



A Study of Namita Gokhale's *The Blind Matriarch*

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Abstract

The Blind Matriarch (2021) is Namita Gokhale's twentieth book and eleventh novel. The title is self-referential as Matangi-Ma is the blind protagonist of this novel. The writer tries to put across to the readers, the complicated and layered lives of the members of a joint family headed by a matriarch, by weaving a poignant and a well-crafted narrative. The strict rules of the joint-family home can also be broken to make them more flexible, just as in case of countries, where large communities live together. However, it is only this home which becomes a source of unexpected help and relief, when the members need it the most. As the story progresses, the grandchildren gradually come to terms with old secrets and growing pains which their grandmother had to bear, when she was young. But when things take a turn in the novel, the endings lead to new beginnings. The story is woven into a warp and weft of memories and lives which are deeply linked together. The story primarily follows the life of middle-class Indians but nonetheless pays attention to how each and every generation struggles to break free from an all-encompassing Indian Joint family.

Key words: Writer, *The Blind Matriarch*, novel, children, family.

Introduction

In the recently written novel *The Blind Matriarch*, a blind old woman, who lives on the top floor of an old house with many stories; closely watches the lives of her family members from her mighty nest. Her best friend and domestic help Lali, is always there to help her to connect her with the world around. However, her three children, who are erratically overprotective and dismissive of her, are usually not seen to be nice with her.

One day, when the world comes to a halt, everyone starts to look inside. The matriarch, who lives in her Delhi home, keeps her family together during the first year of the pandemic. In comparison to her other works, this particular novel written by the author is based upon the real-time events lending it a sense of urgency. She says, "My book is based on what I saw during the pandemic and lockdown." During those long months, I was able to write every day and not have any distractions, which is something I don't have in "normal" times. But this book shares some



similarities with one of her most recent novels, *Jaipur Journals* (2020), which is also a fictional story that takes place in a real-world setting based on the events that happened around the time of the Jaipur Literary Festival. Infact her most recent work, such as her play about the life of Michael Madhusudan Dutt, *Betrayed by Hope* (2020), which was written with Malashri Lal, has also been about real-life events. “My three most recent books are all very different from each other”, says Gokhale. In the case of *TheBlind Matriarch*, it was written at a very different pace. “It was easy to write and took less than six months to finish”.

The title of the book refers to Matangi-Ma, a woman who has a good sense of intuition and is generous even though she is blind. Her family is a big one, with two sons, one daughter, two grandchildren, two housekeepers, a dog named Dollar, a cat named Trump, and two guests: a little boy and a baby barbet which was saved from a predator and nursed back to health. She is the head and heart of the family. The novel explores how the pandemic can potentially affect the family ties through the agency of her characters, forced to stay inside during a national lockdown to stop the spread of the coronavirus in India. Gokhle deals with the matter withutmost care and subtlety. She is able to apprehend the pain that each person goes through, but never over stresses on their mistakes while judging them or during their emotional outbursts.

TheBlind Matriarch is one of the first books written in India about the pandemic. It carefully documents the events that took place in the country from early 2020. We also learn about work-from-home problems and the death of Irrfan Khan. In an interview, Gokhalesaid that she was writing in real time and paying attention to what was going on around her during the lockdowns. This gives the book a sense of sharp honesty, which can also shake the reader and make him uncomfortable as he will witness the immediate past in the fiction, in close proximity to the real.

The Blind Matriarch is a real-time account of the corona virus's arrival in India, the strict quarantine measures, and the never-ending "house arrest". Matangi-Ma, the blind matriarch, is the heart of the story. She keeps her family together, as they live on the fourfloors of the same building, during a time when things become hard and surprising for everyone.

The novel goes a step beyond in revealing to us, how the family functions, as they get stuck together because of theprolonged epidemic. It's also a brave and timely critique of India, a country that once took pride in its unique mix of people. Matangi Ma’s family changes during the spell of these long lockdown. The blind woman perceives this transformation as the members start to think about their lives to find their purpose and try to get over their old secrets by connecting with new friends. The people, who had disappeared from her life, start showing up again. A day comes when she decides to not see anything at all, both literally and figuratively, because she didn't want to behold what was happening. She reminiscences and thinks deeply about her own past; both in her dreams and while she's awake. Although, she never shares the



burden of her memories with others, indicating that she is very much alive. She is a huge source of strength for everyone in her family, and this episode proves it! When she was alive, her husband made fun of her and would beat her. She didn't let her pain stop her from being kind. It's always great when Matangi-Ma is around, not just for people who are related to her by blood, but for everyone who comes into her circle.

Background of *The Blind Matriarch*

In *The Blind Matriarch*, Matangi-Ma, the title character appears weak and reliant on others at a first glance. But her serene stoicism and quiet love make the woman a source of strength in her family. They all live in a four-storied house that has its own unique style. Namita Gokhale herself lives in a joint family, and she thinks it's a very strong thing to do. She says,

"I think it's great that people can talk to each other across generations. They went back to their families during the pandemic because they felt better there."

Before her last child was born, Matangi-Ma's retinal damage had already begun to happen. It was slow at that time, but still in a very bad state when her last child was born. She had learnt how to use her other senses perfectly to deal with the situation. Her vision became worse, which scared her caretaker, Lali, who thought she was pretending not to see or had been possessed by a spirit. There was an unwitting silence about her blindness in the house, and even her three children kept quiet about it.

Matangi's daughter-in-law, Ritika, gifted her cuckoo clock when she came back from Switzerland after her honeymoon. During this time Matangi-Ma used to watch TV and heard old songs, the chirping of birds, and sad stories about migrants who couldn't get food or money on their own. Her favourite show of all time was *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*. "I loved Tulsi so much," she said. She meant that, "She went back to being the character played by Smriti Irani."

The way Matangi-Ma lived her life was like she had eyes all over her body. "As if she had eyes in her fingertips, in her silver be-ringed toes, in the alert grey hairs that stood up on end on her thin arms, and even in her elbows." Lali helped the matriarch fill in the blanks when she was looking for clues, and she in return was very grateful for her help. When the Prime Minister addressed the country and announced the Janta curfew on TV, she inquired Lali about his appearance. She responded to her by saying that although he looked elderly in appearance, but his skin was as smooth as that of Kareena Kapoor.

Using flair and humour, Gokhale shows how complicated human relationships can be in middle-class India. As the pandemic approaches, she insinuates about the disintegration of Matangi-Ma's



joint family, which is being ripped apart by the surrounding uncertainties. However they only find peace and solace in the four layers of their home, which becomes a metaphor for an India that is falling apart. Even though they attempt to expand out in the name of personal progress, but they find consolation only in the four floors of their home.

Matangi-Ma's helps her elder son Suryaveer, to help him deal with the fact that his ideological stand point keeps changing from "left-wing commitment to right-wing confusion". Suryaveer reads poems to Matangi-Ma as she is the only person with whom he is most comfortable. Satish's wife Ritika, admires Matangi- Ma because she gives her love and is full of wisdom. Earlier, Ritika had not liked her mother-in-law's power or the rules of the house which according to her had not been written down anywhere. She had wanted her dead.

Shanta, the daughter of the grandmother was a charmer. She always used to carry her cat, Trump along with her. Shanta ran an NGO from the ground floor of her house, and kept Trump by her side. As she works hard during the lockdown: cooking meals for the poor but doesn't feel right about the changing scenario of society and politics. "So, you're an NGO wallah?" comments a policewoman sarcastically, when Shanta wants to cook for her.

Shanta is saddened by the mounting death toll and particularly by the death of Irrfan Khan, an actor, whom she admired a lot. Matangi-Ma was likewise saddened after learning about Rishi Kapoor's death, but for an altogether different reason. She was filled with guilt and the weight of her existence. She was blind as a bat at 80 and useless for anyone. Her children, who adored her, were burdened. And the youth were passing away.

Matangi-Ma loved to fondle her grandsons Rahul and Samir, who had grown in her arms and always accompanied her. The fact that she asks Samir to look for an injured bird in the neighbourhood park as it needs assistance deeply moves and surprises him. She says: "There is a green bird," and further says, "It is possible to view the bird. It's in physical pain. It's tucked away under a tree. It is unable to fly". The bird is rescued by the grandchildren and with the healing of the injured barbet, now given the name Mirchi, the rest of the family also begins to witness a period of healing. They learn from their mistakes and let go of their pasts. They move on to new places, and endure crises by owning up their responsibilities.

Narrative Style of the Novel

The novel has attracted a huge audience because of its realism, although many radical critics object to any form of mimetic writing. It does not mean that novelist's art is simply based on other people's work. As life is messy and hard to tell, a well conceived story is a good stand-in. It is the internal logic of a book that teaches us how to make sense of the chaos and tumult of life,



which we experience through scraps, shreds, and puzzle pieces offered by the events of the life. In other words, the Gokhle wants to draw attention to an apocalyptic event like pandemic which is still going on, and we have to deal with the debris left behind by the surges. We are dealing with at all levels: individually, socially, globally, economically, and philosophically. During this time, we have been following the news a lot and one gets to hear a lot of reality based, compelling stories about the pandemic, from all over the world. At this point, fiction helps us in making sense about all this rubble around us.

There aren't enough books about pandemic which have been written like *The Blind Matriarch*. When readers willingly let go of their disbelief and enter a fictitious world, they don't forget about the reasons behind their pleasure. Readers often enquire whether the story is connected in any way with the author's life. Their illusions get dismantled and they realize that it is all made up. Although a writer may be making up a story, she cannot but evade drawing experiences from her own life. While reading *The Blind Matriarch*, one does not necessarily need to think about all the meta-questions that are related to our own selves. We can get completely immersed in the world of the book and then not give it much thinking, which is also a good thing. It won't be an exaggeration to state that the novel, *The Blind Matriarch* had come into this world already complete. The author's main goal was to tell stories and to make sure they were told in a better way. *The Blind Matriarch* shows that healing can happen when we face any ordeal and let of the parts of our past that still bother us. This book is a has answers for those who overlook the fact that pandemic has made them closer with their parents and partners, children and other people, and strengthened the bond and friendship between the employers and their employees. Therefore, fiction can sometimes help us to realize basic truths about life that are hard for us to decipher in the real world.

Conclusion

The novel brings to the surface "a sense of suspended animation" and "disconnect" that people felt during the corona-affected years. The book deliberately moves at a very slow pace which is put forth in contrast to the disjointed background that stemmed from the fear of the covid 19, followed with a general sense of anguish and anxiety about the events among the masses, and the overwhelming sense of dread and despair.

The novel seems to be quite at ease when dealing with deeply philosophical questions like birth, sickness, and death which are all part of life and delves into their affect on our minds and bodies. It introspects into the pain that we feel during any transition or any unwelcoming change which can be lessened if we stop focusing merely on ourselves and pay attention to the surroundings. There are certainly people out there, who need our help, and as we pursue this direction, new meanings and purpose in our lives become unravelled for us.



When coronavirus makes its way to their house, Matangi-Ma becomes ill, and the family demonstrates incredible grace. "It was difficult for her to breathe through her nose or mouth." Gokhale commented about the nature of the illness, "A woman attempted but was unable to click her tongue against the roof of her mouth. It was as if an uprising had occurred within her body; it had devolved into a combat zone with no pauses for tranquillity."

Love and loss touches every person who has survived the pandemic. They will be moved by this story of strength and triumph. Namita Gokhale's latest work is a must-read and should not be ignored or put aside. It keeps the reader engaged till the very last page. One cannot get enough of Matangi-unending Ma, who becomes a sanctuary of love and has great wisdom in store to offer. She is a sweet balm, full of warmth for all those who are hurt and sick.

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