

The Blind Matriarch: A Chronicle of Pandemic and Resilience

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Abstract: The present paper analyses Namita Gokhale's twentieth book, *The Blind Matriarch* which is a real-time account of India's experience with the corona virus, the complete lockdowns with containment zones and sealed interstate boundaries, followed by the quarantine periods that seemed to be never ending. The story revolves around Matangi-Ma, the blind matriarch, who holds together her joint family residing on the four floors of the same building in such difficult and critical times. All the characters continue through the hardships that shows remarkable strength and resilience during the pandemic. Although death lurks around and does carry near and dear ones, Matangi Ma continues to support her family in every way like a soldier at battlefield. The researcher proposes to show that the novel showcases the complex lives of the matriarch's family and their journey outward as well as inward. It is an endearing chronicle C100's microcosmic encounter with the deadly virus at the backdrop of the nation's struggle to overpower the virus and its vulnerability.

Keywords: Matangi Ma, Corona virus, pandemic, blind matriarch, resilience, C100

"What did the virus look like," Matangi-Ma, the eponymous blind matriarch of Namita Gokhale's novel, wonders. "Did the virus have feelings? Was it angry with the world?"(80)¹As we grapple with the qualms created by yet another variant of the coronavirus, her questions seem pertinent. The pandemic has distorted our sense of time and space. As the days drag and months fly by, *The Blind Matriarch* makes us pause in our busy, hectic life and reminds us of the human cost of the two years that we apprehensively recall.

Namita Gokhale's Twentieth Century novel, *The Blind Matriarch* is a story of love and loss, the resilience and triumph of the human spirit² set in the context of the raging pandemic which rocks the peaceful lives of a fascinating family out of order. It is simultaneously an account of the dreadful days of pestilence as the dark death looms large in the surroundings. The novel, revolves around Matangi Ma who is doubly confined, first by her blindness and secondly with the onslaught of the epidemic. Nevertheless her placid stoicism and silent affection makes her the core of strength for her joint family. C100, the lively house in an opulent Delhi locality provides the setting of the novel. They all live in a four storeyed house, C100 that has a character of its own and is seen as an extraordinarily resilient institution. Matangi Ma occupies the top floor with her loyal emissary, Lali; her son Satish, his wife Ritika and their son Rahul live on the second floor. Another son Suryaveer lives with his adopted teenage son, Samir and his dog, Dollar on the second one, while the daughter, Shanta lives on the ground floor along with her cats. As a modern novel, Gokhale first employs a culturally determined symbology of home replete with all the powerful and empowering associations to space as are organized by the notion of belonging. This thematic preoccupation with home as the measure of historical, familial and social relations is finely yoked to the contemporary realist representation of the family in the uncertainties of the pandemic situation.

The Sharma family has been compelled into spatial proximity by the pandemic and nurtured by the optimistic Matangi-Ma. She loves TV serials and fancies herself as Ba, the matriarch from *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*. The re-plays of *Mahabharata* on Doordarshan, are like a "pang in her heart", as Dhritarashtra and Gandhari remind her of the gradual onset of her own blindness. Matangi Ma is seen spending her time singing old songs, hearing the chirping of birds, and watching or rather listening to television - of late, the disheartening news of the "Chinese virus" or of frantic migrant workers stranded without food or money or being killed on the way to reach safer abode.

The blind Matangi-Ma registers the changing dynamics of her family during the prolonged lockdowns, as they begin to reassess their life and purpose, reconcile with old secrets, and develop new bonds³. Her own past life comes back to her in flashes, and she prefers to escape into her dreamscapes, her memories seem to be tarnished by her womanising and abusive husband so that she chooses to go blind - literally and metaphorically. Her stoical resignation is evident as she traverses down the lanes of memory either in wakefulness or in dreams and never shares the burden of her memories or of existence. Matangi-Ma's retinal damage has set in gradually

and, tragically, quite early when her last child was born. She has adapted her other abilities to her failing vision with accomplishment often alarming Lali, her caretaker, who thinks she is pretending to unsee or is possessed by a spirit and never dares to cheat on her.

None of her three children - Suryaveer, Shanta, or Satish – ever mention her blindness in the house. Matangi Ma's children are alternately overprotective and unconcerned towards their mother. Ironically, those who feel they are trying to shield her, actually turn to her for comfort and solace. Gokhale writes, "Her own unflustered acceptance of her condition had made it seem even more normal (26)." She draws from within her own reserves for her family. "Matangi re-entered the imagined spaces within her. She listened to the beating of her heart, to its irregular rhythm... This is where she lived, deep inside herself. Her family, her children, their children, inhabited another sphere, of light, of vision, of the external interplay of images (p. 58)." Matangi-Ma lived life to the fullest "as though she had eyes everywhere, in her fingertips, in her silver be-ringed toes, in the alert grey hairs that stood up on end on her thin arms, and her elbows, even." (8-9) Lali fills in the blanks when the matriarch needs clues. Gokhale documents the vast complexities of human relationships in middle-class India with flair and wittiness, taking in every emotion that has engulfed Matangi-Ma's joint family that is being crushed by the uncertainties of the pandemic. "This was about capture, submission and stagnation, about selfhood and the loss of agency. A spell had been cast, on the poor and the rich, the ill and well. Who would break the spell and how? (99) .Matangi also feels the panic and despair as they all are cloistered in the deep, total lockdown.

Though the extended family systems are mostly redundant, her characters, even those trying to branch out in favour of individual growth, make their peace and find solace within the four floors of their home – an allegory for a disintegrating India: "We had been a family, once. India had been a nation. It wasn't just a virus that was destroying us, it was the demon seed that we had spawned (p.199)." As certainties dissolve, endings lead to new beginnings. Structured with the warp of memory and the weft of conjoined lives, the narrative follows middle India, even as it records the struggles for individual growth, with successive generations trying to break out of the stranglehold of the all-encompassing Indian family. Every member gives a diverse response to the pandemic which makes them embark on a journey of self realization in their lives. Suryaveer, the eldest one is, constantly struggling with his ideological stance swinging between "left-wing commitment to right-wing obfuscation", seeks comfort in Matangi-Ma's company, reading out poems to her. He "had been a vegetarian, a pacifist, an anarchist, a Marxist Leninist, a Gandhian, and now veered to the soft right, lurching from conviction to conviction in a sequence of seasoned responses" He embodies an acquainted sense of being in a baffled state about ideology to follow in the Indian socio-political scenario, especially in the period of crisis. When life comes to a halt for Ritika, the wearer of diaphanous dresses to keep the romance in her marriage to Satish alive, Matangi-Ma's love and wisdom win her over. Ritika has never approved of her mother-in-law's predominant authority, or the unwritten rules of the house, and has wished her dead. She feels unfit in this extended family and is unprepared for the changes but tries to compensate her uneasiness with her job that fills in the vacuum in her selfhood. Paradoxically, it is her blind mother in law who gives her the vision to live her life.

The matriarch's benevolent daughter Shanta runs an NGO, Women for peace meticulously cooks for the poor and needy throughout the lockdown, reproachfully taking in the changing socio-political fabric of the country. When Shanta offers to cook for a policewoman, the latter remarks, "So, you are an NGO wallah? ShaheenBagh? JNU type? Urban Naxals? Terrorism. Sedition (22)."

Shanta is miserable over the mounting death count, especially of actor Irrfan Khan whom she has crush on, and Matangi-Ma over Rishi Kapoor's - although for a different reason. "She felt an enormous guilt descend upon her, the weight of being alive. Here she was, at 80, blind as a bat, of no particular use to anyone. A burden upon her loving children. And it was the young who were dying."(p.105). Shanta, on the other hand a true philanthropist has a strong sense of familial and communal duty, embraces her role as a social worker more aggressively, signifying the dedication of many volunteers during the contagion. Despite a shady past, the hatred and bitterness in the relationship with her father who refuses to support her, she seeks new horizons and prefers to stay a spinster probably as a reaction to her parents loveless and turbulent marital life. She too feels estranged, grounded and helpless and desires to leave the family to experience liberty and peace; yet continues to nurse her mother in self isolation and plays the role of a natural caregiver.

Matangi-Ma supports her grand-children Rahul and Samir through the thick and thin. Samir is bewildered by her intuitive powers when she urges him to look for a stranded bird in the neighbourhood park that needs help: "A green bird. I can see the bird. It is hurt. It is lying under a tree. It doesn't know how to fly. It needs to heal

(88).” Samir finds the bird, and with the healing of this barbet, later named Mirchi, the family, too, embarks on a healing process, embracing their follies, letting go of their pasts, heroically continuing with their onward journeys, and surviving the crisis. At times depressed Sameer prefers to play drums when he wishes to escape from the monotony of imprisonment. He desperately desires to reach out to his parents who left him as a child in the care of Suryaveer. Rahul too feels intensely lonesome and irritable in confinement.

The novel also depicts with uncomfortable realism the “sense of suspended animation” and disconnect felt during last year. Ironically being cut off during the pandemic brings the isolated lives closer. Its deceptively tranquil pace is set against the disjointed backdrop of the fear of Covid, the general anguish about its ensuing events, including the plight of the migrants and the pervasive, apparently endless feeling of dread and helplessness. Perhaps the lethargy and fear outside caused by the Chinese virus is reciprocated in the monotony of the lifestyle at C100. With the nation as the macrosystem, the House C100 becomes a microcosmic representation of the change in social fabric and the lives of its inhabitants. Like the nation itself, the strict hierarchy of the extended family home can be dysfunctional, nevertheless it remains a source of unforeseen relief and succour to the vulnerable souls entrapped within its premises. No one seems to know whether this pandemic would ever resolve itself without further wounding the soul of India. Matangi often wonders, what would be the consequences after this whirlwind of disease and devastation ran its course? Would she remain alive to steer her children and grandchildren to safety? but to these questions she did not have any answers.

Second half of the novel moves faster with the transformation in the family and the country outside. When coronavirus visits their building, and Matangi-Ma falls sick, the family exhibit amazing grace under pressure. Here, Gokhale’s writing is phenomenal: ‘It was difficult to breathe from her nose or her mouth, and yet she was not choking. She tried to click her tongue against the roof of her mouth, but she couldn’t manage it. It was as though there was an insurrection going on inside her body; it had become a battleground with no interludes of peace.(158)’. Matangi is described as ‘indestructible’, shatterproof. ‘She could negotiate anything.’(164) and she continued to rule the roost, as C100 continued as a functioning matriarchy, with Matangi Devi as its presiding deity...(p. 173). She is one of the most endearing characters in the novel.

It is Surya who succumbs to the virus and the complete family falls apart. Matangi Ma continues to strongly console the family, she believes that ‘Life is for the living. We must heal the living, they hurt more than those that have gone..(187) Her fortitude and resilience is unparalleled. Samir calls her, “a soldier, with the fortitude of a saint” (187). Sameer feels lonely after his foster parent is no more. He leaves for Bihar Sheriff where his life has something pleasant in store for him. He falls in love with Sukhada who runs coaching classes in Kota and is simultaneously preparing for Civil Services. Shanta tries to find peace and tranquillity in her friend’s beautiful house in Sat-tal. Before the second wave of pandemic hit, Shanta along with Matangi Ma, Lali , Trump and Dollar moves to the enchanting mountains. Although cats resist changes, Trump is quick to adapt to the new environment. Lali makes a shocking confession to Suryaveer, that she has killed her father seeking revenge. She pushed him into the well after witnessing her mother’s brutal death at his hands. She too reconciles to her fate and serves Matangi with affection and concern.

While alarming death toll is reported throughout the country. Number of deaths within the story are reported. Surya, Agastya Sen, Anna Sen too die due to the fatal virus. The novel reminds us that all the living beings adjust to changes at unprecedented times. Soon Matangi Ma who has already started counting her days after Surya, is dead. However the spirited woman defies the virus and dies a natural death. She dies peacefully in her sleep. A contented Matriarch who has taken decisions at critical times and tried to keep the family together. Her death symbolizes the disintegration of extended family. Ritika and Satish shift to Mumbai after she gets a job there and Rahul is sent to a school where Karan Johar had once studied. Samir like his name that symbolises breeze decides to move on in his life. Shanta goes back to the pine-crested hills to find peace and serenity. She sadly reflects, “ We had been a family once. India had been a nation...(199) .For Rahul, death looks like Yama and suffers panic attacks after his father is diagnosed corona positive and shifted to ICU. Each one tries to fill in the void created by death through meaningful action to overpower this apocalypse Thus the novel is ebbing and flowing like the waves of the coronavirus. It is a perspicacious chronicle of the tragedies of India’s encounter with the Coronavirus, the cynicism and gloom that accompanied it, and the resilience and strength of human spirit that is invincible. They all are survivors, emotionally drained at times by their battle against the deadly virus and their life’s quest for self realization.

This universal story of love and loss, of the resilience and triumph of the human spirit, will resonate with every single person who has survived the pandemic. Matangi-Ma is one of Gokhale's most appealing characters, an impressive lady whose steely resolve many readers will identify with their own lives. A review article mentions, Gokhale has not lost her voice as *The Blind Matriarch* is a nuanced and sympathetic view of how individuals react in times of crisis, the ways in which they crumple and the unexpected places they discover fortitude⁴.

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