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# "What Does the Virus Look Like…?": Disability, Pandemic, Senility and the Bodily Embodiment of Crises in Namita Gokhale's *The Blind Matriarch*

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ABSTRACT

*The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities, increasing the vulnerability of disabled individuals to social isolation, inadequate healthcare and the barriers imposed by an inaccessible environment. The novel The Blind Matriarch is a matrix of crises of impairment, pandemic, ageing and death, and it 3narrativises the crises of embodying disability during the COVID-19 pandemic. The novel presents Matangi Ma, an eighty-year-old, visually impaired matriarch living in C100, a four-storey house in Delhi, as COVID-19 ravages the whole world unsparingly. The havoc Ghokale poignantly captures in the novel evokes the Oppenheimerian apprehension of the Bhagavad Gita 'Now I have become death, the destroyer of the world' This study undertakes a cultural and literary analysis of the bodily embodiment of disability, pandemic, senility and womanhood in Gokhale's The Blind Matriarch. It aims to examine the socio-cultural implications and representation of these minority identities through the lens of disability studies, particularly their narrative construction. Employing Anne Waldschmidt's cultural model of disability studies as an analytical tool, this research explores the representations of disability within literary discourses.*

*Keywords: disability; COVID-19 pandemic; embodiment; crises; cultural model*

## DISABILITY: A LITERARY DEVICE

The normalisation of the non-disabled body and mind permeates literary writings, particularly novels, as they aim to create universal characters with whom readers can identify. As a result, novels often unconsciously reinforce normalcy. Moreover, disability is frequently represented in cultural narratives as a literary device to emphasise the thematic or political concerns of the author. In famous literary works, including H.G. Wells' short fiction "The Country of the Blind," blindness is employed as the biological realism of a community that lives in a mysterious valley, and their 'blindness' is merely a tool intended to advance Wells' allegory of imperialism. In Coetzee's *Foe,* Friday's muteness is not depicted as a social stigma of disability but as a parable of colonial politics and a representation of the colonial conspiracy to render the Black individuals as colonised and voiceless. Jose Saramago's *Blindness* tells the story of a city afflicted by an inexplicable blindness epidemic. Saramago employs the blindness epidemic as a convenient allegory for social degeneration. The mental illness of Antoinette Cosway (Jean Rhys' reimagining of Bertha, the 'Mad Woman' in *Jane Eyre*) in *Wide Sargasso Sea* serves as a parable of feminist and postcolonial resistance; however, Rhy's portrayal is an improvement, Charlotte Bronte's depiction of Bertha's mental disability ultimately results in social exclusion, literally. Although

many novels include non-normative bodies and minds within their contexts, few engage disabled bodies or minds as the central thematic concern of the mainstream narrative. Cultural representations of disability are frequently employed as a 'literary device' (commonly as poetics or rhetorical tools) that serves as extended metaphors or allegories for a significant thematic concern or politics the novelists intend to project. However, Gokhale's *The Blind Matriarch* places disability as a central theme, which qualifies the novel to be analysed through the lens of the cultural model of disability.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Tobin Siebers (2008), one of the most prominent critics of disability studies, posits that the key agenda of disability studies should not be to treat physical or mental disability as a medical or social disorder that needs to be cured or eliminated but to deal with its social assumptions, meanings, symbols and stigmas related to the embodiment and identity. Siebers situates disability among minority identities. While focusing on the complexity of defining embodiment, he claims the term is caught between medical and social models of disability. The medical model prioritises embodiment, whereas the social model rejects it, based on the conviction that a disabling environment produces disability. Sieber recommends that disability studies focus on an agenda to formulate "a theory of complex embodiment" (p. 25) that values disability as a form of human variation that qualifies disability as a human diversity. He further claims that disabled bodies are the sites of "fear and fascination" (p. 63) for non-disabled people, and they tend to ascribe something extraordinary to their dis/ability.

Tanya Titchkosky (2002), in her attempt to pinpoint the lack of a cultural map for disability, claims that the day-to-day understanding of visual impairment is that "blindness is not seeing" (p. 103). Titchkosky proposes that people who slowly become blind are in peril, as their orientation to the world keeps changing, and they undergo reorientation during every phase of blindness. She further argues that individuals experiencing vision loss exemplify the absence of adequate language or conceptual frameworks that account for the transition between sightedness and blindness. Titchkosky's emphasis on the linguistic inadequacy in describing the transition from the onset of blindness to total blindness guided this study toward the employment of a linguistic lens to analyse the literary representation of visual disability. This linguistic lens has served as an effective tool for both problematising and embracing the literary representations in *The Blind Matriarch*. Anita Ghai (2002) emphasises the significance of conceptualising disability in India in terms of its meaning and nature. She boldly claims that the dichotomy of disability and ability does not even find a place in every discourse, as disability is assumed to be an unimaginable tragedy. An impaired body is not accepted as normal in Indian culture. This notion finds its source in the reluctance of Indians to donate their organs and are not ready "to part with their body parts even after death" (Ghai, 2002, p. 90). Ghai's analysis sheds new light on the meaning, experience and nature of disability in India, which is found to be culture-centred. It further highlights that disability studies are largely Western-centric and inadequately represent diverse disability experiences. Anne Waldschmidt (2017) analyses the advantages and disadvantages of a social model of disability to assess the efficacy of creating the cultural model of disability. She recommends an analytical perspective that emphasises that "impairment and disabilities are structuring culture(s) and at the same time are structured and lived through culture" (p. 20). The cultural model of disability has not evolved with a unique characteristic or outline. Waldschmidt highlights Tom

Shakespeare's concern that disabled people are objectified in theatre, literature, paintings, films and media.

Despite the influential prominence of disability studies, it has faced various critiques that question its foundational models and practical applications. Mollow, A. (2004) contends that in disability studies, scholars like Simi Linton and Rosemarie Garland Thomson have adopted identity politics as a key framework similar to the critical theories of race, gender and sexuality. This approach is ineffective in addressing the complexities of disability as it can reinforce the essentialist notion of identity. Mollow further argues that the overemphasis on identity politics limits the scope of integrating other marginalised groups in structural economic analysis of class, capitalism and power dynamics. Goodley, D. et al. (2019) criticise that even though critical disability studies focuses on broader political and social issues than traditional disability studies, it remains closely associated with Western and Global North studies. The authors call for the inclusion of Global South, indigenous, and marginalised communities and recognition of diversity among the disabled, which can forge an inclusive and flexible understanding of disability. Vehmas and Watson (2014) argue against critical disability studies for its engagement with theoretical deconstruction while downplaying the real-world ethical, economic, and political concerns that affect disabled individuals. Owens, J. (2015) criticises that the social model of disability studies entails disadvantages, and to address this, the author suggests that Arendt's concept of power be incorporated to construct a nuanced and inclusive disability theory. She suggests Arendt's notion of power to reinforce collective action, plurality and the importance of both public and private realms of disability.

Byung-Chul Han (2015) in the first chapter of his *The Burnout Society*, investigates the shift in social afflictions from bacterial and viral Illnesses to neurological disorders such as depression, ADHD and burnout. The former was caused by bacteria and viruses, which Han calls the "immunological *Other*" (p. 3), whereas the latter arises from the 'Self' (as opposed to the 'Other') motivation to overachieve and overproduce, leading to exhaustion and burnout in society. In his analysis of the social maladies (bacterial and viral age) of the past, Han argues that they can only be interpreted in terms of immunological defence and "immunoreaction" (p. 2), a paradigm that he suggests came to an end in the twentieth century. However, contrary to Han's opinion, the COVID-19 pandemic has reenacted immunological defence against the immunological Other (virus carriers) in the form of lockdowns, Quarantines, Social Distancing, mask mandates, inoculation drives, and border closures. *The Blind Matriarch* marks the 'return of Han's Immunological Paradigm' by recirculating immunological discourse in the cultural space of the twenty-first century. Johnathan Flowers (2021) strongly argues that the accessibility facilities that emerged as exigencies of COVID-19 did not support disabled bodies. Extrapolating from Sara Ahmed's employment of the term 'inheritance', he claims that the disabled body cannot inherit or orient the spaces and the objects in the same way as able-bodied individuals. These modes of accessibility are structured for the convenience of able-bodied subjects; disabled bodies are disinherited or disoriented from these extended accommodations during the pandemic. Mont, D. et al. (2021), drawing on the interviews conducted with persons with disabilities in various countries with low and middle income, report that local civil society organisations and nongovernment organisations rendered more assistance than the government, whose facilities were insufficient. The arguments of both Flowers and Mont help in understanding the importance of policymaking that necessitates the fundamental restructuring of accessibility, aligning with war and pandemic emergencies.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Anne Waldschmidt (2017), in her essay "Disability Goes Cultural: The Cultural Model of Disability as an Analytical Tool", posits the efficacy of the cultural model of disability after briefly discussing the merits and limitations of the social model. The fundamental concept of the social model of disability is that it is not caused by physical impairment but by societal barriers such as inaccessible buildings, discriminatory practices, and a lack of social inclusion. The cultural model of disability argues that disability is also shaped by meanings, values and representations within culture. Thus, she emphasises the need to integrate disability studies with disciplines such as "philosophy and anthropology, history and sociology, ethnology and archaeology, literary studies and linguistics, media studies and religious studies, etc" (p. 20). Waldschmidt acknowledges that Tom Shakespeare also emphasises the need for a cultural model and draws attention to how disabled people are 'objectified' in cultural representations. This study extrapolates from and models the theorisation of the fictional narrative based on Anne Waldschmidt's cultural model of disability:

> A cultural model of disability should not be dismissed as focusing only on symbols and meanings. Instead, it can broaden our analytical perspective to investigate the relationships between symbolic (knowledge) systems, categorisation and institutionalisation processes, material artefacts, practices and "ways of doing things," and their consequences for persons with and without disabilities—their social positions, relationships, and processes of subjectivation.
>
> (2017, p. 24)

Differentiating itself from the social model of disability, which focuses primarily on discrimination, Waldschmidt offers four programmatic ideas for the cultural model of disability. Firstly, it posits that impairment, disability, and normality are constructed by media, academic, and everyday discourses. Secondly, this model considers disability as an 'embodied category of differentiation' understood in binary opposition to what is considered normal, healthy, and complete. Thirdly, the subjectivities and experiences of both disabled and non-disabled individuals are interconnected and constructed in relation to each other. Fourthly, she claims that this decentring approach will open new dialogues that critically examine both constructed normality and deviance. Like any academic discourse, disability studies has its strengths and limitations. Notable strengths include its significant impact on shaping cultural perception by problematising stereotypes and fostering diverse representations in media and the arts. It also influences public policy, such as the Americans with Disability Act, promoting accessibility and anti-discriminatory measures. As an interdisciplinary approach, disability studies incorporates art, education, law, medical science, sociology and psychology to provide a comprehensive understanding of disability. The limitations involved in disability studies include the challenge of implementing their insights and recommendations for changes in accessibility and policy due to systemic inertia and the indifference of those in power. Additionally, while the social model forms the foundation for disability studies, it can overlook the role of the medical model of disability, which aims to improve the quality of life for individuals with disabilities.

This study examines disability identity and its representations in the novel *The Blind Matriarch* through the lens of Waldschmidt's cultural model, analysing knowledge systems, social categories and institutions, material objects, and daily activities at the intersection of disability and (so-called) normality. Among the many relevant studies, it is evident that the matrix of disability, pandemic, senility, and womanhood has been scantily explored within the framework of the cultural model. There is only limited investigation of disability through a cultural theoretical lens,

a gap that underscores the relevance and necessity of the current study. It aims to provide deeper insights into disability identity and lived experience through the narrative of *The Blind Matriarch*. Historically, both womanhood and agedness have often been represented as forms of disability, and *The Blind Matriarch* employs Waldschmidt's cultural model as a powerful theoretical tool to counter the multi-layered representations of disability within social and cultural structures.

## THE EMBODIMENT OF DISABILITY

### LINGUISTIC REPRESENTATION

Titchkosky, in her essay "Cultural Maps: Which Way to Disability?" highlights the common tendency of culture to frame sight and blindness as binary opposites. The focus of the essay is on the need for the cultural map to chart the transformation of stages of blindness from sightedness to blindness. There is no linguistic medium to map the phases of going blind. The inadequacy of language covers various other combinations of lived experience like the stripes of shades "between partial sight and total blindness, between dyslexia and going blind…between all the ways of speaking of blindness and its lived actuality, between all this and surely more, an ambiguous plurality of perspective is released into the world" (2002, p.109).

The embodiment of disability problematises common assumptions about the body (a failing one) and challenges the linguistic representation, which would be defective in capturing the realism of a disabled body. "The present, the past, the dark, the light. Then and now. It was all blurred, in her heart, in her mind's eye" (Gokhale, 2021, p.1). The novel opens with these cryptic words, summarising Matangi's biological reality of blindness and ageing during the "damned time" (Gokhale, 2021, p. 56), and the novel captures Matangi's experience in the third-person narrative and discreetly handles the linguistic representation of Ma's blindness to avoid misrepresentation of the disability reality. Siebers observes, "Disabled bodies provide a powerful example of embodiment seriously. Disabled bodies provide a powerful example of embodiment as mimesis because they resist standard ideas about the body and the pushback when confirmed by language that would try to misinterpret their realism" (2008, p. 2).

The novelist employs a third-person narrative to avoid the misrepresentation of disability realism yet challenges the notion of the body while embodying the disability. The traditional notions and activities of the body are obliterated and unconsciously sidelined in the narrative and language. Matangi Ma's visually disabled body is represented as not seeing but sensing and imagining. "She sensed his entry... she felt these things, inhaled them" (Gokhale, 2021, p. 1). "She could try to imagine how his lips might have puckered up" (Gokhale, 2021, p. 4). "She inhaled the scent of hair oil and his toffee breath, her heart expanded with love" (Gokhale, 2021, p. 6). According to Siebers, "The blind alone do not live this way. All disabled bodies create this confusion of tongue and eyes and hands and other body parts. For the deaf, the hand is the mouth of speech, the eye is the ear, and deaf hands speak. Deaf eyes listen" (2008, p. 53). The disability state sees the body beyond its biological reality, and the general assumptions of the functions or attributes of the body are implicitly challenged in disability. Those ten fingertips of Matangi Ma envision the objects that she deals with every day: Rahul, mangoes, parrot, *ladoo*, kneaded balls of *Chapati,* etc., "Half fingertips, her toes, even the hairs on her arm were all part of the apparatus of perception" (Gokhale, 2021, p. 26). Disability as a condition problematises the embodiment of identities, for disabled identities are in constant flux as a socio-cultural and political construction is in continuous transference with time. Matangi, having endured an oppressive patriarchy that

erased her identity across various aspects, has lost her vision after enjoying the privilege of eyesight until the age of 40. There was a precondition of wet macular degeneration and renal damage during her 30s. It took a toll on her total eyesight when she tripped on a phenyl bucket, and the liquid splashed on her face. The fundamental proposition of disability studies is that disability is an exclusive identity that welcomes everyone at any time, by accident or by the natural process of ageing. Disability identity is not an unlikely reality, whereas other marginalised identities are thrust on irreversibly by birth.

Identity categories are predominantly for bodily attributes like sex, colour, height, proportion and ability. Thus, the body is the significant entity that primarily creates an unchangeable identity. These cannot be changed without the intervention of medical science. (to change a black body into a white body, a female body into a male body, a disabled body into a non-disabled body). Matangi's identity falls into many marginalised identity categories (women, disabled, and old), rendering her body relatively powerless and the most stigmatised entity. The unpredictable, sudden embodiment of impairment leaves Matangi's existence in a whirl of uncertainties. Though she is the matriarch of C100, where all her children live close by thanks to the Lockdown, she never attempts to take control of the family dynasty. The eponymous and demented aged matriarch in Cassandra Medley's (1992) autobiographical play, *Ma Rose,* shares the multiple categories of minority identities of Matangi. The play *Ma Rose* also deals with the matrix of stigmatised identities of mental disability, blackness, womanhood and ageing that are interplaying in the central character, Ma Rose. She fights fiercely to retain control over her family of three generations of women, but this ends up in vain. On the other hand, Mathangi Ma, now in her 80s, does not attempt to actualise her self-identity, which her disability and womanhood have long eroded. Her embodiment of the impairment is stoically voluntary: "She had willed herself to darkness" (Gokhale, 2021, p.115). This corrosion of identity results from the assimilation of a dependent body. However, being a dependent body is a universal human condition, especially during the most unusual times like the pandemic. Thus, the novel enacts every character at the height of physical and mental ability in flux. Surya, Satish, Shanta, Ritika, Samir, Mr. and Mrs Sen, Lali, Munni, and Babli Mohan are all on the brink of timelessness and uncertainty, drifting slowly into an inexplicable disability, groping in the darkness and sometimes immobile, at times experiencing sensory impairments during the pandemic.

## THE CULTURAL TROPE

The mythical trope of disability projects two types of cultural notions of disability: i) Disabled individuals have Distinctive Power, ii) Cripples are Crooked. The cultural perception of an impaired body is infused with a double standard worldwide. The mythologies of both Eastern and Western cultures ascribe either supernatural abilities or villainy (Cripples are Crooked) to physically and mentally disabled persons. Indian mythology primarily represents the impaired body in a negative light. According to Ghai (2002), Indian culture idealises perfection, viewing bodily and mental imperfection as the result of Karma (wages of sin in a previous birth). Thus, the impaired bodies in Indian mythology are often associated with malevolence or vices. The representation of mythical figures like Dhrithrashtra[1], Shakuni[2], Manthara[3], Shukracharya[4], and Ashtavakra5 (Ashtavakra's deformity is not vilified, but his humiliation was normalised in discourses) has evolved into a negative stereotype of disabled characters in films and literature until the 1970s.In both Western and Eastern cultures, there are instances of either valorisation or

demonisation of disability, lacking the narration of life or first-hand experience. The novel *The Blind Matriarch* does not employ the first-person narrative or autobiographical but the third-person or witness narrative and airs the tendency to valorise the character with impairment. In her novel, Gokhale portrays Ma as a heroic figure who swims against the current, pushes all the limits and prevails as a survivor.

Between the two popular assumptions- 'Disabled have Distinctive Power' and 'Cripples are Crooked'-the former has remained consistently present in social and cultural representations throughout history. Lord Varys, in the popular *Game of Thrones* (2011) series, while talking about Bran's recent disability, brings about his childhood mutilation and implies Bran will be blessed in another way, saying, 'Some doors close forever and others open in the most unexpected ways'. Later in the series, Bran is compensated with the power of teleportation. Disabled people are often believed to possess superpowers. The blind can see what normal eyes cannot and can hear the oracles and voices of God; cripples can teleport themselves beyond the realm of time and space. Blindness is a universal mythological and cultural trope. Greek mythology is rife with instances of people blinded by God and humans. Most of the time, these victims of disability are granted reparation as compensation. Ganthari, in the *Mahabharatha,* voluntarily blindfolded herself to share the visual impairment of her husband, King Dhruthrastra. Gandhari's self-imposed disability is rewarded with a superpower that allows her to protect her eldest son in the war by rendering his body invulnerable when she removes her blindfold and looks upon his naked body. Aligning with the mythical trope, Ganthari's voluntary blindness is appreciated as a supreme sacrifice and spiritual fortitude, and she is endowed with a one-time boon to strengthen her son Duryodhana. (Yet he was ultimately killed, struck in the thigh, which he covered due to shyness about being naked in front of his mother) Tiresias gains the power of foresight as recompense when Hera strikes him blind, Evenius gains the power to foretell as reparation for the injustice he was subjected to, and Demodocus is offered the gift of an excellent voice by Muse after robbing of his eyesight. Since ancient times, human imagination has attributed poetic justice to the natural and unnatural deprivation of a physical ability. Everyone around Matangi *Ma* believes that she has also been endowed with a sharp sense and the extraordinary power to see what others cannot see. The objectification of disabled people in cultural and literary representations is a serious concern for disability critics. Ghai asserts, "But disabled people possess bodies that are limited, and to portray them as otherwise is to negate them" (2002, p. 99). The imagining of the disabled as a superpower emanates from the prospect of treading an unknown territory, and 'Unknown' is a condition caused by the lack of first-person or life narration of disability. It is noticeable that the narrative unconsciously violates the modern disability code of fictionalisation by attributing Matangi Ma with an uncanny sense of perception. The disability theorists see the ascription of extraordinary power to disabled people as a 'cultural misunderstanding of disability'. The author does not consciously employ the superpower representation of disability, nor does Ma openly claim credit for her cryptic, uncanny ability to see a hurt bird fall from a nearby tree. However, the people in C100 perceive this as a superpower of Ma to hear the distress call of the wounded bird. On Sunday, it was Ramzan and Matangi called Lali. "There is a bird, she said, a green bird. I can see the bird. It is hurt. It is lying under a tree. It doesn't know how to fly" (Gokhale, 2021, p.88). Sameer, whose mind has been intrigued by the theory of a parallel Universe recently by NASA, perceives, "This was more than a coincidence. By some freak accident of the universe, this bird had reached out to his grandmother" (Gokhale, 2021, p.89). Lali, the home maid to Matangi, is Sanjaya[6] to Dhritarashtra, acts as eyes to Matangi and describes and narrates things around her. For Lali, "The old lady scared her sometimes. It was as though Allah had taken away her eyesight but given her

some other faculties instead" (Gokhale, 2021, p.90). Ritika, at times, refuses to believe her mother-in-law is blind: "Your mother can see in the dark too. Sometimes I think she is not really blind; maybe she sees everything, and we don't realise it" (Gokhale, 2021, p.16). These spoken perspectives on Matangi Ma's visual impairment expose the fault lines in cultural understanding and the lack of experiential knowledge about blindness. The fictional representation of blindness cannot preclude the mythical association of blindness with an uncanny ability to see. Bolt (2021) advances his alarming concern over the literary representation of disability rooted in mythical and cultural stereotyping and of the eugenicist worldview and calls this positioning the 'metanarrative of disability'. However, Matangi never believes or embraces the notion of 'disability with the distinctive ability'. The narrative conspicuously exposes the dichotomy between the embodiment and the perception of the disability.

Davis asserts that a novel is deeply rooted in 'body normativity,' and fictional narration is structured upon the base structure of normalcy and cannot accommodate any aberration, as it is intended to make a model for a reader to lean on and identify themselves with the usual (able-bodied) protagonist. "If disability appears in a novel, it is rarely centrally represented. It is unusual for a main character to be a person with disabilities, although minor characters, like Tiny Tim, [Madam Bovary] can be deformed in ways that arouse pity" (Davis, 2013, p.9).

In myths and epics, disability is employed to evoke either hatred (if the character is negative) or pity (if the character is positive). Rarely is the cultural representation of disability normalised, and few fictional works attempt to portray impairment with an agency of normalcy. Disability is the typical embodiment of tragic heroes and is an agenda to elevate the trauma in a crisis narrative. The trauma is intensified when the disability is not congenital but acquired through fate or enmity. In a novel, the normalisation of impairment occurs only when the disability is not a central theme and is not portrayed negatively or tragically.

## COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Gokhale's novel is one of India's earliest literary responses to the pandemic. It characterises the literature of disability, pandemics, crisis and trauma, dystopia, apocalypse, and historiography. The novel expands from the setting of C100 in Delhi to the broader picture of COVID-19, Lockdown, labourers' migration, and black fungus, incorporating sharp political criticism.

Being non-disabled in a world with disabled people(speculative) and being disabled in a world with non-disabled people during a pandemic led to the homogenisation of disability identity. Jose Saramago's (1997) *Blindness*, a pandemic novel, employs the pandemic as an allegory for an anonymous dystopian society that loses sight of its moral and spiritual foundations. The novel depicts a pandemic-stricken society in which a contagious blindness afflicts people. They see nothing but a white world, except a doctor's wife whose ability to see is considered incongruous (and thus concealed) in that dystopian world of blindness. Matangi's blindness also makes no difference in the world that desperately tries to see the viruses to escape contagion. "What did the virus look like…"? (Gokhale, 2021, p.80) It was not just Matangi Ma alone who wondered; everybody in real-time 2020 did. Both Gokhale's vision of blindness and pandemic and Saramago's depiction of blindness as a pandemic present a catastrophic failure of humankind. However, Gokhale perceives the pandemic as an agent that brought families closer together, even when the vast social structure slowly began to crumble in the fight for oxygen cylinders, medication, toilet paper, etc.

Disability requires a personal narrative for a closer picture, and the pandemic needs a narrative of collective experience for a broader view. In the acknowledgement, Gokhale metaphorically thanked Ambrish Satvik, "opened my eyes to inconsistencies and lazy vision" (Gokhale, 2021, p.209) and thanked Prakya Tiwari for helping her to focus on the "larger picture" (Gokhale, 2021, p. 209). The presentation of the personal narratives of Samir, Shanta and Rahul in the epilogue brings out the diverse perspectives on the pandemic. The unrepresented first-person narrative of Matangi Ma speaks of the bleakness of her old, disabled embodiment. Matangi stoically endures despair, panic and pandemic-induced challenges, yet she envisions hope and a thriving future after the languid Lockdown. She braves the loss of her most loved son, and the embodiment of weakness in all forms incites an emotional emptiness and stoic endurance of pain. She has developed this resilience from the moment she attempted to cope with the reality of her sightlessness, and she voluntarily let go of the things without regret. Her submissive passivity to her husband's arrogance renders her already a defective embodiment. Historically, women's being is conceptualised as defective by philosophers like Aristotle and psychoanalysts like Freud. The primary context of the binary ableism and disability is the bodies of males and females, respectively. A biological disease or sociological stigmatisation is the most damaging embodiment of a body. But a disabled body embodies both disease and stigmatisation, a malady of biology and sociology. Matangi Ma embodies the double stigmatisation of disability and femininity, which her husband exploits. This otherness manifests in the social, cultural and political perception of disability as 'different' with the able body as the 'norm'. The conflation of disability with pandemic discourse enables a new "immunological paradigm" (Han, 2015) and opens up a viable space for confronting the hybrid immunological otherness. Integrating disability studies with other disciplines highlights the necessity of a multidimensional approach to countering the multi-layered representation of disability as exemplified in *The Blind Matriarch*.

Juárez-Almendros observes, "Men have been placed on the positive side of the equation, and the ideal human being has been universally conceived as masculine, young, and physically and mentally able. Women, in contrast, have historically been circumscribed as an insufficient or deficient version of this model" (2017, p.19). Matangi's husband, Proboth Kumar Sharma, plays this universal model of ableism and patriarchy. For him, Matangi (even his daughter Shanta, for being dark and plump) is disabled even before the onset of her blindness. In their theorisation of patriarchy, Mohanta and Banerjee (2024) argue that its manifestation in India differs from that in the West. "In a patriarchal society, due to their sex, women experience systemic social injustice and patriarchy, on the other hand, has an impact on every facet of society, including gender, caste, class, the economy, and polity" (p. 54) Drawing on Bhasin's notion of patriarchy they claim that the family emerges as the primary site where patriarchal domination is actively and dynamically exercised. Matangi's willing embrace of her blindness gives her the privilege of not seeing her husband's face again, and it is liberating and subverts all biological, social, psychological, and cultural stigmatisation about physical embodiment. *The Blind Matriarch* narrativises the embodiment of femininity and disability, enabling the discourse to assume a different trajectory, highlighting new issues and shedding new light in the dark world, recognising this kind of embodiment as strangely comforting.

## MEDIA – A MODE OF ACCOMMODATION

Modelling Sara Ahmed's concerns of 'disorienting' and 'disinheriting', Flower resituates orientation and inheritance of the physical and social spaces by non-disabled subjects, especially in the context of COVID-enabled accommodations. "On this view, we should not treat the disinheritance and disorientation of the able-bodied subject due to COVID-19 as parallel to how disabled persons cannot inherit the world due to the organisation of the world around ability" (Flowers, 2021, p.114). These accommodations themselves challenged the orientation of disabled individuals during the pandemic. Masks disabled the hearing impaired, social distancing disabled individuals with mental impairment, online education disabled those with specific learning impairment, Covid assistive apps disabled the visually impaired, and media coverage of the pandemic disabled individuals with mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety disorder.

The world is structured based on the accessibility of non-disabled subjects. The expanded accommodation is also framed around ability during the pandemic. The world that non-disabled persons once oriented and inherited is now inaccessible to them in the wake of COVID-19. The lockdown concept curtails access to places and objects to contain the disease. Those places and objects have been conspicuously framed around abled bodies. Lockdown not only disabled the able-bodied but also exponentially disabled the disabled persons. Matangi's dark world during the pandemic is quite disorienting and disinheriting. Shanta exemplifies Fowler's notion of world disorientation caused by the Lockdown as she reflects on her once-busy life - travelling from Rwanda to Copenhagen, to Belarus, to Mumbai, to Chennai, and to Uttarakhand- only to feel burned out when caught in traffic. Shanta's past busy world is juxtaposed with the present disoriented and disinherited world of Matangi, and it also highlights how that busy world is framed around the able body. The enforcement of a total lockdown drives Shanta and everyone into despair. "This was about capture, submission and stagnation about selfhood and loss of agency" (Gokhale, 2021, p. 99).

This perception of a non-disabled person (Shanta) explains how the space and objects they inherited are now out of reach, which leads to an existential crisis. The expansion of accommodations during COVID-19, such as work from home, online education, and health apps, disinherited disabled people as they were all designed with able-bodied individuals in mind. Mont et al. report:

> This information was often not accessible to people with hearing or visual difficulties. For those with hearing difficulty, accessible communication formats such as sign language or captioning were generally not available. People with visual difficulties also highlighted the importance to them of having accurate information, given the necessity for using their hands, along with white canes to navigate environments, increasing contact with surfaces and, therefore, susceptibility to contracting COVID-19. Despite this risk, much information was transmitted through the use of videos without adequate audio descriptions for people with vision difficulties.
>
> (2021)

The pandemic SOP of six feet distance, awareness videos without audio or background music, and awareness pictograms have no relevance to visually impaired, digitally illiterate and aged Matangi Ma, who has been trapped in C100 since the onset of her blindness.
Mont et al. report:

> In the UK, for example, between January and November 2020, the risk of death due to COVID-19 was 3.1 times greater for people identified as having a higher level of disability (3.1 times greater for men and 3.5 times greater for women) in comparison to people without a disability. Even for people classified as "less-disabled", death rates were about double those for people without disabilities.
>
> (2021)

COVID-19 is a pandemic of the digital era, which has garnered media coverage and involved the wider dissemination of positive and negative information. It undeniably supported and reached out to needy and disenfranchised people. The hyper-exposure to digital media resulted in the augmentation of panic and risk to the mental health of the public. This media-driven panic during the pandemic was as harmful as the virus itself. The overused media spread misinformation and even thwarted the containment of the spread. Suicides were reported among people who were frightened by the prospect of getting infected. Matangi Ma refrains from visual media, which contributed to negative emotions and behaviour during the pandemic. Matangi attributes her psychological resilience and stoicism to the assimilation of her stigmatised embodiment, which has numbed her to any trauma.

The fictionalisation of previous pandemics has offered myriad shifts in tone, human perception of life, and desperation; the fictionalisation of the COVID-19 pandemic has been awaited as the most intriguing area to reimagine. While COVID is wreaking havoc at social, psychological, political and economic levels, Matangi envisions hope and extends her goodwill. "Everything will be alright. You may think your world is falling apart, but it is not. You will get some good news, today or tomorrow, and you will soon be sitting here, smiling" (Gokhale, 2021, p. 108) Another pandemic novel that deals with COVID is *Lucy by the Sea* by Elizabeth Strout, published in October 2022, where the protagonist Lucy Barton is moved from her favourite New York and relocated to the coast of Maine by her ex-husband (William) during the Lockdown. *Lucy by the Sea* is also like *The Blind Matriarch*, a novel about remembrance, a haunting past, despair, and trauma. The novel paints a dark picture without losing sight of the resurgence of hope and life, similar to *The Blind Matriarch*.

## THE DUAL INCARCERATION OF DISABILITY AND PANDEMIC

Incarceration becomes the bodily condition of the disabled due to the prevailing social normalcy centred on ableism. All disabled bodies experience incarceration due to social exclusion and a lack of a built environment. Building on this notion, the ableist (power) framework of society unconsciously enforces a social exclusion on the disabled body, which is incarcerated not for discipline (in the Foucauldian sense) or subjugation but as a form of eugenic invalidation. During the pandemic, the power centre explicitly enforces mass incarceration (Lockdown) to protect the subjects from airborne health risks. In *The Blind Matriarch*, incarceration is a powerful motif that permeates the narrative, creating a recurring pattern. Matangi Ma embodies a triple incarceration that unfolds across various dimensions. As a woman, she is incarcerated by her patriarchal husband, and when she attempts to liberate herself, the onset of disability imprisons her and permanently traps her in C100. "The lockdown had not changed her life in any way. She couldn't remember when she last left the flat at top C100" (Gokhale, 2021, p. 80). In the wake of COVID-19, the Lockdown incarcerated her along with all her children around her, which, paradoxically, provided her only welcome respite. Thus, the combined state of disability and pandemic generates a Gothic trope of entrapment on three levels- physical, mental and existential- in *The Blind Matriarch*.

## DISABLED IDENTITY AND PANDEMIC REALITY

While analysing the social psychology of disability, Dunn and Burcaw (2013), as quoted in Dunn (2015, p. 128), postulate that storytelling and fictionalisation conceptualise Disability Identity. They claim that narratives about disability co-opt biography as well as positive and negative social experiences. Thus, they credit storytelling as a viable source to examine the social psychology of disability and disabled identity. They postulate six prominent themes related to Disability Identity based on the narratives written by Persons with Disability (PWD):

> Communal attachment—desire and feeling to affiliate with other PWDs
> Affirmation of disability—private thoughts and feelings of inclusion in the larger society, including the same rights and responsibilities as other citizens
> Self-worth—valuing oneself with a disability, equal to non-disabled individuals
> Pride—being proud of one's identity while recognising and possessing a devalued quality, disability
> Discrimination—awareness of self and other PWDs as targets of prejudiced behaviour in daily life
> Personal meaning—finding significance, making sense, and identifying benefits associated with disability

The novel *The Blind Matriarch* is not a life writing of Persons with Disability (PWD). Yet, the pandemic plays a decisive role in disability identity of Matangi situating it within the theme category of 'personal meaning', which entails her attempts to find significance among her children and grandchildren, making sense by sensing an ailing bird, identifying her blindness as an advantage during the time of media's hyper exposure to negative information about the pandemic. "People with disability have faced many barriers to inclusion in the COVID-19 response (panel). The Lockdown measures societies have taken during the COVID-19 pandemic have meant people with disability are worse off and more excluded" (Shakespeare et al., 2021). Thus, social distancing, a new normal during COVID-19, caused an escalation of Matangi's social isolation even though she is under the close attention of her children.

## CONCLUSION

When the pandemic, disability, femininity, and ageing become a combined lived actuality in *The Blind Matriarch*, there is no cultural map available to pin down the meaning of disability in the context of the pandemic or senility. The cultural model of disability seeks to analyse the portrayal of the disabled in art, media and literature. The cultural model of disability shows that the collective subjectivity of both the disabled and non-disabled is interdependent. The pandemic problematises these identities, erases the boundaries, and ascribes a new meaning to the dis/ability. The pandemic enacts the interplay between 'normality' and disability.

The central character Matangi Ma's disability serves the agenda to metaphorise the human vulnerability and inability generated by the pandemic. Matangi's disability deliberately enhances the tragic sense of the crises, trauma, and catastrophe of the pandemic, which everyone was clueless about during the first and second waves of COVID-19. Every text is political and unconsciously projects its countertext. The text offers an implicit countertext that calls for attention to an undercurrent narrative (opposed to Matangi Ma's condition)- that of a disabled person lacking social and economic advantage, family care, and the privileges that Matangi Ma enjoys. The text indirectly highlights the trauma experienced by economically disadvantaged elderly persons with disabilities and their detrimental disorientation and disinheritance.

## NOTES

**1. Dhritarashtra,** the King of Kauravas, was born blind and uses the rhetoric of literary tropes of disability and metaphors for his lack of discernment, wrongly influenced by love for his children, which stands for immorality.

**2. Shakuni** bears discredit for the Kurukshetra war, depicted to have a limp while walking and a disfigured eye, and the incarnation of manipulation and malice spends his entire life plotting.

**3. Manthara** In Ramayana, she was the maid of Rama's Stepmother, Kaikeyi, making Rama's banishment possible. It was her malice and baseless vengeance that made Rama go into exile for fourteen years. She is depicted as having a hunchback. Manthara is also known as Kubja, and both of the names translate to hunchback or humpback in Sanskrit.

**4. Shukracharya** was not born visually disabled; rather, his loss of an eye was accidental. Being a man of great learning, he thought he was the worthiest person to be the Guru of the Devas, the gods. However, Vrihaspati was chosen to be the Devas' Guru. So, he went to the Asuras, the demons, and assumed the role of their Acharya to exact revenge on them.

**5. Ashtavakra** possessed eight physical abnormalities from birth. He was well-respected for his wisdom and knowledge. Yet he had to endure some humiliation. To impart his newly gained knowledge to the world, he wrote the Ashtavakra Samhita.

**6. Sanjaya** is the advisor and charioteer for the visually disabled king Dhritarashtra. He is blessed with the gift of seeing things happening in a distant place, and he describes the Kurukshetra War in the Mahabharata.

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