

**Hills of Nainital:
A Backdrop for the Novels of
Namita Gokhale**

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Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/Things-Leave-Behind-Namita-Gokhale/dp/4691278303>

Abstract

Beautiful natural description of landscape, the hills and rivers, the flora and fauna of the Nainital and Kumaon Hills bring to the novels of Namita Gokhale, a special touch of romance and grandeur. This paper attempts to bring out the natural beauty and the native culture of the Hills folk in all her novels. Till Namita wrote her novels, no one had immortalized the beauty of the Nainital.

Keywords: Namita Gokhale, Nainital, Kumaon Hills, *Things to Leave Behind*, *The Book of Shadows*, *A Himalayan Love Story*.

Introduction

Namita Gokhale is one of the well-known women novelists of recent time. She was born at Lucknow in 1956. Namita spent her childhood between New Delhi, Nainital and in the foothills of the Himalayas. At present she lives in Delhi. Namita had plenty of personal experiences in life that became a treasure store for her writings. We can say that her eventful life has provided her with a vast canvas for her work. Namita is co-director of the famous Jaipur Literature Festival. She has penned nine novels. The present article focuses on Namita's pictorial presentations of the hill station of Nainital and Kumaon hills in her novels. After *The Book of Shadows* (1999) and *A Himalayan Love Story* (1996), Namita Gokhale completes her trilogy of books on the Himalayas with her exquisitely crafted and produced novel *Things To Leave Behind* (2016).

Kumaon

The word KUMAON owes its origin to 'Kurmanchal' meaning 'land of the Kurmavtar'. According to the Hindu Mythology, Kurmavtar is the Tortoise incarnation of Lord Vishnu, the Preserver among the three gods of the Hindu Trinity. Kumaon region comprises of the four districts namely, Nainital, Udham Singh Nagar, Almora and Pithoragarh. All of these are favorite haunts of the tourists, pilgrims and trekkers alike, providing them vast attractions, fascinations, wild challenges and faith as well. Namita is a daughter of the Kumaon hills. Her favourite stamping ground is the region around Nainital, Almora and Ranikhet. It is densely afforested with pine, deodar, oak and rhododendron and rich with bird life, bears, panthers, porcupines, snakes and a variety of butterflies. To the north are the snow-covered Himalayas which keep hill streams gushing with ice-cold water through the summer months. To the south are the Gangetic plains which become an inferno during the summer. Often described as the "Switzerland of India", Kumaon's natural brilliance is manifested in the beautiful lakes and rivers, majestic snow-white peaks, bright flowers, colorful birds and the picturesque landscapes. Adding to this grandeur are the charming hills, the pilgrim centres and the trekking glaciers - all of which add to Kumaon's range of natural beauty and make the hills attractive and haunting.

Nainital

The tourist town of Nainital situated in the Indian state of Uttarakhand is the headquarter of Nainital District in the outer Himalayas. Situated at an altitude of 1,938 meters (6,358 feet) above sea level, this town with its beauteous splendour is one of the most famous tourist places of the country. Pictorial presentations, effect of dialect, geographical descriptions, comparison with past city, present problems etc. make the Nainital town a character in the novel *The Himalayan Love Story*. Nalini Ganguly writes in *India Today*:

The writer who grew up in Nainital remains obsessed by the air of the mountains. All of her work seems to be stuck with her personality as a Kumaoni Brahmin girl. Her earlier novel *A Himalayan Love Story*, in which she traced the

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lives of two star-crossed lovers who grew up in Nainital bears testimony to her overpowering sentiment for the region.

Namita's Novels with Kumaoni Places, People and Culture

Things To Leave Behind (2016) Namita Gokhale's most ambitious work, is an ode as much as an eulogy to her hilly native Kumaon region. It is another installment of Namita's continuing love for the Himalayas. The broad arc of the novel encompasses generations of women in the Kumaon region during the British Raj, from families based in Nainital and Almora, within the seemingly slow time around the placid waters of the Naina Devi Lake. *Things To Leave Behind* is a historical fiction beginning around 1840, the years before the Indian Sepoy Mutiny, leading to the first decade of the 20th century, crackling with its wonders of electric bulbs and horseless cars. The novel is epic in span covering the period from 1840 to 1910. It may also be described as a clash between colonialism and modernity, which offers a particular peek into the changing role of women.

The novel is a tale of social development with scientific progress in this region. The novel begins with the foundations of today's hill district Nainital before 1857. It compasses the period from the entry of the Britishers in Nainital. It narrates development of modern Nainital with its mythological evolution:

The settlement flourished. Naineetal (as mentioned in the novel) grew, quickly and irreversibly, even if the gods were unsettled. The trinity of Baron, Welles and Batten had worked their spell. The lake of the three immortal sages, Atri, Pulastya and Pulaha, where Sati's eye had once fallen to earth, now belongs to another time, another people. (*Things To Leave Behind* p.17)

The novel covers both the hill towns Almora and Nainital. It narrates the development of the hill station:

The new hill station of Naineetal was different. The township was designed and built with the subjugation of the native race in mind. The Upper Mall Road was meant to accommodate the Europeans, their wives, their children and their horses, and the Lower Mall Road for dogs, servants and other Indians, both circling the lake. (*Things To Leave Behind* p. 18)

Tilottama, one of the most memorable women characters of Namita is the protagonist. Devi Dutt Pant is a government pleader in Nainital living with his wife Saruli, his widowed sister Durga and her female child Tilottama. After the death of her mother Tilottama is brought up by her uncle Devi Dutt and her childless wife Saruli. Because of Mangaldosh Tilly is married at age of nineteen with Nain Chand Joshi from Almora, a surveyor with rational mind. Tilottama's new home was considered the cultural heart of the Kumaon region. Nain Chand as a traveller, in his wanderings encounters many women. Lonely at home rearing her daughter Deoki, Tilottama develops interest in learning to read and write. Other interesting women characters of the novel are Mary Jane and her

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daughters Rosemary and Gloria. Mary's husband is murdered in the mutiny of 1857. She lives with a mission and a message. Mary remarries an American missionary Henry Boden. Boden set up a leprosarium in Almora. Later on, Rosemary establishes Eden Ashram near Nainital. Deoki baptised as Diana and her husband Jayesh as Jonas arrive in this Ashram. As the novel proceeds Tilottama proves to be rebellious and modern. The novel ends with her return to Naineetal in her sixties when she feels 'Leave the past behind and look only to future.' Namita describes:

Tilottama sat by the lake, squatting on a large damp boulder facing the Pashan Devi temple. On with the steep rock face, the image of the stone goddess had been freshly anointed with vermilion. Around her, the frog had crept up, enveloped and swathed Naineetal until sky and land and lake were the texture of floating cloud. (*Things To Leave Behind* p. 300)

In her acknowledgement note Namita admits, "This novel is written from memories, family histories, conversations and things read and remembered over the years". (*Things To Leave Behind* p. 301) The novel also narrates the fateful rains of four days and nights in Naineetal in 1880, when the topography of Naineetal changed overnight. It also narrates how Almora transforms from a quiet hill station to a bustling garrison town around 1887. It portrays, "An imperceptible change was taking place in Almora. People, things, buildings, clothes-all looked the same as ever to the lazy eye, but they were transforming". (*Things To Leave Behind* p. 125)

The novel describes the surrounding areas of Tallital, Mallital, Bhimtal, SatTal and others. *Things To Leave Behind* has well-endowed - the beauty of the Nainital hills and the small-town atmosphere of both Nainital and Almora. Gokhale's landscapes are lavish and panoramic: the broad sweep of the hills with the Upper and Lower Mall Roads, the white missionary's home and its surroundings; the secrets and tales of the natives and the sahibs, and the increasing commingling of the classes is narrated well. The two towns have not yet been covered much in Indian fiction.

The Book of Shadows was published in 1999. It is a work of startling originality created by Namita Gokhale. This ambitious novel investigates the nature of reality, love and faith. Scarred by her lover's suicide and an acid attack that has left her permanently disfigured, Rachita Tiwari has sought refuge in a remote house in the Himalayan foothills. In this rambling house, built by a foolhardy missionary over a hundred years ago, she lives alone. Rachita is a young university lecturer from Delhi, whose face has been disfigured in an acid attack. Her fiancé had committed suicide by hanging himself and, blaming Rachita for his death, his sister takes revenge by throwing acid in her face. When Rachita Tiwari's well-regulated life turns chaotic, she retreats to the comfort of the Himalayas, to a colonial house built by a missionary over a century ago. Part ghost story, part erotic romance, *The Book of Shadows* is a fantastic novel. The creation of the spirit is a wonderful achievement by Namita. She describes the nights in the hills:

Our kind is not nourished by the sun: it is the moon which gives us sustenance.
We wax and wane with the moon, except when harnessed by a human energy,

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when the pull of the tides loses its grip. As dawn broke over the mountains, lighting up the still white presences of the snows... I fled to my refuge, my fated spot. This night of passion, my first, had initiated me into the sorrows of mankind; the unfaith, the terrible and tenuous link of love. (*The Book of Shadows* p. 93)

It is not a typical ghost story, yet each page leaves the reader in thrill and excitement with the haunted house. The house has a history of over a hundred years with some unusual happenings during its construction. Rachita has some strange experiences in this house. The house occupies the most significant place in the novel. It is the epic centre of various terrible tremors that make the hair of the reader stand on end. The shadows haunt this house and the mind of Rachita for whom the house is a refuge. With its fantastic narration, the house becomes one of the living characters in the novel. *The Book of Shadows* is a fine example of a real fiction. The novel is a superb blend of psychology and reality. The house is a place of refuge and of a healing touch for an abandoned character like Rachita. It is a chronicle of displacement, strangeness and exile, of forbidden passions and family histories told in a sensual descriptive style. This novel has many autobiographical elements. Namita Gokhale herself admits it. She says in the author's note to the novel:

I too have lived in the house I have written about. This is a novel which has its core in truth. It has been written itself, under circumstances which would appear strange to most people. It has been a vehicle to resolve my personal pain, but there is more to it than that. (*The Book of Shadows*)

Namita's favourite, the hill folk again are a prime focal point in this novel too. They become an essential part of the novel with their rituals, beliefs, habits, superstitions, legends and their ways of life. Gokhale's world, the misty mountains forever remain an eternal backdrop. Gokhale's persona remains that of the Kumaoni Brahmin woman she is. The writer who grew up in Nainital remains obsessed by the air of the mountains. Most of her work seems to be stuck with her personality as a Kumaoni Brahmin girl. Namita admitted in the interview with Nalini Ganguli, "My way of looking at the world remains trapped in that primary identity; once you start loving the hills, they hold on to you."

Over a hundred years old house, on a hill near the Himalayan Hill town of Ranikhet becomes the pivotal spot of the novel. Almost all incidents take place here. It is described wonderfully. The house plays such a crucial role that it becomes like a character in the novel. The story takes place in this strange house. It also refers to some surrounding places. It begins at this haunted-strange house and it also ends in the same house. The protagonist Rachita suffering from hallucinations and dementia gets better in the end. The house proves a healing shelter for her. It is not a stereo type-typical haunted house. The hill house, the natural surroundings, the folk all they become an inseparable part of the novel. The descriptions of seasons are excellent. The wonderful characters, the illusory world of Rachita's mind, the strange old house with many mysteries, the Himalayan black

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bears, panthers, the hillside plants, flowers, birds, animals with their particular characteristic features, hill folk with their ways of life, their deities and their beliefs, mountains, the trees, hill side river, the *daayans*, terrible nights.... all this enchanting environment make *The Book of Shadows* an unforgettable romance.

A Himalayan Love Story was published in 1996. With this haunting novel about romantic loss and fatalism, Namita Gokhale confirmed her reputation as one of India's finest writers, and one with the rare gift of seeing and recording the epic in ordinary lives. Namita delineates the hill people and their simple ways of life. It is the story of Parvati, young, beautiful and doomed. Mukul Nainwal, the local boy made good who returns to the Nainital of his youth to search for the only woman he has ever loved. Told in the voices of these two exiles from life, this spare, sensitive novel is a compelling read. Parvati is a young beautiful girl, full of aspirations. The novel begins with her narration of her own childhood life at Jeolikote, a popular tourist halt on the road to Nainital. As a daughter of a poor mother, whose father has expired, she had to face struggles since childhood. Her mother dies of tuberculosis and she has to stay with her uncle, the stepbrother of her mother, Mr. Hiranand Joshi, a headmaster in a high school at Nainital. The novel deals with the lives of Parvati and Mukul, who grow up together in the Himalayan town. Parvati is forced to marry at the wish of her uncle, one of his former students, Lalit Joshi. This unhappy arranged marriage finally ends in a mental asylum after Lalit's death. While Mukul flees the restrictive and conservative hills and lives with his Burmese wife, Adeleine in Hong Kong as an International civil servant in the International Relief Organisation at Hong Kong.

He returns to Nainital after many years to manage the will of his former favourite teacher, Mr. Hiranand Joshi and to search for an unrequited teenage love. On his way, he comes across many memorable and miserable events and situations of his youth in this hill town. He becomes just nostalgic and describes the hills:

The rocks under Pashan Devi lay exposed, dry and scraggy, like weeks-old chocolate cake. A ridge that ran across the water was coming into view, the hump of disfigured dromedary..... Sulphurous springs gurgled opposite Smugglers Rock. Parvati and I were standing naked on the muddy floor of the lake. Her body was as beautiful as I had always known it would be...But of course it was only a dream. (*A Himalayan Love Story* p. 56)

Mukul was rejected by Parvati and her uncle Hiranand Joshi only because he was a Khasiya Brahmin. Perhaps considering their superiority, Hiranand Joshi did not want miscegenation. Namita delineates the sentiments of Mukul, "We stopped next at the toll station outside Nainital... 'Where every prospect pleases, and only man is vile,' I murmured to myself". (*A Himalayan Love Story* p. 72) Mukul visits various places of Nainital and meets some of his past friends. This visit also reminds him of the pungent reminiscences of his despondent childhood. Thus, he is thrown between the past and the present like a pendulum. Mukul also visits the club, the fair and Naina Devi Temple.

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A Himalayan Love Story is Himalayan in scale and setting. The Himalayan Hill Town of Nainital becomes the backdrop of the novel. The story takes place in Nainital, but it also refers to some other places. It begins at Jeolikote, a tourist halt, on the road to Nainital and takes the reader to Nainital. The places of Nainital, like GGIC - Government Girl's Intermediate College, China Peak, Snow View, Bhimtal, Talital, Municipal Library, Mali Bazaar, Mal Road, Ramsay Hospital, Pashan Devi, Smuggler's Rock, Naina Devi Temple, and the nearby village of Bhovali are the real places of Nainital and they become the setting of the novel. The span of the novel is really of Himalayan girth in area - it spreads from Nainital to Hong Kong via Bareilly, Delhi and back to Nainital. The locations, places and buildings play significant roles in the novel. Hiranand Masterji's house, *Wee Nooke* becomes a pivotal place in the novel. It is described as pilgrim's place for Mukul, the hero of the novel. *A Himalayan Love Story* is a tender love story. It has all the softness of a Kumaoni shadow. The hill town of Nainital, the natural surroundings, the folk, they all become an inseparable part of the novel. The description of Nandashtmi fair is excellent:

Shawls and bangles and ribbons were hung in confused colourful display. Sticky looking jalebis and other sweetmeats were piled in unappetizing heaps beside enormous frying pots. Everybody appeared possessed by a reckless abandoned gaiety. A well-dressed old man walking a pet monkey on a chain. I heard the crashing of cymbals and the merry sound of a tambourine, followed by a young man dressed as a woman. (*A Himalayan Love Story* p. 84)

The descriptions of natural surroundings, traffic, Nandashtmi fair, city of Nainital and sacrificing ceremony at Kali temple give the novel a touch of Indianness and make it splendid. There are plenty of references regarding its history, legends, places, people, past and present condition of the town, the changes, developments etc. Hiranand Masterji also describes the town in his letter to Mukul to Hong Kong, "Nainital is no longer what it once was ... As for the tourists, the less said better. They have all but destroyed this once scenic hill station. Nainital is no different now from Meerut or Bareilly". (*A Himalayan Love Story* p. 54) Mukul also observes the changes in the town, "I arrived at Nainital. It was changed, changed utterly. The buildings were all in a state of dilapidation". (*A Himalayan Love Story* p. 75)

The brilliant manifestation of the beautiful lakes and rivers, majestic snow-white peaks, bright flowers, colorful birds and the picturesque landscapes make Namita's novels a pleasant reading. No writer has ever portrayed the hill town of Nainital so marvelously. The descriptions of the charming hills of Kumaon's range of natural beauty give her novels grandeur. With its realistic and picturesque narrations, Nainital becomes a character in the novel. Namita has marvelously portrayed Nainital and surrounding hilly areas of Kumaon in these three novels. The novels *Things To Leave Behind*, *A Himalayan Love Story* and *The Book of Shadows* are throbbing with Kumaoni folk and hills.

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