

ECOCRITICAL CONCERNS OF NATURE IN NAMITA GOKHALE'S TRILOGY ON HIMALAYAS

Dr. A. Monika

DG Vaishnav College, Chennai, Arumbakkam

monikaarumugam@gmail.com 9445385277

ABSTRACT

Literature and the nature go hand in hand. Literature dealing with the majesty and force of nature is abundant. The writers' attention has recently been drawn to ecology and the danger that constant exploitation of our environment poses to humanity. This sense of worry has given rise to Eco-criticism, a new area of literary study. Eco criticism is the study of how nature is depicted in literary works and how literature and the environment interact. Literature and Eco criticism have a tight relationship. The essay discusses how Namita Gokhale's female protagonists attempt to preserve and revitalise their rural lifestyle and deep connection to their land. It provides instances of how readers can understand the concept of Eco criticism by reading the Himalayan trilogy by Namita Gokhale, which includes Things to Leave Behind, Himalayan Love Story, and The Book of Shadows.

Keywords: Eco-criticism, Ecology, Exploitation, Environment, Protagonist

Namita Gokhale is one of the most celebrated women novelists of the modern era. In 1956, she was born in Lucknow. Namita's early life was spent between New Delhi, Nainital, and the Himalayan foothills. She currently resides in Delhi. Namita's life was full of unique experiences that she used as a rich resource for her writing. We can assume that her rich life has given her a wide pallet on which to paint. Namita Gokhale is the Co-director of the

renowned Jaipur Literature Festival. She has written nine books. The present article focuses on Namita's portrayal of the Kumaon hills and Nainital, a hill station in her novels.

Namita Gokhale, has been a tireless chronicler of life in the Kumaoni foothills. After *The Book of Shadows* (1999) and *A Himalayan Love Story* (1996) Namita Gokhale concludes her trilogy of works on the Himalayas with her brilliantly designed and constructed novel, *Things to Leave Behind* (2006). As she did in the previous volumes, she once again shows her talent for painting the most vivid pictures of the hills and dales in and around Nainital and Almora. Her attention to the smallest details, together with her almost photographic recollection of the sights and sounds she experienced as a kid and the tales she heard from her grandmother and grand-aunts, contribute to the creation of a virtual panorama in front of the reader's inner eye. The majority of the time, Gokhale's compositions are more introspective in nature and are not in response to her surroundings. She brings the readers into a state of meditation with her words, bringing them one step closer to the image she has in mind and allowing them to find their answer in a measured amount of words.

Namita Gokhale has fond of the nostalgic memories of bygone days. Although she was born in Lucknow, she spent her early years there in Nainital that doesn't exist for her as a location on a map or even as a physical place; rather, it follows her everywhere she goes. All of her memories congregate in her head when she travels to old places. She acknowledges that, "The overlays of remembrance and memory had coalesced into a dream territory which some part of me continued to inhabit"(226). She is inspired by these memories to write about the locations, people, and sights she has previously experienced. Even the seemingly insignificant details are crammed into her memory: "These were memories made up of brittle things: the texture of sticky summer lychees; the sound of langurs tramping about on the tin

roof; the taste of fresh pine and deodar needles which the mali's son insisted tasted just like chewing gum. And our Malju, the mali, the wizard, who fell off tiffin top chasing an errant cow"(226).

Her novels highlight her love of the Himalayas- Kumaon and Nainital. Settings often have significance in the works of writers. There are numerous examples that demonstrate that how old places are recreated. William Wordsworth refers to Lake District and Thomas Hardy to Wessex. A.K. Ramanujan and Jayant Mahapatra discuss their ties to their region. Namita Gokhale has memorable moments of the neighbourhood she lived in or belonged to. She incorporates these memories into the way she describes the settings in her novels.

The value of a novel can be determined by asking ourselves if we should read it again. If a novel becomes tedious after the first reading, it is not one. Like two of her earlier books, *Things to Leave Behind* is also set in the Himalayan Mountains. Its premise—the interconnected tales of a few Indian families through British rule—holds great creative promise. The first chapters' historical depth and poetic opening words suggest the possibility of a post-colonial reading. Some of the characters are endearing, particularly the Ayurveda doctor and his interactions with the king of Nepal and British officers. According to its preface, it is Gokhale's "most ambitious work yet".

Kumaon appears as the protagonist in *Things to Leave Behind*, *The Book of Shadows* and *A Himalayan Love Story* that comprises Gokhale's Himalayan trilogy. The word "Kumaon" derives from the phrase "Kurmanchal," which means "country of the Kurmavtar." Kurmavtar, one of the three gods of the Hindu Trinity, is said to be the tortoise-incarnation of Lord Vishnu, the Preserver, in Hindu mythology. The Kumaon region is divided into four

districts: Pithoragarh, Almora, Udham Singh Nagar, and Nainital. These are all popular destinations for travellers, pilgrims, and hikers alike since they offer them a variety of sights, fascinating experiences, extreme obstacles, and religious inspiration. Namita Gokhale is a descendant of the Kumaon Mountains. The area near Ranikhet, Almora, and Nainital is her favourite hunting ground. It is abundant in bird life, bears, panthers, porcupines, snakes, and a wide variety of butterflies. It is heavily forested with pine, deodar, oak, and rhododendron. The Himalayas, which are blanketed in snow to the north, keep hill streams pouring with ice-cold water throughout the summer. The Gangetic plains, which are to the south, heat up considerably in the summer. Kumaon is frequently referred to as the "Switzerland of India" due to its stunning lakes, rivers, towering snow-white peaks, vibrant flora, colourful birds, and attractive scenery. The picturesque hills, the pilgrimage sites, and the trekking glaciers all contribute to this grandeur and enhance Kumaon's natural beauty, making the hills alluring and eerie.

Things to Leave Behind, a rigorous work of art and literature has been hailed as Gokhale's most ambitious project, is both an ode and a eulogy to her home Kumaon. It is a monument to human desire for escape from the fetters that bind humanity. Those chains maybe caused by our gender, our colonisers, our sexuality, our independent will, or our strongest feelings.

In contrast to her previous works, Things to Leave Behind is more aspiring, intricate, and nuanced. It also represents a transition from the personal to the political to a point when the personal merges with the political. Historical occurrences have a lasting impact on a way of life that is about to change. The emerging and the dying worlds are poised to come

together and integrate. The lines separating the traditional and modern, national and international are becoming less apparent.

The epoch Gokhale has selected is one of enormous turbulence, even though change is sluggish to come to the hills. Many significant events occur between the years 1840 and 1912, including the Great Revolt of 1857, which will be referred to as the "First War of Independence" years later; the expansion of British rule in India and the resulting awareness of colonialism among the local population; the beginning of missionary activities combined with westernised ideas of health, hygiene, and education; the widespread use of English-medium schools; and the distribution of newspapers, books, and journals among readers; greater printing advancements; easy access to world literature through reasonably priced translations; a network of libraries and bookshops in the trimmed corners of smaller towns; and enhanced travel options due to better road and rail connections.

The novel explores the conflicted legacies of the British Indian past as well as the creation of a precarious modernity. It opens with a scene of six mountain ladies circling Naini Lake's waters while wearing black and scarlet pichauras. It captures the spirit of colonial times of the Lower Mall Road (for dogs, servants, and other Indians) and Upper Mall Road (reserved for Europeans and horses only). In this novel, Jayesh, Tilottama's husband, and Deoki, her problematic daughter, are the main characters. Tilottama's uncle is hanged during the Mutiny. The utopian Eden Abram is founded by the young missionary Rosemary Biden, and Jayesh enters it after converting to Christianity. It is a complicated story of intertwined cultures and the Himalayan region where they meet.

Mountains, lakes, meadows, landslides, hail, snow, and sleet are all present. Diesel exhausts from vehicles and buses. The people are tough and powerful but also somewhat disturbed. These mountains are among the youngest in the planet and are still growing and exploring.

Tilottama makes the captivating dominant character. Her departure from "normality" starts early on when her marriage is postponed due to India's gradual march towards independence, giving her access to a sliver of education and agency. Because of Tilottama's (also known as Tillie's) feminist tendencies, which are fuelled by her respect for Pandita Ramabai and the news she ingests from Almora Akhbar and Almorah Annals, fate is made worse. Despite of all that, Tillie is unable to turn her independent thoughts into independent deeds, whether it be ensuring that her daughter receives a quality education or freely moving outside of her home. Through this character, Gokhale emphasises the struggles of independent-minded women in 19th-century India.

Namita Gokhale was brought up in Nainital. She misses Nainital, which brings her joy. She is well-versed in the geography, climatic conditions, inhabitants, customs, and even the history of numerous locations there. Her novel captures all these memories. The most part of the novel, *A Himalayan Love Story* takes place in Nainital. Nainital is a part of Gokhale's identity. As she acknowledges: "For me, Nainital is not a place on a map, it is not even a geographical location. It exists continually for me wherever I go. I live out a part of my life there wherever else in the world I might be" (229).

The locations of Nainital and the Jeolikote, which is located in the Himalayas and on the road heading to Nainital, are both well described in *A Himalayan Love Story*. The novel

includes detailed descriptions of the houses, streets and bazaars. The first chapter of the book describes life in Jeolikote, where Parvati and her mother resided in two apartments perched above a kirana shop. Parvati describes the various trades practised by the local hill inhabitants. Strawberries, mulberries, and roasted corn on the cob were the staples of trade in Jeolikote, apart, of course, from the honey for which it was justly famous. It was not a prosperous town, nor a particularly interesting one. "Subjects of conversation were few and far between; nothing much happened except for yet another tourist or traveller taking sick because of the winding roads and puking uninhibitedly out of the window onto the body of a bus"(HLS 4).

Then there is the narration of road in Nainital that led to the place where the annual Nandashtami mela was held. Even the smallest details have been provided by Namita Gokhale to show how much she adores Nainital and everything related to it. Mohan Mischief, Jeevan Jaundice, and Mukul all went to the mela. "We walked past the old English graveyard of St. Johns-in-the-Wilderness. with its brooding trees, with roots like talons, past the stable where houses sheltered restlessly under tattered blankets, down past the mosque and the police station to the temple" (HLS 83).

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In *A Himalayan Love Story*, Namita Gokhale has depicted what is familiar to her—the various hues of nature over the seasons. She connects changes occurring in her characters' lives to various forces of nature. The first thing Parvati tells us is that she noticed her mother's face changing toward the conclusion of the long winter. Her skin tone returned to its previous state, and the small nest of wrinkles that had formed around her eyes also vanished. Seasonal changes have an effect on Parvati as well. With the arrival of spring, she no longer

experienced the fear and dread she had over the long, chilly winter. She finds comfort in nature:

"The plum and apricot trees were in blossom, and the sky was a clear, triumphant blue. The days were getting warmer, there was something gentle and invigorating about the fragrant March breeze, and a part of the anxiety and dread that I carried like a secret burden seemed to be gradually disappearing with the spring"(HLS 13).

The monsoon caused the flowering of hydrangeas and tiger lilies, much as the arrival of spring caused the blossoming of plum and apricot trees. She was brought to Ramsay Hospital during that time period following Lalit's demise since she was carrying a child. Autumn came after the monsoon season, and this is when Parvati's problems really started. The season is vividly and obliquely described. It is nothing more than a memory of the past:

"It was when I returned to Wee Nooke that the troubles began. Although it was now autumn, the monsoon clouds had receded and the warm sun shone in a blue cloudless sky, the fog refused to go away. It crept about my forehead, black, smoky, acrid, creating a terrible weather and climate quite its own" (HLS 49).

The changes that occurred in Parvati's life, such as becoming a lunatic and sent to an asylum were foretold by the weather. But for Mukul, who returns to Nainital for a short stay, the natural world stands in for the warmth and comfort of home. He was completely familiar with the landscape as he was making his way to Nainital. Even the following scene could be predicted by him:

"There was a complete familiarity in the landscape, each scene reminding me of what was coming next. The sky was like a smudged grey watercolour. My eyes followed the inky cumulonimbus cloud formations towards the most unimaginable shades of green: the young green of the paddy shoots, the deeper colours of the mango trees, the tall lush grass. There was a fulfilment in the earth, in the flooded fields and cavorting parrots that communicated itself to me even though my tiredness of the day before. I put the window down and smelled the damp earth" (HLS 61).

When Mukul returned to the hills, he felt fulfilled, just like the earth eventually will. Gokhale has created the ideal representation of nature using colour. Further explanation obviously shows Mukul becoming sentimental at observing the many manifestations of nature. In order to fill the car's radiator, the driver stopped at Jeolikote, where Mukul discovered pure spring water gushing from a lion-headed spout. He inhaled the crisp scent of wet mud. He then came to a stop at the toll booth outside of Nainital. The entire chapter describing the nature reveals the delight of Mukul and nature. Dahlias and other flowers that are growing there are also made to sway by the soft air. In addition, the Monsoon streams were gleefully gurgling down the hill, and butterflies were flitting about:

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"We stopped next at the toll station outside Nainital. Huge heads of dahlias nodded in the breeze. There were marigolds and cosmos and tiger lilies and other sorts of hill flowers the names of which I did not know. Monsoon streams gurgled down the hillside. Butterflies speckled the air" (HLS 72).

Gokhale's passion with hills is once again displayed in her next novel, *The Book of Shadows*, which is set in the Himalayan resort town of Ranikhet. It was a region created by

the British as a hill station, a place for soldiers to relax and escape from the stifling heat of the plains. Ranikhet was hardly populated when missionary William James Cockerell and his wife arrived to start their mission there. At the place, there was not a single dwelling. There were trees all over the place. With the exception of a little area cleared on one side, William Cockerell writes: "With the exception of a little land cleared on one side, the country around was covered with forests of pine, oak and rhododendron, interspersed with meadows or 'bugyals' where the people of the valleys pastured their cattle" (TBS 37).

Rachita Tiwari sought shelter in a secluded house in the Himalayan foothills, after being attacked by her former lover's sister. She had visited this house frequently when she was a child. In the author's note at the opening of the novel, Namita Gokhale mentions that she had lived in the home that is mentioned in the book. She continues by making a statement about the home, saying,

"My husband and I lived in an old house in the hills. It was a house we both fell in love with. But we also felt that there was something strange some presence that was not entirely at peace with itself. I based my novel on that house. I didn't set out to do it. I didn't say, 'Okay, I've been to a haunted house so I'm going to write a ghost story' It happened rather insidiously"(Namita Gokhale, at <http://www.lifepositive.com>).

Both the mansion and its surroundings were enigmatic. Rachita once strolled along the path that wound through the hill beneath the house. Rachita discovered a fascinating scene on the road with a small waterfall. When she saw the beauty of the place, she lost track of herself and her struggle in her quest for identity. Rachita was calmed by the surroundings, which caused her to lose herself. Describing the beauty of the place she says,

"There is a path that unfolds in the hills below the house that winds around until you reach the stream beside the fields, and then back to the house again. There is a spot in that walk that I have always felt is enchanted, privy to secrets, peopled by sprites or fairies or some such benevolent spirits. A copse of banj, of Himalayan oak, is clustered around a little waterfall that tumbles prettily to a clear pool surrounded by a heap of dolmen-like rocks. There was a forest of ferns around me, delicate cautious tendrils of the most heart-rending green. I sat down on a rock and contemplated the scene, forgetting for a while the confusing dilemmas of identity" (TBS 69). The Bhairav Temple was another place that influenced Rachita. Even as a young child, it terrified her. Even the sun never strayed there since it was a forbidden place. It was intended for the most ferocious hill deity. On another of her walks, Rachita arrived at the temple and trembled as she entered. She describes her views:

"I found myself on the rocky path that leads to the Bhairav mandir dedicated to the fiercest of our hill deities. The temple is a forbidding place. It is situated upon a curve of the hill which the sun never visits. A jagged assembly of boulders line the way to the temple gates. A concatenation of crows is always squabbling there. Several steps up, on the spine of a ridge that straddles the mountainscape, in a direction obverse to the lay of the land, the Bhairav temple used to terrify me even as a child. Now, once again, the hair on my arms stood on edge as I walked up the sombre path" (TBS 197).

Nature depictions abound in *The Book of Shadows*. With remarkable conciseness, the 15 hills, which goes from morning until sunset, and the changes in the scenery brought on by the changed season are depicted. Following an acid attack, Rachita has travelled to Ranikhet, a town at the foot of the Himalayas. She relies on nature for her power to survive. She was in a confused state of mind at the outset of the book, so she was not relishing in the beauty of

nature. But at end of the novel the nature, however, is what nourishes her, teaches her life's lessons, keeps her alive, and gives her the urge to live. She begins the novel by describing the early hours of the day, with the sun peeking through the window and birds tweeting to announce the coming of morning. But she was not in the right state of mind to experience the morning splendour.

"I awake again as the first light of the morning creeps into the room. The dawn chorus heralds the arrival of day. First a single tinny-voiced bird twitters a brave but not entirely musical welcome to the Sun God. Gradually more voices enter the fray. It could sound lovely if one was in the right frame of mind, but my head is hurting" (TBS 32).

However, she finds satisfaction in the wonders of nature after drawing power from it and through self-realization. The fantastic description of the manifestation of nature's splendour is thus;

"This is the most beautiful time of the year in our hills. The leaves begin to change colour. And a shadow of red sits upon the hillside. The marigolds are out in full bloom, their rich smells satiate the senses. The tribulations of winter are just around the corner, yet the last snatches of sun drenched joy still saturate the earth. Marrows sit plumply upon the sloping roofs of village houses, sunning themselves, and tomatoes are dried and preserved for the sunless winter. Corn hangs by the eaves of Lohaniju's cottage, as do garlands of bright red chillies. The Himalayas gleam brightly in the warm clear sunlight, and when the first snows fall in the high reaches of the mountains, powdering the peaks with an added glow, there is something breathe taking and stupendous in their beauty. It is a time to harvest, to conserve,

to await a trial of strength with the elements. It is a time of joy and resolution" (TBS 218-219)

The missionary, William Cockerell, who constructed Rachita's home, believed that the harsh climate of the Indian subcontinent made it impossible for civilisation to advance steadily. When the first rains come, the vegetation is stimulated to grow because the summers are destructive to growth:

"In the searing summer months not a blade of green grass is to be seen, and the ground is scorched, scarred, and baked. When the first rains arrive, all nature is transformed. The parched earth gives way to the richest green. After the downpour the sun comes out in all its strength under the combined action of heat and moisture, every conceivable form of vegetation thrives vigorously, as, alas, does an infinite variety of pestilential insect life" (TBS 41).

William Cockerell also makes a comparison between the English and Indian autumn and claims that God is present in all nature. He claims:

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"It was now the fair month of October, which in those hills is different from an English autumn. The copious monsoon rains had enriched and rejuvenated the soil, and a verdant green blanketed the hills. The heavens were deep and startlingly blue, a sort of rich cobalt colour unknown in England. Against this backdrop rose the noble snow-mountains of the Himalayan range, brilliant in the mellow sunshine; reminders to the human soul of the pervading presence of God" (TBS 48).

Namita Gokhale's fiction frequently references nature. In her novels, the natural and human worlds inevitably come into contact. She has carefully studied the numerous facets of nature and is able to accurately analyse how it affects the human psyche and way of life. Nature has a calming effect in addition to having an unsettling presence. Nature in all of its forms playing various roles in her writings. The protagonists are given solace by being removed from the world of sorrow and suffering, but at the same time being made aware of the depressing existential facts. The protagonist's inner world and the natural world outside are always in conversation with one another. Nature serves as a metaphor for both creation and destruction.

Thus it can be seen that Namita Gokhale cherishes nostalgic memories of the past. She exhibits a fine talent for conjuring up lovely word pictures in her thoughts. The descriptions of people, places, and environment are rich with small particulars. It demonstrates her keen sense of observation, memory, and retention. Having an intense desire to communicate and mastering the language to do so efficaciously and vigorously makes Namita Gokhale what Raja Rao refers to as a true "Upasaka": "Unless the author becomes an Upasaka' and enjoys himself in himself (which is 'Rasa') the eternality of the sound (Sabda) will not manifest itself and so you cannot communicate either and the word is nothing but a cacophony" (p.256)

She has written about the beautiful grandeur of the Himalayas as well as urban settings like Delhi and Mumbai in her works. From her childhood to her womanhood she carefully examined these locations all around her. She has imparted universal appeal to these places' scenery, landscapes, men and women, cultures, and traditions.

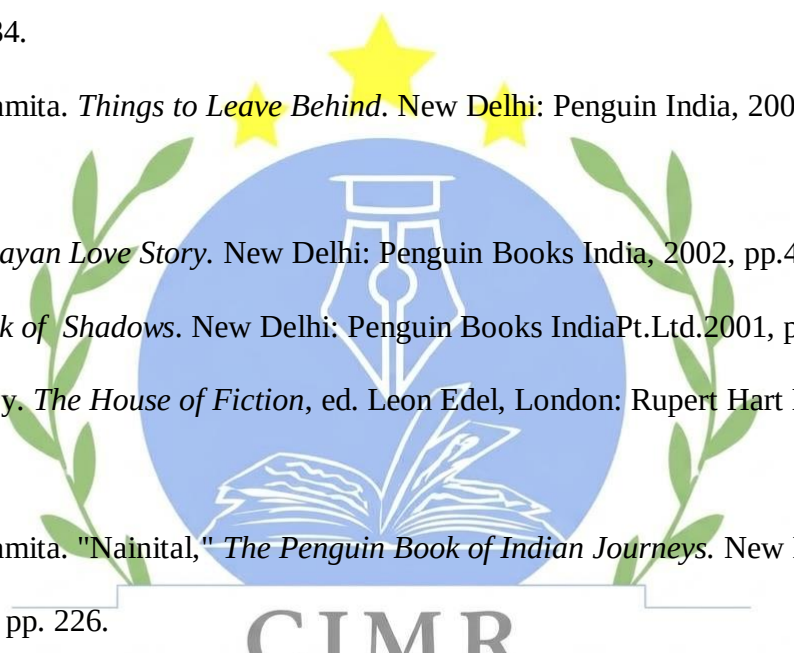
When discussing artists and the creative process, Henry James describes Namita Gokhale's exceptional perception as, "a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue"(p.31). She provides vivid descriptions of people, places, and nature while subtly implying the peculiarities entangled.

Her first two novels reflect the urban setting which includes descriptions of workplaces, homes, streets, a cremation site, etc. While the hills are described in her other novels with their homes, streets, temples, strange spots, etc., she has also provided information about the residents of these locations. She provides details regarding their physical characteristics, attire, jewellery, and even behaviours. Then there is beautiful word art of the natural world, including hills, the sea, flowers, trees, the seasons, sunrises, eclipses, etc. Her novels' natural settings serve as both a backdrop and a central character. It can occasionally have an impact on how things turn out by affecting how people feel and how they behave.

In conclusion, Namita Gokhale's compositions are greatly influenced by the geographical environment that follows her wherever she goes. This paradigm views the individual as a component of the ecosystem and shifts the crucial attention away from social ties and toward natural ones. It places a high priority on the "literary sense of place," which is an essential statement of one's connection to or estrangement from a particular natural context rather than a setting. The writer has expressed an interest in environment, culture, and geography since the outset. An Eco critical perspective looks at how people interact with nature to understand how they relate to it because it supports the premise that nature permeates all aspects of life as a literary subject. Suresh Frederick is true when he states,

“Eco criticism gives human beings a better understanding of nature” (134). Literary studies require Eco criticism because it is impossible to separate characters from nature, which they either groom disruptively or constructively.

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