
Book Review:

Title :	<i>Never Never Land</i>
Author:	Namita Gokhale
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Namitha Gokhale's *Never Never Land* (2024) is a meditative text situated in the intersection of ecology, memory, nostalgia, ageing and existence through the intriguingly personal and philosophical experiences of the characters. The beginning of the novel with a quote from Muriel Spark, an eminent Scottish author "The prospect of death is what gives life the whole of its piquancy. Life would be so much more pointless if there were no feeling that it must end" establishes the overarching theme of life-death, and ageing as a voyage, a liminal passage where one evolves from 'be' to 'being'.

The novel is set in the beautiful backdrop of Nanda Devi, the Himalayan Peak of Kumaon region, Uttarakhand, where the character Iti Arya, a middle-aged editor and aspiring novelist, retreats in search of meaning and a renewed sense of self. Iti's emotional and psychological evolution takes place at "The Dacha", where she starts living with her grandmother, Lily, affectionately called "Badi Amma," and her old companion Rosinka Paul Singh, both women in their nineties. The Dacha, which has been a physical retreat to her, soon becomes an emotional excavation that takes her to the dark passages of her past. Her stay there helps her to make sense of who she has become and what has been lost in life.

The Himalayas and the eco-consciousness of life in the foothills are omnipresent in the novel. Gokhale paints a very pragmatic view of the Himalayas, illustrating both the sublime and the picturesque features of nature. The beauty of the landscapes of Nanda Devi is juxtaposed with the horrors

of landslides and loss of life and property, which it precipitates. She mentions "climate change and global warming" (Gokhale 159) have brought about the "wrath of Gods" (ibid). It suggests a cosmological retribution against human excess on the ecosystem. The mountains, once venerated as sacred, now appear to retaliate against the degradation done to them. Gokhale asserts, "they have decided to push away the tourists and greedy builders who are polluting our Dev Bhoomi". She exposes environmental exploitation situating it in moral and spiritual ethos highlighting the land's agency against human exploitation. She employs magic realism at several instances when the Himalayas talk back to her. They say, "We are there for you" (Gokhale 20). She also communicates with magpie bird, blurring human-nonhuman boundaries. When the Himalayas stand by Iti, a woman in her moment of crisis, assuring her of their presence, they also entrust her with the responsibility to stand by them in return.

This reciprocal carries a distinct ecofeminist undertone of mutual care and interdependence between woman and nature. Her retreat in search of existence simultaneously becomes a return to her home, her nature, from her urban life of Gurgaon, embodying Gokhale's assertion that "sometimes we have to retreat to return" (Gokhale 164) towards the end. Her journey is pulled to the evolution of her subjectivity, strengthened by the interconnectedness she experiences with the natural order.

Women in the novel have complex relationships. The association between Rosinka and Lily is rooted in social hierarchy of class. However, over time, it has transformed into mutual dependence and affection. Iti observes the growth of their relationship as she represents the life force "In their entwined ways" (Gokhale 77). Nina, a young woman who claims to be Badi Amma's granddaughter, is also the part of The Dacha. Her intrusion to the house dismantles its delicate equilibrium. It brings forward the old memories and hidden resentments. Through these four women, Gokhale constructs a multi-generational portrait of womanhood and its postmodern perspective driven by the back and forth, nonlinear narrative of the novel which oscillates between first-person and third-person perspectives. These shifting of narrative techniques mirrors the fluidity of existence and memory of the characters allowing temporalities to exist.

The novel stands at the cliff of concerns of aging and its plural manifestations. Where on the one hand, Lily is passive and meek, on the other hand, Rosinka is vibrant, sharp and mischievous. However, both are extremely complex and full of contradictions. Rosinka's joke "When the burden of life gets too heavy, or either or both of us fall ill, we shall withdraw from

life. I have a suicide note ready..." (Gokhale 83) captures the ingrained existential fragility that accompanies ageing. Gokhale reveals the despair with which the elderly characters confront mortality, a phase accompanied by dependence, loss of agency, and the fear of prolonged suffering. The "suicide note" is the metaphor of desire to reclaim control over life. Gokhale, through the portrayal of ageing as the reflection on how ageing compresses vitality while sharpening the consciousness of mortality. Through this, Gokhale opens important conversation about autonomy, vulnerability, and the courage it takes to face the death with grace.

Like her earlier works, *Never Never Land* represents a mature continuation of her engagement with the themes of femininity, memory, ageing, life and death. The novels she wrote earlier investigated young women negotiating through life but in *Never Never Land* she turns her attention to women in midlife and old age. The tone of the novel is gentle, melancholic, yet quietly luminous that captures the wisdom that comes from enduring life rather than overcoming it.

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