

**Reading Trauma and Its Reflections on the Body and Self in Namita Ghokhale's *The Blind Matriarch***

**Sandeep Kaur**

Asstt. Professor in English, Amar Shaheed Baba Ajit Singh Jujhar Singh Memorial College, Ropar, India

**Abstract:** Trauma is not a new word. It affects everyone in one way or the other. It is no more a sign of exterior or interior physical injury; rather, it has spanned its realms to the human psyche. It goes beyond generations, sometimes travels into the social memory, and sometimes even goes on to shape the histories of communities and nations.

The pandemic (coronavirus) has been one such phase in the history of mankind that will always be remembered as a traumatic one. The *Blind Matriarch* has been labelled as India's first literary response to the pandemic. A character of the novel named Suryaveer reads Walt Whitman to the central character Matangi-Maa, "I am large- I contain multitudes."

With this Namita, Ghokhale reminds us about the multitudes of human life and takes us to the innermost journey of the characters, where she reveals their trauma, victimhood, and violence and its effects on their entire existence. The primary victim is Matangi Maa, who is physically, mentally and emotionally abused by her husband and then cheated by him. She does bend to the societal obligation of being a good wife but decides not to see his face again and becomes (willingly) blind. She also refuses to be a stereotyped mother and mother-in-law; she allows her children to choose their life paths to keep them away from her own traumatic experiences. This paper attempts to study the trauma and violence faced by the central character, different generations and their responses to the experiences.

**Keywords:** Trauma, Memory, Violence, Identity, Patriarchy

Trauma is a consequence of incidents or events that transcend the boundaries of normal; therefore, it is never possible to record and represent traumatic experiences with total accuracy. Still, the

fragmentation of memory and flashbacks are enough to describe “the degree of damage done to the individual's coherent sense of self and the change of consciousness caused by the experience” (Caruth). The power of trauma lies in the fact that the overwhelming traumatic experience is not forgotten. Instead, it is “stored in the unlocatable place in the brain” (Caruth). Therefore, the traumatic events, memories and consequences have found a decent place in psychology, psychoanalysis and literature. The focus remained on studying the World Wars, Holocaust partitions, etc. However, the COVID-19 phase demands a re-shifting of this focus and urges scholars to study the trauma common people face in their daily lives.

The recent Coronavirus Pandemic tossed the world upside down, and there was a total shutdown in many nations. Countless lives were lost, the layoffs became a threatening reality, and return to homelands was associated with fear, hunger, and non-availability of means of transport; the Pandemic profiteering, looting, domestic violence, distrust, and isolation showed the dark side of society at large. This novel by Namita Gokhale is set during this time, and the entire atmosphere of lockdown is very boldly discussed. Namita Gokhale did her best to explain everything related to the Pandemic. She yet kept her focus on offering insights into the traumatic experiences that left a lasting mark on Matangi Maa and her family. As a reader, one can feel how the reading shifts to the dynamics of memory, the gaps, the absence of lengthy narratives, the response to the trauma and the self-healing. The traumatic memories of Matangi Maa, her daughter Shantaa, her maid and her daughter-in-law dominate the emotional atmosphere of the novel. The learned knowledge of the world and the unlearning of the same often reoccur and construct a framework that is entirely new and more acceptable. Although Gokhale constructs the narrative with disjointed traumatic memories, the vividness of the same helps the reader to understand how repressed emotions and underestimated events and experiences can play a vital role in the lives of individuals. It is worthy to quote Crespo here, “by now it is widely recognised that literature...is a power medium and carrier of cultural memory.” Gokhale has added the factual accounts to produce- “ a more historical and authentic story.” The blend of realistic events and fiction makes the work an account of collective memory and

trauma and its impact on the body of a nation and the families who suffered irreparable damages during the period.

However, it is not in the realm of this paper to discuss collective memory, trauma and its effects. This paper is focused on the life story of its central character, Matangi Maa, whose traumatic experiences and the memory of the same bring back its reflections on the body and self. The writer has presented to us the cultural, social and individual contexts in which the stress escalates and becomes trauma. Balaev states that, "...traumatic experiences and remembrance situates the individual concerning a larger cultural context that contains social values that influence the recollection of event and reconfiguration of the self" (149).

He adds that trauma can pose major challenges by disrupting the attachments between self and others while taking into account the place of trauma. The physical atmosphere and the cultural contexts can help one to organise memory, trauma and its reflections on the body. Balaev further mentions, "Trauma, in my analysis, refers to a person's emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual's sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates society" (149-50).

Gokhale juxtaposes both -the trauma caused by COVID-19 and lockdown is treated as accidental trauma and collective memory. In contrast, the characters of the novel are inflicted by the trauma of their past and its lasting impact. It is pertinent to note here that 'trauma, witnessing and memory' pervades the memory studies because:

Trauma challenges our understanding of how "normal" memory works. Memories of events that threaten our bodily and mental integrity resist being assimilated into a coherent life story and are repressed. They return sometimes years later, as intrusive flashbacks, nightmares, and fragments. (Kennedy)

On the other hand, Felman opines that a coherent narrative is blocked by trauma therefore, he argues that testimony should not be understood as "a complete statement, a localisable account of events." (as qtd in Kennedy)

The transmission of traumatic memory into the lines and psyche of the future generation(s) can make an irresistible change. Memory, however, cannot be termed reliable because the victims and others have their interpretations and perspectives to define the particular events. For example, the men in the house of Matangi Maa never recall any (bad) memory about their father, but her daughter Shantaa and her concern about her daughter-in-law clarify that gender and stereotyped identities will always intersect and play a complex role in trauma, memory and its dealings.

The female protagonist, Matangi, calls herself unfortunate and “had a contentious relationship with gods. They had been unjust with her, and she was unforgiving in her anger and her disappointment” throughout her life (Gokhale). Her traumatic experiences, beginning from her childhood, continue to haunt her. Gokhale does what Huyssen describes as “the act of remembering is always in and of the present” (as qt in Kennedy), which makes this work not only about absence, pain, and suffering instead, it is an inevitable invitation to move beyond the past and celebrating the present. Trauma can be associated with past or accidental issues. Dalia Said Mustafa, in his paper states that, “Trauma is also described 'as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena” (5).

This same happens with Matangi, her daughter, and others. Matangi Maa is living in a three-story house with her children. The daughter, Shantaa, occupies the ground floor, and the younger son, Suryaveer, with his adopted son, Samir, lives on the first floor. The elder one, Satish, lives with his wife Ritika and son Rahul on the second floor, whereas Matangi Maa lives on the top floor with her maid Lali. Matangi Maa is blind. She is the central figure who keeps her family intact and is considered a ‘presiding deity’ of the family. Matangi relies on her memory and remembers how her mother brought her an embroidery kit. Gokhale mentions:

As a teenager, she had spent long hours embroidering twelve cambric handkerchiefs, intended as a part of her wedding trousseau. She had dreamt of how her husband would delight in and compliment her artistry...three of the handkerchiefs had miraculously

survived-they had remained her companions through these years of pain and torture, consoling her, wiping her tears. (7-8)

But, “misfortune had followed Matangi all her life.” (11) Her father was DCP Matang Singh Kashyap of newly independent India. Still, she lost her father on 15 August 1950 in an earthquake and even at the age of eight, she hadn’t forgotten “how the ground had begun shaking” (Gokhale). There is no other childhood memory mentioned in the novel. She was financially independent as she inherited a lot of money from her maternal uncle. She understood the importance of money in her life, and she never shared it with her abusive husband. She uses the power of money to educate her children, especially her daughter. Before her death she divides it very meticulously among her children, maids, and the little Pappu who stayed with her for a few days during the pandemic.

During the lockdown, there was no enthusiasm to celebrate any festival, and Gokhale used the festival as a tool to revoke memory and unveil the trauma of the past. The festival Holi, which is a symbol of colours and friendship, has different meanings for Matangi and her daughter. It is the day when Matangi and her daughter both lose their curiosity about it. During COVID-19 Holi, they both separately recall the Holi of almost thirty years ago. Shantaa overheard her mother raising her voice for the first time and weeping loudly, so she peeped carefully through the curtains, “Her father was slapping her mother...once, twice, thrice...then he pulled at her hair, at the long plait, so that her neck jerked backward and her eyes rolled around in their orbs. Another resounding slap” (29).

Matangi remembers that Holi too. She fought with him because she saw him with another woman. He slapped her not for the first or last time when she questioned him. But that Holi, she packed her clothes and decided to leave. Of course, she didn’t leave because she was an Indian woman, a doting mother, and a dutiful wife. The reflections of this traumatic event are narrated by Gokhale, “Her vision became to blur...she had chosen not to see. Perhaps she had resolved not to see” (31).

Gokhale, as a writer, provides hints of the mental trauma and its reflections on the body and self. She carefully chooses the situation where the protagonist decides to become blind. Hence, the

writer paints a clear picture of how traumatic events can lead individuals to different avenues to seek escape. She describes her husband, Prabodh Kumar Sharma, of Indian audits and accounts services, as a womaniser. The memories of her traumatic past keep on haunting her by coming back in the form of flashbacks and dreams. Each memory is intrinsically connected to objects or occasions.

The writer directs the readers' attention to stocking food in large amounts during COVID-19, and the writer uses the food to evoke memories of the past. Matangi stocks the first mangos of the season during lockdown, which brings back another memory in the form of a dream. She sees how they all are enjoying mangoes when her husband asks her to play badminton. She agrees and plays beautifully, which makes her husband angry, and Matangi pleads and apologises. But he flung the racquet, and she knew "there would be consequences" (51). She was awakened by her maid Lali, but Matangi wanted to return to her dream because "she wanted a different outcome this time" (52). This desire for a different outcome is strongly presented throughout the novel, but the only solution provided is to live in the present. The writer makes it clear that the traumatic memories keep on haunting the victim and those around them. Therefore, the trauma becomes intergenerational and is lived again and again with the return of memories. Hence, the occasions, objects and words become triggers for the victims.

Gokhale also makes use of 'fragmented memories' to describe the trauma of her characters. She is careful not to spoil what Belaev calls a "fixed and timeless photographic negative stored in an unlocatable place of the brain" that interrupts the consciousness of the victims. Matangi preferred to "return to the imagined spaces within her." This is very much clear in the novel, though Gokhale shows how Matangi Maa tries her best not to transform her experience into an active one. However, still, the memories keep on revisiting her and reminding her why she became blind. Her family also comprehends the fact that the repetition of trauma causes more pain, and therefore, they have an unsaid mutual agreement, not to mention her blindness. It is also done to "prevent(ing) the mental apparatus from being flooded with large amounts of stimulus which have broken in the binding of

them....(because) traumatic situation is the experience of helplessness on the part of the ego which is suddenly overwhelmed” (Bulut).

Trauma is said to be unrepresentable through the inability of the brain to record, encode and represent the exact event; therefore, it is only through the repetitive flashbacks that it can be comprehended. The brain doesn't forget the traumatic events rather it becomes a carrier of the same. Matangi faced so much violence in her marital life that she constantly revisited those events just to have a different outcome. She once again dreams about her husband, and she confronts him. He slaps her, but she can't slap him back but rather leaves the room, afraid of escalated violence. The memory of those slaps remains with her even after she is awake. She feels dispirited and unsettled after the dream visitation of her dead husband. She remembers how she once got a teaching job. Her husband mocked her and told her she was becoming blind. She joined the job against his wishes and went there for a week, then the accident happened. She tripped over a steel bucket, and the phenyl got into her mouth and eyes. The doctor who treats her makes a clear indication of her traumatic experiences and their reflections on her body, “there was an already an existing precondition...but it has lost all your vision your peripheral vision I can not understand it. It may be emotional trauma-or...” (114).

This one statement is used by Gokhale to give the reader an insight into Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which was not treated by anyone in Matangi's or any other character's case because everyone kept the tales of trauma to themselves and never discussed them with anyone. This led her to the extremity of becoming willingly blind. The doctor kept track of her eyesight but couldn't help her because she didn't want to see. Gokhale says, “She had willed herself to darkness.” this unspeakable and mummified trauma left a lasting and speakable reflection on her body. Caruth claims that traumatic events remain isolated in the brain and keep on carrying the potential to infect others. Matangi's experiences led her daughter to decide to remain a spinster. Her blindness is the major traumatic reflection shown on her body. She is blind to see faces but has good eyesight to grasp whatever happens around her. Everyone in the house is careful, not to mention her blindness, because no one wants to revisit and remap those traumatic experiences again.

The ‘suddenly overwhelming situation’ which carries the capacity to traumatise becomes more relevant in Shantaa’s case. Shantaa, too, has shared traumatic experiences. She develops the photographic negative from time to time to remember not to forgive her father for his cruelty. He calls her dark, fat and useless and needs a big dowry to get married, which he is not ready to pay. But her mother stood by her, paid her fees and was ready to do anything for her happiness. Matangi and Shantaa both remained “dry-eyed” when he died. Shantaa didn’t marry. She was too conscious about her looks; even though she loved a man, she could never muster the courage to express it. He was an exact copy of the famous cinema artist Irfaan Khan, who died during COVID battling with cancer. The news of Irfaan Khan’s death makes the novel more realistic, but it also brings the memory of losing a lover for Shantaa. Shantaa approaches her mother for comfort because, for her, it was a very personal loss. But her mother chided her for crying over the death of Irfan Khan and said, “You young people are ...always feeling sorry for yourself about this or that...look at me. I have been a good wife, a good mother, but what has life ever given me?... did I deserve this? No!” (101).

This ‘No’ is the same for Shantaa. She didn’t deserve to be body shamed by her own father and didn’t deserve to repress her feelings due to the same. All these memories of the past create trauma in the minds of the characters. Bulut, in her article “Freud’s Approach to Trauma”, mentions that “trauma repeatedly disturbs the capacity to deal with other challenges.” Bulut also shares Freud’s insights that trauma, memory and traumatising are a result of internal sources. Still, later, the developments in the field made him include the role of external factors as well. Ferencz also emphasised the external factors triggering trauma. He also said that the trauma and memory relation must be based on the absolute truth and honesty to study it properly, as the lack of this can trivialise the entire process or the problem. Ferenczi also pays heed to the “communication embedded in it” (as qtd in Bulut). It has become a fact now that the external factors influencing a child who needs care, protection and love must be taken into account while studying the traumatic experiences because “external traumatising conditions and their internalisation” cannot be separated.



Gokhale has employed the technique of “reliving or flashbacks” discussed by Crespo and Lausac. They go on to further describe that “Flashbacks are involuntary memories that are triggered by perceptual cues and are dominated by vivid sensational details...fragmented memories dominated by sensory impressions.”

The flashbacks are employed by Gokhale to describe not only Matangi’s trauma but also other characters. Her daughter-in-law Ritika remembers how her pocket money was stopped because she lost a geometry box in school. She was never allowed to touch the gifts that were brought for her, and all things were “unfairly withheld” from her (149). She was the only child, yet she was deprived of a loving childhood. She felt only financial independence could bring her happiness. She becomes violent and sick when she loses her job during COVID. Still, her mother-in-law, her husband, and her little son extend strong support to her, and she becomes more confident and understands that everyone is battling and living in their own web and must be helped whenever possible.

Shantaa’s maid Munni has a traumatic past, too, which she is afraid to visit. Still, the photographic negative comes to haunt her during COVID-19, and she fails to lock down her past trauma and shares her haunting memory with Suryaveer. She was sexually abused by her father. He was an abuser and drunkard who killed his wife by throwing her into a well. The village outcasts him not for the murder but for throwing her in the well, which was used by upper caste people. Their resource was polluted. He requested Munni to allow him in and take care of him, but she asked him to meet her near well. He was scared of the villagers and went there. She threw him into the same well and ran. She sought escape from her abusive childhood by murdering him. Her escape from the village shows her fear and incapacity to fight against the deeply rooted caste system of Indian society at large. But the vicious circle didn’t end. She got married to an abusive man, and she lost her three babies in miscarriages. Only a boy and a girl survived. There is no other reference to her husband. She left him, murdered him, or he abandoned her remains a mystery. The tormented memories of suffering at the hands of her own father and the wrath of upper-caste villagers never left her, and she was scared to date.

The writer doesn't present the trauma as an individual event. Rather, it is discussed as a group memory of one gender, namely the woman. The novel defines and recreates the traumatic narratives of one group of females who are not good-looking. Gokhale keeps the relation of trauma, memory and identity intact to link the oppression and violence faced by four different women from diverse backgrounds to lay bare the dominating patriarchal structure of Indian society. Matangi herself couldn't break it, but she believes in living for the living. She never interfered with her children's lives. She leaves her home after her son Surya dies, succumbing to Corona Virus. She breathes her last in Mukteswar. The deity, the matriarch, leaves the earth, and Shantaa is ready to live a new life with more confidence. The portrayal of Matangi Maa changes the ideas of self-identification and others. The novel carefully paints how the external factors of fear, disrespect, disturbance, anxiety, violence, etc., simultaneously transform the innerness of individuals.

The writer has weaved many incidents to point out the hatred, the narrowness of patriarchal societies, the self-centred concerns, and the thirst for power, which is causing violence, trauma, and abuse. It can be said that Gokhale, through her characters, not only explains the traumatic experiences of the individuals but also conveys the experiences and the impacts faced and battled by many at gendered, social and cultural levels. The novel makes the readers understand the fact that there is an urgent need to address the issues to create a better society.

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