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Post-Pandemic Gendering in Namita Gokhale's *The Blind Matriarch*

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Abstract

The fluidity of gender is overt when cultures of different geographical locations in different eras are taken into account though they appear to be fixed in the popular imagination. The study intends to investigate the dynamics and dialectics of gendering that could be observed in the novel *The Blind Matriarch* by Namita Gokhale. The study seeks to explore the perception of gender and the process of gendering the novel through the plot's narrative and the characters' interplay with one another, oneself and the outside world. The first part of the study shall be an introduction to gender and the concepts associated with it. The second part of the study further explores the significance of post-pandemic times in the process of gendering. The third part of the study investigates the permeative articulation of gendering in the novel by how the characters make the novel align through the narrative. The fourth and final part of the study shall summarise the findings.

Keywords: *Gender, Post-pandemic, Namita Gokhale, The Blind Matriarch, paratext, lockdown.*

1. Introduction

The idea of gender is fixed in traditional nostalgia yet it is fluid in its manifestation. The distinctions between gender and sex are paramount to pursuing any study on gender. The overriding distinction is that sex is a biological factor though there has been significant empirical literature about how there is hardly a clear demarcation between the sexes when all the organisms on the planet are taken into account. The normative is that two opposite sexes can reproduce and continue the existence of the species. However, the fact that a lot of organisms including greenflies and aphids can reproduce without females deems the normative problematic. Gender, on the contrary, involves attributing a set of socially and culturally produced qualities to the biological sexes involved. The factor of sexuality is cardinal in understanding the permeation of gender.

According to Oxford Learner's dictionary, sexuality is defined as "the feelings and activities connected with a person's sexual desires". The desires are not merely a result of a biological urge. One's milieu is imperative to the production of one's sexuality. The term "production" renders the natural sexual urges problematic. If the scope of understanding desires is widened, sexuality could also include platonic attractions in its purview. Fiction could be a tool for demonstrating social philosophy. Studying

fiction could make the reader experience numerous potential situations and human reactions to them. The existence of “could be” explorations and the studies throw light on the nature of realist representations.

The notion of gendering has been a subject of research in philosophical literature since the nineteenth century though it gained momentum as the result of various feminist movements in and after the 1960s. The texts such as Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of Rights of Women* and Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* illuminated the existence of world views which differ according to the sexes that are attributed to the values of gender (Barry 123).

The pandemic-induced lockdown has magnified various inequalities of power existing in the social psyche including that of gender. In addition to mere magnification, there is exacerbation of gender inequality around the globe. There is an inexorable surge in unpaid care work during the pandemic and as a result of it. The United Nations Foundation’s blog on the impact of the virus on women states that despite the relatively higher mortality of men due to the virus, it is the women who pay the price economically and socially (Morse and Anderson). In addition to the socio-economic toll, women in India existed on the receiving end of domestic violence more than ever during the post-pandemic times having been stuck in their domesticities. The domestic concerns of the family bring themselves under the ambit of law when fundamental human rights are violated. The state-sanctioned constraint on freedom of movement during the pandemic has aided the additional violations of fundamental rights of the population living in the margins. The existence of “sex-based brutality and intimate partner violence” (Nair and Banerjee) has brought to light the negligibly few changes achieved in eradicating gender inequality on the planet.

The Blind Matriarch is not a realist representation of these issues which have affected primarily the fringes of the social arena. Nor is it a tale that challenges the gendered hegemony, despite having a matriarch opposed to the normative patriarch. The novel provides an insider view of the bourgeois family’s existential response to the pandemic, and the lockdown induced by it. The family involved in the novel does not act, in the fictional space, with a resemblance to the virtues and ethics of capitalism as explored in the fiction written during the nineteenth century. The changing dimensions of bourgeois capitalism can also be explored from a Marxist perspective, which is beyond the scope of the study.

The name of the novel, in itself, would seem like it subverts the patriarchal notion of a family. It is debatable whether patriarchy’s power relations change when there is a matriarch instead of a patriarch. A matriarch is considered the one who possesses maternal qualities and is quite attached to the patriarch (Mutendi) and is also usually the one who is supposed to provide emotional support to the family. Matriarchal families do not subvert or invert the existing notions of hierarchy in terms of the ideology they produce. Matriarchal families do not follow suit with the patriarchal family with exactness either. The matriarch in the novel is considered so for there is no patriarch in the family of Matangi-ma. The matriarch is not too close to the patriarch either for the latter involves in domestic abuse and maintains a slew of extramarital affairs.

Matangi-Ma’s blindness is considered a trope for the novel for the blindness assumed by her of the atrocities committed by her husband (Parikala). Despite not being able to see, her act of feeling everything around her through the other senses and thought processes is crucial in the novel for such abilities mark the extremely high respect the family members possess for her. Such abilities to feel and sense also bring out the outcomes of gendered views and perspectives of not only Matangi-ma but also her family members.

The role of the novel’s paratext is critical to understanding the beginnings of gendering for the paratext shapes the way a novel is read. Paratexts are considered as the intermediary zone which connects the text and the reader. Paratexts appear in several forms of a book such as a foreword, preface, associated cover art etc., where a significant essence of the book is quintessentially communicated to the reader. Taking *The Blind Matriarch* into account, in which there is no preface or foreword, the

paratexts include the reviews by famous authors, the canvas on the book cover and a humble introduction to what the novel deals with.

To start with, the cruciality of an introduction to the forthcoming text begins with setting a framework for the reader to understand the text. A sense of mystery follows with the presence of contradicting information about the protagonist and the general notions explored in the novel. The humble introduction does not name any of the characters other than the protagonist and the servant cum companion, Lily. The introduction states that the overprotective attitude of the matriarch's children leads to a state where the genuine existence of the matriarch is hardly taken into active account of their existence. It further states that the dysfunctionality of the home harbouring a joint family is no indication of the warmth provided to the vulnerable.

The mentioning of the aforementioned factors marks the beginning of the post-pandemic gendering in the novel. The process in the fictional space begins its making through the discursive processes of multiple dialogues throughout the novel. The hovering of Matangi-Ma's existence over the family members and how her consciousness revolves around them though in a specific hierarchy exposes the "not so exceptional" gendering of a matriarch. The relief provided by the family's dynamics is emphasised in opposition to the dysfunctional hierarchy. The limitations of the protection within the walls are transgressed in the novel expanding the boundaries of gender.

The paratext also laments the escapism of successive generations by inferring that the Indian family is "all-encompassing". From the introduction to the text, as provided on the cover, it can be deduced that feminine qualities are attributed to the family. The feminine qualities do not necessarily accompany the masculine qualities of a patriarch. On the contrary, the masculine qualities of dominance find despicable portrayal in the novel. The aid of toxic masculinity emphasises the significance of femininity in the novel, as a building block of the conscious's defence mechanism of individuals existing under the roof of C100.

The mentioning of the term "defence mechanism" does not steer the study toward the dimension of psychoanalytic theory in which, the term indicates the unconscious processes within one's psyche to prevent itself from getting to conflictual thoughts that could induce anxiety. Although the defence mechanisms of individuals are critical to the gendering process, a psychoanalysis of the novel is beyond the scope of the study. The social and domestic dimensions of gendering shall be explored in the study.

Matangi-Ma's existence hovers around the household and its occupants without the presence of sight. She experiences them through their smells, skins and voices. She does not merely recognise the individuals in the household. She rather finds her existential purpose with them. The matriarch's leadership exerts soft power on her children, servants, daughter-in-law and grandchildren. The presence of appeal and attraction commanded by the matriarch makes her environs move rather consciously around her.

In the opening chapter, her son Satish gets anxious after inferring that he and his wife cannot be blind about the dental damage caused to his son through the matriarch's offering of sweets and candies. Matangi-Ma despite her soft power remains unable to persuade her grandson from getting toffees from her. Her attempts to be in the grandson's good books are an indication of the invisible gendering that exists for the blind Matangi-Ma. Her imagination of Rahul being desperate for candy makes her assume that the eager eyes and awaiting lips of the child could be too hard to refuse candies. Matangi-Ma's gendering despite soft dominance does not fail to deliver emotional responses as opposed to reasoned ones. Irrespective of the emotional and financial support she provides for her children, the matriarch is unable to find her meaning in anything but a close relationship with her grandchildren. The need to provide him with toffees despite the mother's warnings can also be a result of Matangi-Ma's fear of the lockdown ending thereby inducing the dispersal of the family members.

Her long-term companion and servant Lali illustrates the external influences of gendering within the household. Lali is employed to fulfil the needs of the blind matriarch. She does not merely run errands

for her for she also keeps the matriarch occupied with various information and gossip about the outside world. She helps the matriarch watch TV and remains a part of her every discussion.

Matangi-Ma also attempts to find her existence through her culinary prowess. She attempts to make laddoos but does not succeed due to her blindness. She trembles because of a mild earthquake, which reminds her of the earthquake they had experienced in Dibrugarh. Her memories of her domesticity with her parents make her long for the same setup in the post-pandemic times. The idleness bodes well for memories and nostalgia to reinforce the existing processes of gendering.

Lali intends to find her existential purpose by staying relevant in the household. She tries to explain Matangi-Ma things that she could not see such as the Prime Minister. Her failed attempts do not stop her from trying. Her Islamic identity remains hidden along with her nephew's real name, which comes out though stays irrelevant. The communal propaganda and their attempts to demonise specific religious communities lead Lali to follow a suit of disguise in which she does not reveal the kid's real name though the kid does. Lali's existence also comes to a standstill after the death of the matriarch.

Lali's significance in the household is implied by the prioritising of Riyaz as one of the family members in the matriarch's will. Matangi-Ma provides him with an inheritance of a lakh for the boy has lived for a specific period of time in C100. Matangi-Ma's need to provide hospitality to the boy, though she does not learn anything from him indicates the nurturing quality of femininity in addition to the matriarch's dominance in having a say about what should be spent with money. She also instructs the children to not give a penny of her money to temples, godmen and priests.

In the post-pandemic gendering, as illustrated in the novel, the ideals of heteronormativity enter into conflict with an adoptive family. Suryaveer's adoptive son Samir is provided with an inheritance despite not being related by blood. Ritika, the matriarch's daughter-in-law, is not devoid of pride that she and her husband are the only ones that have provided a hereditary lineage to the family through the little boy Rahul. She is also too careful to not assert her supremacy. She ends up being cuddled in the soft power of Matangi-Ma after being called Rinku. Ritika finding the resemblant voices of her mother in the matriarch bursts into tears ending up embracing her. The embracement of Ritika implies the need for maternal warmth, which makes her detached from her existing financial constraints temporarily. The gendered dimension of Ritika's nostalgia is manifest, however in the pandemic the dimensions mutate before they find maternal warmth which is a quintessential factor of femininity.

The Matriarch's daughter Shanta does not lead a heteronormative existence either for she spends her life serving people through her work as an NGO worker. After Shanti's casual friendship with inspector Babli Mohan, she is warned of a potential suspicion of being anti-national. That serves as a warning for Shanta to prevent her from engaging in activities which she used to do. The patriarchal obtrusion of women's interference is manifest in the arena of interplay which involves the public life of Shanta who has associated herself with a lot of women witnessing their problems and perspective and assisting them through such problems. The deliberate inference of social issues and Shanta's reaction to the police visits exists as a significant postmodern factor along with the influence of post-pandemic gendering.

The encounter had tired Shanta. She had been meaning to visit her mother, but she was suddenly too wearied and fatigued. Munni was hovering around, curiosity writ large on her face. Shanta was in no mood to engage with her... she commanded. "I don't want your chatter, please. Any gossip or information can wait till tomorrow (Gokhale 22)

The responses of Shanta betray the essence of being intimidated and make her feel too fatigued to even talk to her mother. Shanta, having found her existential meaning through her NGO service, gets depressed to hear her service being referred to as potentially anti-social and anti-national. There is hardly any suspicion about Shanta from the police people's end. Yet, she exists being unable to fight the allegations. The post-pandemic gendering here indicates the renascent of the gendered attributes of a submissive woman after the intimidation. The intimidation could not have been new to Shanta for her

career as an NGO worker is filled with such encounters. Yet the lockdown which has deprived her of her usual duties puts her into a sense of idleness and depression for she has lost her existential purpose.

From the reaction mentioned above, it can be observed that the process of gendering within Munni neither remains the same as in the pre-pandemic times nor does it differ radically during the post-pandemic times. Munni is a maid in Shanta's household. Her duties involve primarily cooking for herself, Shanta, Trump the Cat and various kinds of vulnerable people. Munni remains without companionship in Shanta's household till the beginning of the lockdown. Having brought the entire world to a standstill, Munni gets too enthused to not share her gossip with her only companion. She also keeps mum when Shanta instructs her not to speak. Munni wishes to talk to someone but she remains unable to do so for the day. This incident provokes her to share things with Shanta's brother Suryaveer who also resides, in the lockdown, in C100.

Shanta's close observation of her family members despite her single life proves contradictory to popular opinions. Her vibrant public life does not hinder the familial bonding and responsibilities which are assigned to her gender. She believes that she can rely on her elder brother Suryaveer more than she could on her younger brother, Satish. When Satish learns about the visit of the police people he does not give out any words of care. Suryaveer and Shanta spend their time with the matriarch more than Satish does. The abundant time which Shanta possesses by her makes her recollect the horrific memories of her childhood. She recollects the horrors of her mother getting beaten up by her father during the festival of colours, Holi. She, along with everyone else, ponders over the emotional and intellectual strength of the matriarch. Her time which makes her relax also makes her lose her existential purpose. Shanta observes the changes in her brother's political leaning from the Left end of the political spectrum to the right. She expresses that she is hardly surprised by the mutation of his ideological leaning for he has been a Marxist, Vegetarian and a Gandhian. Unlike her elder brother, Shanta claims her refusal to succumb to the traditional divide between the left and right. She remains a prototype of postmodern disillusionment. But the disillusionment is overcome by her by acknowledging the planet's succumbing to authoritarianism.

Now, deep into total lockdown, she felt panic and despair. There were containment zones ... the mandatory health app would rob her ... privacy. And who were these people, in India, in America, in China, in Russia, who had seized the stage? ... This was beyond capitalism, beyond class, beyond the spaces of the right and left ... 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 will. Who would break the spell, and how? (Gokhale 99)

Shanta realises that the nervousness of the travel and a load of work has consumed and "sustained her" without which she feels like she has been put through a test. She implies that the curfew is forced imprisonment. She feels a loss of self through the lockdown. Her small acts such as preparing food for the homeless and her family members do not sustain her existential purpose.

The comeback of the joint family is one of the significant factors that boost post-pandemic gendering. Ritika, Satish's wife and Matangi-Ma's daughter-in-law stands differed from a quintessentially gendered being and her gendering undergoes mutation in the post-pandemic times. In the opening chapter, Ritika is observed as the one who does not like her mother-in-law's behaviour which involves feeding her son some candies and toffees. She refuses to compromise on her son's health for the matriarch's family has a history of type-2 diabetes. It is not the mere maternal caution that contributes to Ritika's femininity. Having accustomed to smoking, she continues the habit cautiously. She stubs her cigarette when she thinks about the presence of her mother-in-law upstairs. She lights a new one when she infers that everyone has to compromise in a joint family (Gokhale 18).

The gendering of Ritika involves a surge of feminist consciousness. The aforementioned statement on feminist consciousness is not to infer that the right to smoke is what feminism is. The act of smoking

stands symbolic here because it is only through the act that she infers the family as not a hierarchy but as a functioning of a set of reciprocal actions that conflict, contradicts and reconciles with one another. The feminist consciousness of Ritika does not hinder her maternal values. She cares for her son and she possesses a belief that she is the most superior of the family members for she has produced a biological heir with the matriarch's son.

Ritika keeps to herself the grievances and doubts she possesses about the family members. She postulates that the matriarch could not be blind and that there is nothing wrong with getting money from her. She suspects that Samir could be a biological son of Suryaveer, as a result of some hidden relationship from the past. She keeps mum to many other speculations in addition to the aforementioned ones. She fears the uprising of any conflict in the closed doors of the pandemic era. She refuses to stop her addiction due to the fear of conflict, but she filters her words and conversations with people around her. Her cigarette addiction hinders the typical passivity of feminine behaviour, but it continues to exist in terms of her potential conversations. Ritika does not have an option of smoking outside for there is a strict curfew imposed by the state. Her addiction remains a way for her to ascertain her existence in the household, but her verbal limitations keep her under subjugation.

Ritika, by the end, reveals the need for her maternal care which she believes she has achieved by being called by the matriarch a pet name which her mother used to call, Rinku. Ritika's career goes downhill after the lockdown for it is based on transportation and hospitality. She cries and takes out the anger on her son for a moment. She feels bad about it later. Ritika's behaviour gets prone to instant fits throughout the lockdown unlike Shanta's anxieties within her psyche. In a locked spatiality, Shanta behaves more feminine than Ritika in terms of care and passivity. The heteronormative familial existence of Ritika proves to be of no use in her ways of handling post-pandemic stress.

The study of post-pandemic gendering in the novel does not limit itself to the investigation and speculation of female characters in the novel. It also intends to explore the impact of post-pandemic gendering on the male characters of the novel. The first male character introduced in the novel is Rahul, the Matriarch's grandson. After that the novel introduces Satish, Suryaveer, Mr. Sen and Samir. Satish is the child who is provided with a lavish wedding and a honeymoon in Switzerland unlike the other two who did not get married. Satish, being the youngest, exists in fear and respect for the matriarch. He panics and manages the situation when he uses the term "blind" while talking to her. He talks to her about all his troubles but never stops taking money from her. He considers it a loan to take money from her mother, which Ritika does not. Satish's gendering becomes less masculine in terms of aggression in the post-pandemic times. He behaves with his wife empathetically. He offers her a crying shoulder to her while she remains upset about her career trajectory. Satish provides paternal care to his son when he is screamed at by Ritika. He makes space for Ritika's violent fits but demands her apology when events begin to affect their son. Satish does not care for his siblings as much as they care for him. Satish remains absorbed in his struggles as a caretaker of his biological family. Satish's emotional well-being is dealt with appropriately when he includes empathy, passivity, and resilience to deal with his issues. Satish's act of embracing a few feminine qualities, as opposed to the normative, makes his existence not more difficult. His ability to provide comfort to his wife continues to persist because of the adoption of the aforementioned qualities. Unlike Suryaveer, Satish continues to feel the need to be properly acknowledged by the matriarch for leading a heteronormative existence with his wife and his son. Suryaveer's existence, despite not being married, is not an exactly masculine one either. He learns to change himself and hide his emotional vulnerability for his adoptive son, Samir.

Suryaveer is a research scholar working on his new book based on Indian Philosophy. Likening to the existence of a pandemic, his book as well, he feels, has come to a standstill. The quintessential feature of postmodernism, intertextuality, acquires a distinct form for post-pandemic temporality. Intertextuality refers to the conscious usage of other or others' works by the writer in their writing (Baldwin). In this novel, Suryaveer reads multiple poems to his mother, Matangi-Ma. At first, Matangi remembers the poem, which he recites, written by Ramdhari Singh Dinkar in Hindi. Loosely translated, the poem implies the retrospection of an excruciating past and a hope for the anticipating future, which includes believing that "good fortune does not forever slumber" (11).

He also recites the poetry of Walt Whitman which the matriarch listens to with significant reflective enthusiasm and spiritual absorption. He recites the poem “Song of Myself”. The existence of every autumn within oneself as implied in the poem provides some relief for himself. The matriarch revisits the quote “I contain multitudes”. Suryaveer points to a sensitive side of himself by making his mother realise something out of the lockdown’s speculation. Out of all lines, she merely emphasises “I contain multitudes”. Matangi-ma’s multitudes begin to wonder, sustain and pressurise her.

Suryaveer’s revelation to Samir about his roots follows a philosophical analogy to nature which also follow their roots. Suryaveer begins to dilute his existence for the sake of Samir. He does not express his ego to be acknowledged by Samir. The gendering of Suryaveer gets diluted to a less severe masculine version when he thinks of the past and lets Samir choose his own roots instead of expressing his worries to him.

Samir, on the other hand, begins to explore his roots by searching for his biological family members. Suryaveer recalls the moments he got custody of Samir especially his friend and Samir’s maternal uncle quoting the proverb “blood is thicker than water”. Samir does search for his roots maternally for he longs for the care that he has always been unable to get from Suryaveer. He keeps the picture of his mother, yearns for maternal warmth and expresses his angst of not getting it through playing the drums powerfully to which Ritika does not respond despite being stressed. Samir’s gendering involves asking for maternal warmth as well as a violent expression of the lost roots. Samir’s, like everyone else’s, gendering blurs the contours between the normative masculine and feminine. The nature of the loss is distinct within Samir. He laments the death of his adoptive father who connects him to the matriarch’s family. He goes to his maternal uncle’s place and falls in love with another girl. The three months provide a distinct shaping of the psyche of Samir.

Those three months of the early lockdown that I spent at C100 were the slowest, gentlest and also the most intense in my life. There were so many things ... that I had consigned to a vacuum bag labelled ‘Convenient Amnesia’. I was afraid to address these questions, terrified of what the answers might be ... I remember how Surya had taken over all the household work on the first floor ... Never chapatis- he hadn’t mastered those. Munni would bring a stack from downstairs (Gokhale 182)

2. Conclusion

To summarise the findings, despite her gentle domination, Matangi-Ma’s gendering elicits emotional rather than rational responses. Regardless of the emotional and financial assistance, she gives her offspring, the matriarch does not find purpose in anything other than a deep relationship with her grandkids. The desire to give him toffees despite the mother’s concerns may be due to Matangi-anxiety Ma’s that the lockdown may end, causing the family members to disperse.

As shown in the narrative, values of heteronormativity clash with an adoptive family in the post-pandemic gendering. Despite not being connected by blood, Suryaveer’s adopted son Samir receives an inheritance. Ritika, the matriarch’s daughter-in-law, is proud that she and her spouse are the only ones who have presented the family with a genetic lineage through the small child Rahul. She is also far too cautious to express her dominance. After being called Rinku, she is cradled in the gentle power of Matangi-Ma. Ritika breaks into tears after hearing her mother’s voice in the recording and ends up embracing her. Ritika’s embracement of the matriarch reveals a longing for maternal warmth, which briefly removes her from her current financial constraints. Ritika’s nostalgia has a gendered component, but in the epidemic, the dimensions morph before they reach the maternal warmth that is a defining aspect of femininity.

Ritika’s gendering comprises a rush of feminist consciousness. The above statement on feminist consciousness is not meant to imply that feminism is just the freedom to smoke. The act of smoking is symbolic here since it is only via the act that she supposes the family as a collection of reciprocal

activities that conflict, contradict, and reconcile with one another. Ritika's feminist consciousness does not interfere with her parental ideals.

Satish's gendering becomes less masculine in terms of anger in the aftermath of the epidemic. He treats his wife sympathetically. While she is still sad about her job path, he provides her with a sobbing shoulder. When Ritika screams at Satish, he shows paternal care to his kid. He tolerates Ritika's angry outbursts but expects an apology when circumstances begin to damage their son. Satish's emotional well-being is effectively addressed when he uses empathy, passivity, and resilience to deal with his problems. Satish's embrace of a few feminine attributes, in contrast to the conventional, does not make his life any more difficult.

Suryaveer's gendering softens to a less harsh masculine form when he considers the past and lets Samir pick his own roots rather than voicing his concerns to him. Samir's gendering includes both a request for maternal tenderness and a violent declaration of his lost roots. Samir's gendering, like everyone else's, blurs the lines between the standard masculine and feminine. The nature of Samir's loss is distinct.

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