethi remarks:

Rachita is the protagonist of Namita Gokhale’s
The Book Of Shadows a chronicle of
displacement, strangeness and exile, of
forbidding and family histories told in a sensual,
descriptive style which lends energy to her tense
psychological drama with all its intimacy and
haunting elusiveness. It is an original and
ambitious piece of work and wide-ranging with a
laudable cosmopolitan edge.²

The question arises – Does Rachita Tiwari succeed in
running away from the memory of her fiancé? No, certainly not.
She recollects that Anand used to kiss her passionately. Now the
curtain falls and she recollects:
Who was this swaying on a rope before me? This was not my lover, the stroker of my brow. It was an unbearable excess of all that was possible and bearable. There was defeat here, and a loss of dignity. This travesty of not-life was not how death was to be faced: of this I was sure... Well, I had betrayed him. I had 'yielded to passion', as he put it, to the not so subtle persuasions of my best friend's husband. Unreality gets compounded by confusion (Book 5).

Whenever she is alone at Ranikhet, she remembers:

Anand was another fictionalizer, he had wanted to be a novelist, or a film-maker, or perhaps a great dramatist. I have trained my mind to avoid thinking of him, of that purple jeering tongue, and I go through the set drill of forgetting (Book 16-17).

Rachita approves Plato's theory as expressed in The Republic that poets are removed from reality. And yet enjoys reading poems of Emily Dickenson, Mahadevi Verma etc. Here Namita Gokhale indirectly refers to time as: 'the invisible thief'. Shakespeare explains the same theory of time in As You Like It. Namita Gokhale follows the pattern of Gothic Romances and creates the world of horror and fear. She admits:
I'm talking about myself, Rachita Tiwari, touching thirty-four, forgotten as a person by the world, remembered only as a sensational story (Book 65).

In the month of October she faints as her handkerchiefs are spotted with blood. Sometimes she feels that there is someone in her room. Even the dog named Lady senses it. But who is in the room? Why does she not listen his sound? Rachita remarks:

I lay in bed paralysed with fear. Dry mouth, sweating palms, thumping heart and shallow hasty breathing. My heart beat so hard that at each beat a loose brass knob on the bedstead rattled. When I woke up (although I don't know if I ever slept) my mind was blank, I was exhausted, and my one desire was to get away (Book 64-65).

She asks herself – What is the cause of this malady? Namita Gokhale remarks:

Experience is the raw material of life. Life is the sum of our meager experiences. After a while it becomes easier just to drift. Yet anger can at least affirm, while regret redeems nothing (Book 66).
The above statement confirms that Namita Gokhale relates experiences with life and art as life is literature. Even Henry Fielding accepts that conversation is important for an artist. R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, V.S. Naipaul etc. are conscious of their experiences and share them with the readers. Same is the case with Namita Gokhale. While writing this serious novel she gives voice to her sense of fear. But the sense of fear does not go waste as the result is The Book Of Shadows.

Perhaps I will after all one day write a novel – I’ll become an author, I’ll write a best seller and go for the launch in a black lace mantilla and have all the men in the audience wildly in love with me (Book 65-66).

As she expresses her likes and dislikes freely, she gets mental relief. Yet she has her own hallucinations as she does not understand ‘something’, though she sees them. But who are they? Are they like the characters of a science-fiction film? Why it is that the ‘chaos regins. Everything has gone. Only pain remains unvanquished, a raw constant pain that is almost a stimulus... And now, these anomalies; these confusions. What is happening to me? (Book 67).

She asks herself – Does she exist? Or has she ceased
You could say that I have ceased to exist, I have become but a consecution of surreal perceptions, derelicted by spatial time and left at the mercy of
a world suspended between unrealities (Book 67).

Like Macbeth, she feels that she and her servant Lohaniju
re only shadows in a very long journey:

We are like people in a very crowded bus,
towards the end of a very long journey. We sense
and know our separate destinations, and yet the
journey which had thrown us together has knit a
sense of intimacy between us (Book 68).

These shadows haunt her regularly as she admits:

From somewhere beyond the curtain that divides
their worlds and mine, these shadows are seeking
my voice, appropriating my self. My definitions
of who I am are coming undone, and yet I do not
think I am going mad. Of course, that is what we
all say (Book 68).

The plots of Paro: Dreams Of Passion, Gods, Graves And
Grandmother, and A Himalayan Love Story are simple and deal
with the realities of the life of women. As an artist she has her
own perception of life and knows the art of narration. But she
seems to be running away from humanity to some extent in The
Book Of Shadows. Rachita does not want to return to Delhi
though she recollects her students and small portions of her
lectures. She recollects:
Pain is a precondition to life, a prelude to joy. It is a teacher, not a tormenter. Lack of stimulation leads only to a lack of sensation. Better, then, the pain.

Why can’t I understand this in daily life (Book 70-71).

Rachita’s loneliness makes her feel of the things that she experiences and yet fails to express them through words. As every Gothic Romance creates a sense of fear, she also feels:

I am being stalked. I know I am being stalked.

All the evidence is there—all the tell-tale signs of a ... person? entity? stalker?... intent on pursuit. Every time I turn my head I see the shade of someone hurriedly retreating. There is a suspicious silence which follows my silences like a pause. I don’t like it. I am afraid. Someone, something... this house—it has begun to speak to me. I do not want to listen to its stories; they are malicious and convoluted. It is not my imagination, there are things I see, words I hear that are outside the sphere of any experience I have ever had (Book 61).

Sometimes, the experience of fear makes her insane as she remarks:
... loneliness feeds on isolation until one day you realize you just can’t face anything any more (Book 61).

Her problem is to describe her neurosis which seems to be co-related with alienation and psychopathology. As her servant talks of various superstitions which the people believe there, she ridicules some of them. In The Book Of Shiva she accepts Parvati as worthy wife of Lord Shiva. In The Book Of Shadows she makes fun of the homely life of Shivji and Parvati and remarks:

I wonder if Shivji really lives there, under mount Kailash. Lohaniju assures me that he does, serpents and all. I asked him, just a joke, where Parvati went to get to her sexy little cholis tailored and he fell into a rage, a real rage such as I had never witnessed before. He said I was half-educated and suspended between two worlds like Trishanku. Since I didn’t have the good sense to hang on to my beliefs it was unlikely that my beliefs would stick on to me. that was what was meant by her destruction of samskaras (Book 62).

She finds the collection of Mahadevi Verma’s poem in the book case. As Sumitra Nand Pant, Nirala, Jayshanker Prasad and Mahadevi Verma are regarded Chhayavadis, she calls them poets of shadows as like romantic poets, they recoiled from the new
realities of modern India. As Namita Gokhale is conscious of her pain, she recollects the following lines of Mahadevi Verma:

Pain sticks to my mind
like a damp cloth;
as though drowning, these wet sighs
come crowding to my lops.  

Namaita Gokhale fails to understand whether Mahadevi Verma is coherent or incoherent and yet recollects this lonely woman poet who had washed the shadows in the lap of the Himalayas:

In the bosom of the night I am the arrow of the
day's desire.

Empty was my birth,
And the dawn is as a death:
Darkness alone the companion of my restless
spirit.

Speak not of union: In separation I am eternal (Verma 73-74).

As Rachita finds a prism in a drawer, she compares her world with it and feels pleased with the range of colours. This pleasing new reality is fully delightful for her:

As I observed my world bathed in that beautiful glowing light, as I saw the table and the chair and the fireplace refracted in this puzzling but entirely pleasing new reality. I felt somehow safe
and secure and familiar, as though I was retreating or retiring to a place I already knew and recognized. I sat with the prism held close to my eyes, lost in the splendour and surprise of this new world. Everything was as it should have been, nothing around me had changed (Verma 74).

After having defined the mental disease synesthesias Rachita feels that she is perhaps suffering this disease now. Namita Gokhale quotes the following stanza from W.B. Yeats to highlight her contemplative life at Ranikhet:

Let the new faces play what tricks they will
In the old room; night can outbalance day
Our shadows roam the garden gravel still
The living seem more shadowy then they.4

In the second part she refers to Chaucer, Spenser etc. Regarding The Book Of Shadows Namita Gokhale admits:

I didn’t realize that this was a book about pain. It is only after finished the book that I saw its purpose. In the book, Rachita, the connecting link of the story, feels lot of anger. I had lost my husband some years ago. And although on the surface I looked peaceful, there was a lot of anger inside me. That’s what I filled Rachita with... It was cathartic in that sense. The book is
also about death. As if I'm trying to find out what death is all about. The ghost in the novel serves that purpose. With him, I explore the soul's outward journey. Initially, I had thought that at the end of the novel, Rachita would go back to the city, perhaps have a plastic surgery (she has acid thrown on her face by her lover's sister) and live on. But somewhere along the way, I realized that this wouldn't happen. She would live on in that house of hills. This is symbolic of my living on in the world of - well, I won't say psychic, because I mock the obviously psychic - let's say, in the world of spirit. In a sense, it is also about rebirth.\(^5\)

In the third part of the novel Namita Gokhale describes Rachita's contemplative life with the help of Donaronza and her love for Wolcott. In the very beginning she confesses:

I hide in corners, I lurk in shadows. You might glimpse me behind the corner of a smile, or in the set of the eyes, sometimes. Getting in is easy, but humans are so very boring most of the time, and infiltrating them involves getting trapped in a time-dimension as well. There is no end to it then, linearity prevails, and day follows day, and they do so little with their lives. You
can excite them, incite them to mischief, but after a while it is all more of the same (Book 79).

Rachita describes the adventurous life of Dona Rosa and also the sound of the fire. She admits her own limitations regarding the past and future and remarks:

I have my own limitations. Whereas the future (viewed in a certain light) is like a quicksilver stream capable of being gauged and understood, or an incoming bus that can be caught or missed, the past remains a mystery, to be grasped only in the chambers of memory. I knew — I sensed — Dona Rosa to the depths of her being, but her history, the particular truth of her past, could only be understood and reconstructed from scattered thought impulses and shards and splinters of memory (Book 80).

In one of his novels Emile Zola describes the psychology of a murderer through the cat who has seen and observed the jealousy of the murderer. In the same manner Namita Gokhale admires the wisdom of the crows, the ravens, walrus, the cat etc. and considers the crows as eternal wanderer and hence her friends:
Crows have ancient eyes, they look into the twenty-seven depths of surface events and understand their totality. There is nothing which they do not know. Their opinionated cousins, the ravens, are parvenus and pretenders, the object of much pity and ridicule in refined circles. The walrus, I understand, is acquainted with death, with the synapse between the worlds. The cat too is companion to many mysteries (Book 81).

As Rachita has a lot of memories, she recollects Dona Rosa (basically Laura) and how she takes interest in the dead fish. As the fish is dead, Namita Gokhale remarks:

Nothing is irrevocable: everything must yield to change.

But nothing changes: the fish is still dead (Book 84).

Inspite of being an optimist, Laura fails to give new life to the fish. Same happens with Rachita and Namita Gokhale. While living with the inhabitants of the shadows, she recollects Dona Rosa’s love for Captain Wolcott. Actually Captain Wolcott was a student of the magician Crowley. Here Rachita again talks of spirits and mystics and remarks:

It is never good to venture too far, for mysteries are fragile things, and every world and dimension is full of traps for the unwary. I hesitated, and
you could say that in that hesitation I was lost. You will understand what I mean, it happens often enough with your kind (Book 87).

Namita Gokhale refers to the laws of Karma, theory of choice and success in this novel also and remarks:

I glimpsed for a moment the nature of human choice. Choice is the joker in life's pack of cards. It is choice that first guides the sperm on its long wet journey. Lonely, desirous of success, impelled by both past and future, it knows that its destiny is waiting, pulling it to the tip of the cape, the isthmus of the mother. Life is a constant series of choices. Some you make, and some are inevitably made for you (Book 87).

Here she comes close to Hardy who asked readers to remain beware of fate. Once she saw Captain Wolcott and Dona Rosa making love to each other passionately. Dona Rosa was lustful now as:

One kiss led to another, and in a short while they were tangled up in each other, the unsightly heap of holes and orifices and protruding parts which your race understands as passion. I was dismayed to see the change in Dona Rosa. The proud nobility, the gentle, calm of her demeanour all vanished from view (Book 89).
After having observed the body of Dona Rosa, Rachita admires the construction of a woman’s body as there is no depth to be analyzed in the body of a man. She remarks:

A man’s body is a most peculiar construct. A woman’s body contains a symmetry of purpose—the breasts, which are the conduit of the life-force, and the womb, the matrix of life. A man is an idiot on two legs, with a tap of semen between the testicles; his life-force is stored in a vulnerable exterior container (Book 90).

As Wolcott was interested in magic, Crowley’s spirit could travel as far as Ranikhet. Through magic, people drink human blood as Namita Gokhale remarks:

Magic is, as you doubtless know, merely a matter of finding and making the right connections. I have seen men drink blood from bowls of bleached skulls: such revels were not unknown in the history of this very house, when mad Munro and his friend Marcus tried their metaphysical tricks in this same room so many years ago. I have seen men slurp blood, bleached skulls for teacups, and I have seen them burp and benefit little else. And then, I have seen wise men that but smile at the wind and have their way with the elements (Book 64).
Rachita believes that Crowley had the power to destroy the works of civilizations. Crowley could analyze various aspects of cosmos, astral charts and the tree of life. Though Crowley does not accept the theory of evil but Namita Gokhale does. Munro and Marcus were the friends of Wolcott and hence came to know about this house. As both of them were great hunters and enjoyed hunting panther. They had to suffer for it. Namita Gokhale has full sympathy with the wild animals as they enjoy freely in the woods. She remarks:

Captivity is anathema to the spirit of the panther, its essence is speed and agility and freedom. Animal energies, when released, remain in the air for a long time, and a permanent miasma of anger, sorrow and confusion had settled on the tennis field. Even the servants were reluctant to go there...

The panther is a black animal, and anger when sheathed in the colour black magnifies and multiplies and attains an unimaginable intensity until it implodes unto itself. Because of its feline nature the panther is able to impregnate many dimensions. In short it is dangerous in the extreme (Book 99).
Later on Turner, Forbear, Kennedy and Dunbar saw the dead bodies of Munro and Marcus in a room of this house. The only son of washer woman had been sacrificed to the gods by these two hunters and how could the spirits of hills tolerate this sacrifice of pure and innocent blood? How can anybody become immortal blood? It is unfortunate that a priest and the wife of an English colonel drank blood of slaughtered goats from silver goblets. Namita Gokhale is not prepared to regard Marcus and Munro as mystics as they are degenerated human beings. They are neither mystics nor seers. They were mad as they enjoyed the Hashish, the Heroin, and uncontrolled freedom. They enjoyed sex freely with the virgins of the hills. She fails to understand this type of quest in life. She does not approve this search for freedom. Ultimately the panthers killed their tormentors and the villagers were satisfied. As usual, Namita Gokhale condemns evil in *The Book Of Shadows* too. With reference to Munro and Marcus she remarks:

The word evil does not belong to our plane, but I have to use it to explain to you what lay within those four walls. Just the smell was enough to drive anyone mad, composed as it was of fear and putrefaction. It is only natural for the flesh to decay, it is process: but Munro’s decomposing face was caught in such a grimace of pain and
anger, it held such a hideous monstrosity of expression (Book 120).

Colonel Osborne met the same fate here. In a very subjective mood, Namita Gokhale describes the lifeless day of February. That day Rachita feels lifeless, dull, lonely and restless and accepts:

I have learnt from bitter experience that there is no solace or relief in philosophizing – it only exacerbates the wounds of my fractured experience. Still, something in that chill, lifeless February day made me cry out at the injustice of my situation. It is terrible to be suspended in time and space, without a body, without a context, ignorant of the reasons and circumstances that have led to this strange exile, this cruel isolation. Knowledge is no consolation, nor is it any comfort to be at a vantage point where the synchronicity of things, their ebb and flow, and the current of linear time, are all so clearly visible. I feel so unutterably lonely, trapped behind the curtain, venturing out sometimes around the house (Book 124).

Rachita asks herself – Who brought her here? She thinks of her vision, understanding, dreams and hopes and remarks:
My vision and understanding are only exterior. I can gaze at this passing show of humans, and watch their follies and frailties, but they can so rarely sense or see me. We belong to different worlds, and the bubble of accident that blankets me also denies me contact with other spheres and channels. I dream incessantly of the dryad that lives in the deodar tree. Her dimension may in some terms be approximate to my own, but I fear I do not possess the courage to make her acquaintance. The hopes that I have nursed for so long are all I have, I do not have the conviction to put them to the test (Book 124).

As shadows come and vanish, she feels sad. Regarding the process of transmigration she remarks:

Presences arrive, from other planes, other existences, to observe, welcome and aid the process of transmigration. I look at them wistfully, even with a certain envy. When, I wonder to myself, shall I be reclaimed? Who is the one, the friend from the past, who will come and assist me to cross over? (Book 125).

Rachita is happy with the arrival of Father Benedictus in this house. This Father is the author of two popular books on theology and wants to write a book upon the folk tales of Kumaon
and Nepal. He has captured certain butterflies as he wants to study regarding their substance. While describing her sympathy for the butterflies she remarks:

Life... is a fearful quest for nectar. As it peers at the world through the saturated colours of its spectrum – the blues, the violets, the indigos – as through this beauty it registers the threat of the Other, hooping and diving and beating its wings in a frenzy of fear and panic, it creates a flutter in my field. It resonates through my centre for an unreasonable time. It is not that I am sentimental, butterflies just have that effect on me. It was agony to share the room with Father Benedictus: his orgiastic delight in decapitating the innocent creatures drove me wild with rage. I decided to move out, and even accommodated myself in an outhouse near the main gate for some time (Book 129).

The company of Father Benedictus proved to be a boon for her as the worthy Father told her the power of words. She always regarded words as inadequate vehicles of perception. Now Father makes her feel the importance of human language:

Words are difficult quantities for us to comprehend. They are shadows themselves, elusive approximations, but I mastered them.
That mastery gave me joy and satisfaction and also body: it earthed me, grounded me, made me human-like. Words create immense complications, but they can give life to the most incorporeal things. They became a heady intoxication, an addiction. For me, words will always remain associated with the wraith of cheroot smoke which encircled our conversations (Book 130-131).

Her doubts regarding self-perception were removed by him as she admits the growth of her consciousness:

Father Benedictus once explained that humans know themselves by means of vision, balance and the functioning of the sustaining organs: the thread on the beads being sentience, or the sense of self-perception. Well, my window on the world is naught else... (Book 131).

As Father Benedictus seeks knowledge, he tries to understand the difference between things known and unknown and things observed and unobserved:

Father Benedictus was a seeker of knowledge and a skilled interrogator. He drew from me the substance of my extraneous energies, things known and things observed, as also the subter memories of unformulated associations,
reminders and echoes, besides of course gauging the mechanical constraints and conditionalities of my existence. In return, he attempted to explain the contradictions of human life to me (Book 132).

Like Hindu saints Father Benedictus tried to understand the religious instinct and its relation with primitive instincts: He would use the framework of his friend Carl Jung, who posited – how effortlessly I can now use the burden of words! – who posited the existence of the Religious Instinct, a counterpole to the three biological drives of the primitive instincts. It was this Higher Self that Father Benedictus sought, but he was in despair if he would ever find it, for the call of instinct controlled his complex nature (Book 132-133).

Now Rachita learnt how to enjoy the power of words which she had never conceived earlier. Now her understanding had increased as she accepts:

He would list out the confusions of mankind for me. There were philosophers who doubted if the existence of the physical, objective world could be proved – a suggestion present in St. Augustine, discussed at length by Kant, and present in Leibnitz’s windowless monads. As you
see, the Father taught me well. Our time passed in talking and laughter and merriment (Book 133).

Regarding the power of words she accepts that they have great symbolic value:

Words, too, could in my world be understood as a form of excreta, for they exist only after the act of cognition, as dead symbols of the mind’s working. Of course, I could not understand or formulate these emotions before Father Benedictus gave me the gift of speech (Book 135).

Rachita is safe as she gets rid of uncertainties now. Words cannot betray her anymore. She accepts that words have life and attract the reader if understood and used properly.
NOTES & REFERENCES

1Namita Gokhale, *The Book of Shadows* (New Delhi: Penguin Book, 1999) 4. All the subsequent references are included in the main text.

2Rumina Sethi, *Dawn of Life's Truth up in the Hills* in *The Tribune* (Dec. 5, 1999). All the subsequent references are included in the main text.

3Mahadevi Verma quoted by Namita Gokhale, *The Book of Shadows* (New Delhi: Penguin Book, 1999) 72. All the subsequent references are included in the main text.
