

# It is a novel about change, says Namita Gokhale

For the winner of this year's Sahitya Akademi Award for her English novel *Things to Leave Behind*, the honour is more than just a milestone

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"I'm overjoyed and overwhelmed," says Namita Gokhale, winner of this year's Sahitya Akademi Award for her English novel *Things to Leave Behind*. In an interview with *The Hindu*, the multi-faceted Ms. Gokhale says the award "is more than just a milestone."

"The Sahitya Akademi award is deeply important to me because of its living history and legacy. As the prize is awarded to 23 Indian languages, including English, it makes me feel even more deeply connected with the multilingual literary heritage of our culture," she says.

Since she announced her entry on the literary scene with the sparkling *Paro: Dreams of Passion* in 1984, the prolific Ms. Gokhale has written 18 works of fiction and non-fiction but none could match the scale, pace and drama of *Things to Leave Behind*, which she wrote in 2016. Set in Ku-

maon from about 1840 until 1912, Ms. Gokhale says it was written and rewritten over an extended period of time.

## Central character

Related to Congress stalwart Govind Ballabh Pant, she has drawn from her roots in the region and the time she spent around some strong women in the family, including her grandmother Shakuntala Pande and aunt Shivani, the celebrated Hindi novelist. It reads like a careful dissection of the desires and dualities we live with, best represented by the central character, Tilottama.

The complex hierarchies of caste and community and the call of the human heart play out in the intertwined stories of the spirited Tilottama, her daughter Deoki, and Deoki's husband, Jayesh Jonas, as they search a new life in Eden Ashram - with the parallel and intersecting tales of Rosemary Boden and William Dempster.

"It is a novel about change



Author Namita Gokhale. •FILE PHOTO

and chronicles the mixed legacy of the British Raj as well as the emergence of fragile modernity. I was searching something elusive while writing it, and left it to readers to understand and interpret it as they pleased," says Ms. Gokhale, who doesn't ascribe to literary influences "as these are often insidious."

"The writer whom I most admired for style and strategy was and continues to be, Muriel Spark. Also Tolstoy and *War and Peace*, Dos-

toevsky's *The Idiot*, Herman Hesse's *Magister Ludi* - *The Glass Bead Game* and *Tale of Genji* by Lady Murasaki," she recounts. And, the Indian mythical aspect comes from the foundational and epic text of the Mahabharata, which she has retold for young readers.

In many of her works, she has etched the natural beauty of Kumaon hills in a painterly fashion. Here the Naini Lake becomes a character and metaphor for foreign control over our culture and

spirit.

Ms. Gokhale says her childhood in Nainital is permanently etched in her inner landscape. "The Naini lake is indeed a character, an abiding presence, through the narrative. The trees, the plants, the birds, the quality of light, in Kumaon come from personal as well as cultural memory. The stern and harsh rules which governed the lives of Brahmin women, and the joy they still managed to extract within these circumstances, are things I have seen and experienced," she relates, adding, "the novel isn't 'about' anything but a bagful of tangled narratives tumble out of it."

From *Paro* to *Tilottama*, strong female characters have been a hallmark of her works. They are strong, at times feminist but they also have a certain naivety about them rendering them life-like.

"Indian women have enormous reserves of strength, even though they

are socially vulnerable. This is even more true of 'Pahari' mountain women, of the Kumaoni sorority I grew up with. It's no surprise that the sort of women I have known and admired turn up to inhabit my novels!" notes Ms. Gokhale.

She has flair for addressing deeper, complex issues with a light touch while maintaining a brisk pace. "I do tend to see the stories within stories, the patterns and concentric circles in narrative structures. I have a tendency to ramble, which I try to keep in check," says Ms. Gokhale.

## Deep bonds

As one of the forces behind the Jaipur Literature Festival and a successful publisher, Ms. Gokhale has painstakingly fostered a link between English writing and works of Indian languages. "The increasing emphasis on translations in literary circles is creating deep bonds between English and other In-

dian literature, as well as between different Indian languages. This is a valuable and crucial development." However, she maintains, "the easy multilingualism of earlier generations is not so prevalent now, for whatever reason."

Ms. Gokhale forayed into publishing at a young age with *Super*, a magazine that covered Hindi cinema. She retains her abiding respect for the medium and feels "a magnificent web series could emerge from *Things to Leave Behind* - full of spectacular landscapes and historical detail. I live in hope!"

Finally, what are the emotions 2021 will leave behind? "The bewildering changes we encountered in 2021 have impacted me in that I tend to reconsider all the things I earlier took for granted. This has reflected in two short stories I wrote in this strange year - they have a disjointed structure and a search for a pattern within a framework of chaos."