

Gendered Spaces and Remembered Lives: Reconstructing Female Identity in Namita Gokhale's *The Blind Matriarch*

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Abstract

Namita Gokhale's *The Blind Matriarch* (2021) explores gender, memory, domesticity, ageing, blindness, and identity within the context of the Indian joint family and the COVID-19 lockdown. The novel centres on Matangi-Ma, an elderly blind woman living on the top floor of a Delhi household. Although physically dependent upon others, she possesses a strong sense of memory, emotional perception, and familial authority. This article examines how Gokhale represents the domestic space as both a site of confinement and a space of belonging and self-expression. Drawing upon feminist perspectives on gender and space, particularly Judith Butler and Henri Lefebvre, the study analyses how the women characters negotiate familial expectations and reconstruct their identities. Matangi-Ma's memories challenge conventional representations of women as merely wives, mothers, and grandmothers, while her blindness complicates the relationship between physical sight and knowledge. The article argues that memory becomes a means of recovering female subjectivity, while the domestic space becomes a site where gender, power, dependence, and agency intersect.

Keywords: Namita Gokhale, *The Blind Matriarch*, Gender, Memory, Domestic Space, Female Identity, Blindness, Feminism

Introduction

Namita Gokhale's *The Blind Matriarch* presents the Indian joint family as a complex space where gender, memory, power, and individual identity intersect. Set largely in a South Delhi household during the COVID-19 lockdown, the novel centres on Matangi-Ma, an elderly blind woman whose memories connect several generations. The publisher describes her as living on the "topmost floor of an old house with many stories". Her physical separation from the family is contrasted with her emotional centrality within it.

The novel begins with the request, "Tell me a story, Matangi-Ma", establishing her as the keeper of familial memory. Through storytelling and recollection, she reconstructs experiences that have shaped her identity. This article argues that Gokhale uses gendered domestic space and memory to

demonstrate that female identity is neither fixed nor determined solely by conventional familial roles.

Gender, Space, and Female Identity

Judith Butler argues that gender is produced through repeated social acts and performances (179). This concept is relevant to Gokhale's women, whose identities are shaped by expectations concerning marriage, motherhood, domesticity, and care. Henri Lefebvre similarly argues that space is socially produced through relationships and practices (26). The house in *The Blind Matriarch* can therefore be understood as a gendered space rather than a neutral setting.

Matangi-Ma's position on the top floor symbolises both authority and isolation. She is the family's matriarch, yet her blindness and age make her dependent upon others. The novel consequently complicates the relationship between power and physical ability. Her assertion, "I may be blind, but remember, I can see everything", reverses the conventional association of blindness with helplessness. Her knowledge comes through memory, sound, touch, and emotional perception.

The domestic space also reflects the changing relationship between generations of women. Matangi-Ma's authority is rooted in age, experience, and her position within the family, whereas younger women such as Ritika negotiate more individualistic ideas of freedom and selfhood. Ritika's observation that "In a joint family, everybody had to adjust" reveals the pressure placed upon individuals to conform to collective expectations. For women, such adjustment often involves negotiating personal desires against the demands of marriage and family. Gokhale, however, presents the household not simply as a space of female oppression but as a site where women develop different forms of agency. Through memory, negotiation, care, and self-expression, the women transform the domestic space into a place where their identities can be questioned and reconstructed.

Memory and the Reconstruction of the Self

Memory is central to Matangi-Ma's identity. The recurring request, "Tell me a story, Matangi-Ma," positions her as a transmitter of intergenerational history. Her memories preserve experiences that might otherwise disappear from the family's collective consciousness. Her reflection that she has been "a good wife, a good mother" reveals the tension between socially approved femininity and personal fulfilment. Although she has successfully performed conventional familial roles, she questions what these roles have meant for her individual self. Her later reflections on whether she has truly lived demonstrate that memory is not merely recollection but a process of self-evaluation. Paul Ricoeur observes that memory is closely associated with identity because remembering allows individuals to reconstruct their relationship with the past (3). In Gokhale's novel, memory enables Matangi-Ma to move beyond the identities imposed upon her and recognise herself as an individual with desires, regrets, and experiences.

Memory also becomes a means through which Matangi-Ma revisits the emotional experiences that have shaped her relationships with family members. Her recollections do not merely preserve the past; they reveal the silences, sacrifices, disappointments, and unresolved emotions hidden beneath the apparently stable structure of family life. As she recalls different stages of her life, the boundaries between past and present become fluid, allowing earlier experiences to acquire new

meanings. In this sense, remembering becomes an act of self-discovery. Matangi-Ma's memories enable her to recognise that her identity cannot be confined to the roles of wife, mother, or grandmother. By reclaiming her memories and giving voice to them, she reconstructs a more complex sense of self and asserts the value of her individual experience within the collective history of the family.

Domesticity and Women's Negotiation

The novel also explores the pressure of adjustment within the joint family. Ritika's observation that "In a joint family, everybody had to adjust" captures the tension between individual freedom and collective expectations. For women, adjustment often involves regulating personal desires and behaviour according to familial expectations. Yet Gokhale does not represent women merely as passive victims. Matangi-Ma exercises authority through memory and experience; Ritika negotiates domestic expectations; Shanta extends her identity into social work; and Lali exercises agency through her role as companion and caregiver. Their different experiences demonstrate that female identity is shaped not only by gender but also by age, class, occupation, and family position. The novel further reveals that domesticity is not a uniform experience for all women. Matangi-Ma's position as the elderly matriarch gives her a degree of authority, while Ritika's position as a younger woman places her within different expectations of marriage and family responsibility. Lali's role as a caregiver introduces the intersection of gender and class, showing how domestic labour often remains dependent upon women's emotional and physical work. Shanta, in contrast, moves beyond the immediate boundaries of the household through her social engagement. These contrasting experiences demonstrate that the domestic sphere contains multiple forms of power and dependence. Gokhale thus presents women as active negotiators who accommodate, question, and reshape the roles assigned to them within the family.

The Pandemic and the Transformation of Space

The COVID-19 lockdown intensifies the novel's exploration of domestic space. Physical confinement forces family members to remain together and confront unresolved relationships and memories. The house becomes simultaneously a shelter and a site of psychological confinement. The pandemic therefore transforms the domestic space into a place of introspection. Characters who might otherwise escape into the external world are forced to confront themselves and one another. For women, this confinement intensifies the gendered expectations already associated with the household. The house consequently becomes a symbolic representation of both restriction and belonging. It limits physical movement while providing emotional and familial continuity.

Conclusion

The Blind Matriarch presents female identity as an ongoing process of negotiation between individual desire and familial expectations. Through Matangi-Ma, Gokhale challenges the assumption that blindness signifies helplessness and demonstrates that knowledge can emerge through memory, experience, and emotional perception. The house functions as a gendered space in which women experience both restriction and agency. Matangi-Ma's storytelling transforms memory into a form of self-recovery, while Ritika, Shanta, and Lali demonstrate different ways of negotiating womanhood within and beyond the domestic sphere. Ultimately, Gokhale presents



memory and space as central to the reconstruction of female identity. The domestic world is not merely a background to women's lives; it is the very space in which their identities are produced, contested, remembered, and reimagined.

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