

# Shanta Gokhale discusses writing her memoir, the complexities of translation, and the role of a critic

[Living](#) Aditya Mani Jha Nov 19, 2019 10:29:25 IST

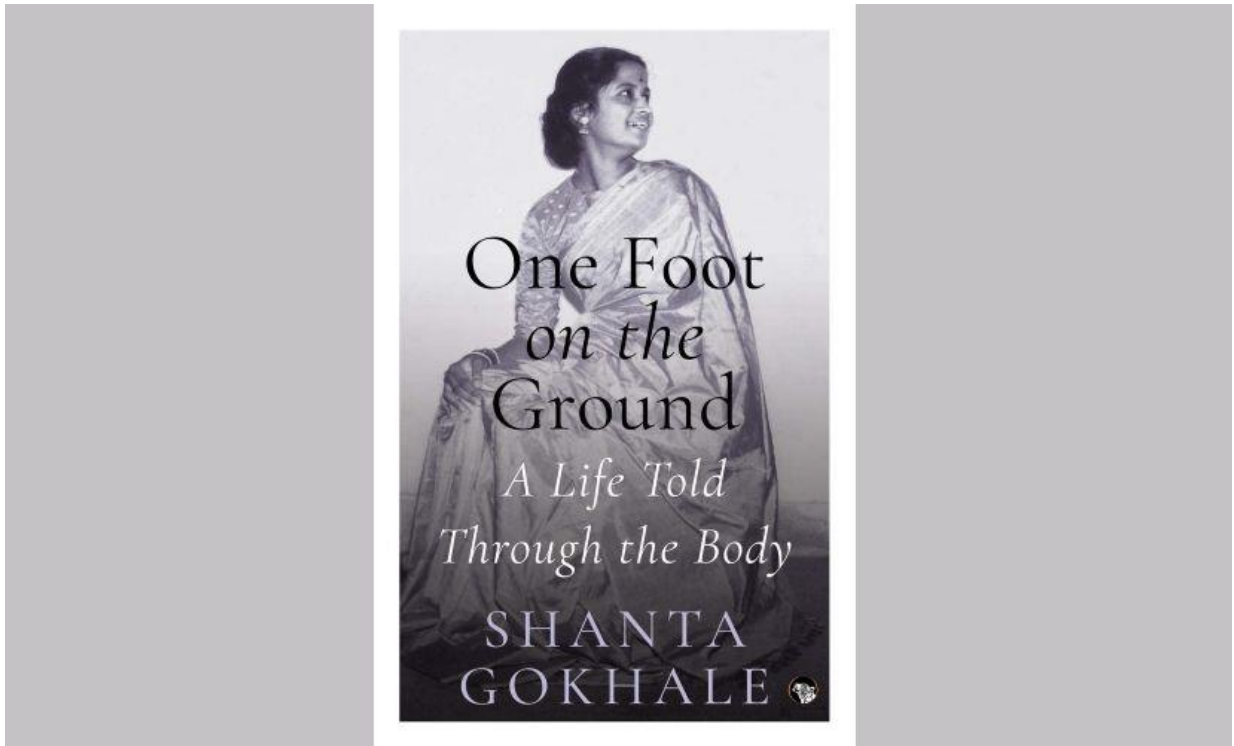
- Earlier this month, the Tata Literature Live Festival conferred a lifetime achievement award upon Shanta Gokhale
- The award recognised her long and distinguished career which includes Marathi novels, plays, translations, books on theatre and screenplays, to say nothing of a lifetime of journalism
- Gokhale's writing, especially in *One Foot on the Ground*, is distinguished not only by its formidable, wide-ranging scholarship, but also by its keen emotional intelligence

In 1964, the English-language version of Jean-Paul Sartre's memoir, *Les Mots (The Words)*, was published to universal acclaim (in November that year, he would famously turn down the Nobel Prize). Sartre's method was simple yet audacious — a chronological history of his mind, complete with the *imaginary* universes he inhabited as a young child. And while this style of writing undoubtedly has some appeal, it's not a stretch to imagine many modern-day readers rolling their eyes at solipsistic lines like, "I had been born in order to fill the great need I had of myself".

When I read Shanta Gokhale's memoir *One Foot on the Ground* earlier this year, I remembered Sartre's pretentious lines — and realised how much smarter

Gokhale's method was. The 80-year-old writer, journalist and translator chose to look "at the body and its life not as incidental to mine but central to it". As a result, the chapters are structured accordingly: the childhood chapter is dominated by badminton matches and school-level athletics meets. We see adolescent Shanta becoming a little too invested in her looks (and her father covering up the mirrors in the house). There's even a chapter about, well, her nose — and the explosive sneezes that would emanate from it in her youth. The structuring is a masterstroke and does justice to a life well-lived.

Earlier this month, the Tata Literature Live Festival (currently underway in Mumbai) conferred a lifetime achievement award upon Gokhale, recognising her long and distinguished career which includes Marathi novels (*Rita Welinkar*, *Tya Varshi*), plays, translations (Marathi to English and vice-versa), books on theatre (her meditation on Veenapani Chawla's career is destined to be on university curricula for a long time) and screenplays — to say nothing of a lifetime of journalism.



Gokhale's writing, especially in *One Foot on the Ground*, is distinguished not only by its formidable, wide-ranging scholarship, but also by its keen emotional intelligence (which never, ever gives way to saccharine sentimentality). Even when she's criticising people or parodying their narrow worldviews, there's a certain lightness of touch that you can't teach in a classroom. For instance, in the hilarious yet poignant concluding last chapter of *One Foot on the Ground*, we follow the then-78-year author as she goes shopping for broad-toed shoes, on account of her bunions. The shop assistant, who recognises Gokhale from her columnist's thumbnail picture from *Mumbai Mirror*, keeps on showing her narrow-toed, 'fashionable' shoes instead ("I can see almost without looking that every shoe he whips out of its box with a flourish is elegantly narrow at the toes"). What's remarkable here is that at no point does Gokhale *hammer* away at the assistant's casual sexism

— there’s no heavy-handed commentary, no discursive segues about the politics of the situation. And yet, all of this is crystal clear. It’s classic ‘show, don’t tell’ writing.

During an email interview, Gokhale spoke about this passage. “The couplet, ‘If it wears a beard it is a man / if it has breasts it is a woman’ was written centuries ago. The difference is that we have become aware now of how falsely divisive these binaries are to protest against them. We are increasingly aware of the fluidity of things. It surprises me that it was not always so when our philosophers consistently held that there is no such thing as positive truth and untruth; that there are many in-betweens. The story of the elephant and the six blind men comes from our folklore. In (the novel) *Crowfall* my artist protagonist Ashesh is exploring shades of black in his work.”

*Crowfall* (2013), the English-language version of her 2008 novel *Tya Varshi*, is the kind of book we see less and less of every passing year — the novel of ideas, of difficult truths about art and the artistic ego, about loss and death, about the human capacity to endure (a dubious gift at the best of times). Every character in *Crowfall* must confront the pragmatic failures of their idealism. Sharada, the Hindustani classical singer, is shunned by her guru after her formal experiments (singing a raag at the wrong time of the day, exploring forbidden rasas and so on) are deemed disrespectful. Anima is haunted by the death of her husband, a secular pacifist murdered by zealots. Prakash, an enthusiastic early-career artist of modest means, must decide whether to devote himself to a wealthy patron’s narrow

interests. Like all great novels, *Crowfall* challenges its characters constantly, and in doing so, destabilises its readers' notions of right and wrong. A recurring theme is the mentorship dynamic. Anybody who's ever had a troublesome internship or a tyrant as PhD advisor knows that the mentor-mentee relationship can unravel very quickly. Very often — like with Sharada, for example — this is simply a reflection of the vast gulf in power between the two individuals.

Gokhale told us about a seminar organised by Mumbai's Music Forum a few years ago, "to explore the possibilities of a conservatoire system of music teaching".

"It was felt that this was the only way we could circumvent the subjectivities involved in teaching music according to the *guru-shishya parampara*. In the end, the participating musicians came to the conclusion that a conservatoire would not work with the nature of Hindustani classical music given its 22 *shrutis* interspersed between the major notes of the octave and the same notes being differently sung to make different ragas. This music called for internalisation through face-to-face listening. But gurus are not as feudal today as they used to be as, for instance, the guru in *Crowfall* is. He was drawn at least partly from a living example, a purist of his *gharana* and insecure to boot. Gurus no longer demand subservience because students who pay them good money are not willing to be subservient."

As a journalist who's been covering the arts for a decade or so, I found myself gasping at several points in *Crowfall*, such is the novel's clarity about the artist-critic yin-yang — and how it's falling apart today. Janaki, for example, is very confidently asked by Prakash to write about his show, never mind the fact that she's answerable to her editor, or that she could, presumably, not find his show worth writing about. This fits the cognitive dissonance of the ongoing era to a T. Internationally famous authors can spit on colleagues who review their books less-than-positively — and still win major literary awards. The director of one of 2019's bestselling Bollywood films can get away with calling critics “parasites” and “threats to the industry”.

“Artists are not supposed to have thick skins,” Gokhale said. “Nor do they. If they did, they might perhaps not produce worthwhile work. Artists are thin-skinned and vulnerable. I realised this long ago, accepted it and learned to work with it.” The author recalled an incident that happened when she was Arts Editor at the *Times of India* (in the late 1980s), involving the sitar player Pandit Arvind Parikh.

“He said many musicians were disappointed with our music critics who wrote negatively about their concerts. He proposed setting up an informal group, to be convened by him and chaired by me, to create a space for discussion among the stakeholders of the music scene, such as the musicians, the organisers, the critics, radio and television. I was all for open discussion, I said, but I needed to know if he thought all musicians performed flawlessly in all concerts. He said no, of

course not. So I asked, in view of this, what did he think a critic's function was. He gave it some thought and then suggested we could base our first discussion on defining a critic's job."

As a translator, Gokhale's work has been crucial in bringing some of the most important works of Marathi theatre to English-speaking readers, including those by Mahesh Elkunchwar, Satish Alekar and Premanand Gajvee. According to her, translation is not something that can be defined by rules or structures.

"A publisher once sent me a translation done by an academic who held a certain theory about translation. The result was totally untrue to the original. What I and most translators do is internalise the writing persona of the author and make her/him speak in the target language. The aim is to get everything in — sense, sound, rhythm, tone, style. It is not possible to do this if the persona you are trying to enter is totally inimical to yours. I have given up a couple of translations because I was uncomfortable being in the writer's skin. But ultimately translation is slippery ground. You struggle, you grapple and finally call it a day even when you know a few things have slipped through your fingers."

For decades now, Gokhale has been one of our most prolific and respected writers/translators, a veritable stalwart of Mumbai's cultural world. She has raised two accomplished children (the actor Renuka Shahane and the critic/curator Girish Shahane). She has survived cancer. And she's still doing what she does best—writing. In the book of essays *On Late Style*, the iconic theorist Edward Said wrote that after a lifetime of negotiating

with ground realities, the late-career artist wants to produce something essentially unmoored in space and time, a work that could be termed ‘universal’ in the most *ab initio* way possible. Whatever Gokhale produces in this vein, then, will be worth reading and re-reading — of this, I have no doubt.

*Find latest and upcoming tech gadgets online on [Tech2Gadgets](#). Get technology news, gadgets reviews & ratings. Popular gadgets including laptop, tablet and mobile specifications, features, prices, comparison.*

Updated Date: Nov 19, 2019 10:29:25 IST