



**Inner Strength amid Social Barriers: Disability and Resilience in Mathangi
Subramanian's *A People's History of Heaven* and Namita Gokhale's *The Blind
Matriarch***

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Abstract:

Contemporary Indian English fiction has begun to treat disability less as personal tragedy and more as a socially produced experience. This paper reads Mathangi Subramanian's *A People's History of Heaven* (2019) and Namita Gokhale's *The Blind Matriarch* (2021) through the social model of disability. It focuses on two blind protagonists, Deepa, a young girl in a Bangalore slum facing demolition, and Matangi Ma, an elderly matriarch holding her Delhi joint family together during the COVID-19 lock-downs. Both novels demonstrate that inner strength, sensory adaptation, emotional labour, and relational agency enable these women to negotiate and resist disabling social structures. Rather than celebrating physical 'overcoming', the texts foreground community solidarity, intuitive wisdom, and quiet defiance. Deepa dances to the sounds of her environment and joins collective protest; Matangi Ma perceives suffering beyond sight and anchors her family's mental health. By centring resilience as a social and affective practice, these works contribute meaningfully to disability studies, health humanities, trauma narratives, and pandemic imaginaries in Indian literature.

Keywords: Disability, Social model of disability, Normalcy, Resilience, Blindness.

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Introduction

A marginalised subject in Indian English literature, disability has been relegated to metaphorical representation involving lack or even miraculous cure. Nevertheless, over the past decade, there has emerged an array of literary texts that have tried to give a more realistic and nuanced portrayal of people living with various impairments and how disability interacts with gender, class, caste, city life, and, more recently, the global health crisis. Among the works that deserve mention are two novels that were written one after the other in the period from 2019 to 2021, and which both involve blindness: *A People's History of Heaven* by Mathangi Subramanian (2019), and *The Blind Matriarch* by Namita Gokhale (2021). Both novels, despite having completely different settings and moods, involve strong female characters who suffer from blindness. However, they compensate for it with internal strength.

According to this paper, these two books are exemplary literary examples of the social model of disability. This concept has been coined and articulated by the British activists and intellectuals in the late twentieth century. According to this theory, while there is a distinction between impairment and disability, where impairment refers to physical differences, disability refers to oppression and marginalisation caused by social, environmental, and attitudinal barriers. As noted by Mike Oliver, one of the leading thinkers of this theory, disability is not about “the functional limitations of individuals with impairments.” Rather, it is “about the problems caused by disabling environments, barriers and cultures” (Barnes 2). In an Indian setting, where disabilities are exacerbated by poor economic conditions, patriarchal families, urbanisation, and also lockdown in the case of Gokhale’s book, this model becomes highly effective. Nevertheless, this paper contends that employing the social model in the Global South necessitates a drastic shift away from the Eurocentric underpinnings of the social model itself. The social model in its

Western incarnation engages in heavy criticism of the state for failing to ensure access to proper infrastructure; however, in the postcolonial setting, such state institutions are inherently lacking or destructive, evidenced by abrupt lock-downs during pandemics or demolition by corporations. It then becomes clear that the current South Asian literary tradition illustrates negotiation of the social model via relational agency and community kinship. By examining Deepa's story in Subramanian's novel and Matangi Ma's story in Gokhale's novel, I highlight how both authors emphasise the strength of mind through sensory creativity, emotional strength, intuition, and the ability to nurture others is used as a mechanism that allows protagonists to cope with and even change the debilitating experiences that confront them. They do not "overcome" their disabilities. However rather live their lives fully with control, making sure that their disability does not lead them into exclusion and that instead, it becomes inclusion and care and even resistance.

The structure of the paper is divided into four movements. Firstly, the paper introduces the social model and its importance within Indian literature. This is followed by an analysis of the selected works – Deepa and Matangi Ma with an emphasis on moments of sensory adaptability and relational power. In addition, the paper compares the two works, exploring commonalities and differences within them. Finally, the paper concludes with a reflection on the overall importance of such representations in disability studies.

This choice of novels to analyse together is not arbitrary. However very constructive. Subramanian's novel is set in an unstable urban slum pre-pandemic, and it emphasises themes like collective protest, solidarity among girls, and public claiming of space. Conversely, Gokhale's pandemic novel is one that shifts the gaze into the household, focusing on intergenerational affective labour and maintaining the family amidst isolation and loss. When read together, these novels shed light on the notion of inner strength, whether at the level of

organised protest or affective labour, and the kinds of disabling conditions created by class, gender, generation, and a particular period of time. The use of this comparative perspective will enable the paper to highlight the culture-specificity and the common affective elements within resilient disabled subjectivities in contemporary Indian English fiction.

Theoretical Framework: The Social Model, Indian Contexts, and Literary Disability Studies

This social model of disability is the product of the disabled people's movement in Britain in the 1970s. As per this, the terms 'disability' and 'impairment' were distinguished by the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) in a landmark 1976 statement. Impairment is defined as “lack of part or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ or mechanism of the body,” whereas disability refers to “the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes little or no account of people who have physical impairments” (Oliver 22). This term was coined and propagated by Mike Oliver in his book "Social Work with Disabled People" in 1983 and again in 1990 in *The Politics of Disablement*.

The theory has been further developed and, on occasion, critiqued by other theorists. Tom Shakespeare highlighted the strategic simplicity of the theory However warned that it could sometimes overlook the lived experience of suffering and impairment (2010). Colin Barnes has stressed the importance of the theory's continued use for analysis and activism. In literary and cultural disability studies, academics including Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2002) and Lennard J. Davis have demonstrated how storytelling could be used to perpetuate or contradict ableist ideologies . Stories, it has been argued, can “crip” the story of the norm through fictionalising disability.

Indian disability studies has emerged in conversation with the above models. However, also in an insistence upon their local specificity. One of the major scholars studying disability in India, Anita Ghai, has highlighted the point that in the case of disability in India, it is impossible to separate out elements of poverty, gender, caste, and coloniality. Among those classes which are already marginalised because of these reasons, one can mention disabled women since in India, disability is perceived to be an individual misfortune. Within this intersectional framework, modern Indian academics such as Someshwar Sati and Shilpa Das have further explored how physical, institutional, and geographical spaces construct or challenge disabling environments in the Global South, particularly in India (Sati et al., 2025; Mehrotra, 2020). Both the books considered in this paper are extremely conscious of these issues. Both novels analysed in this paper are highly sensitive to such intersections and spatial realities. The neoliberal slum of Bangalore in Subramanian's novel is a place where disability, like any other form of difference, intersects with class and gender issues. The quarantine home of Gokhale is an example of how pandemic policy exacerbated pre-existing disabilities and produced new ones for all the members of this family. However, a blind woman-matriarch turns out to be the one who can provide stability by virtue of her long-standing practice of adaptation. In both examples, the social model allows one to realise that the main problem is not the lack of vision in the characters, but rather the absence of adequate education, ableism, violence, poverty, and access to the public sphere.

Disability literature, in addition to this, encourages us to question the representation of the disabled body, agency, and care in such texts. Do they provide “narrative prosthesis” (Mitchell and Snyder 2000) in which disability becomes a mere plot device, or is there scope for disabled individuals to become agents within the text? In the following readings, it can be seen

that the latter holds true. While Deepa and Matangi Ma lack vision, they make sense of the world using their perceptions and connections.

Deepa: Dancing to the World's Rhythm and Claiming Space in *A People's History of Heaven*

Mathangi Subramanian's *A People's History of Heaven* follows the histories of five girls born in the same year in the same slum of Bangalore called "Heaven" (*Swarga*): Joy, Banu, Deepa, Rukshana, and Padma. Deepa, sweet and smart, is blind. The girl's story cannot be told solely through the lens of individual heroism; instead, the reader gets an account of resilient survival rooted in complex female interactions and support systems.

Already in the first part of the book, the narrator draws attention to Deepa's social disability rather than focusing on the physical one. When Deepa is discovered to be blind, the teachers send her home from preschool, as they have no capacity to educate such children. The next step for the girl is to be sent to a state boarding school, where children with disabilities are accommodated. Deepa's mother, who underwent sterilisation in order to give birth in the hospital, rejects this idea. The woman keeps Deepa in the family and in her native neighbourhood. This is significant since she rejects the notion of her daughter's individuality and the medicalisation, instead choosing to point at the inflexibility of the educational system and not Deepa herself.

The most striking instance when Deepa demonstrates her agency is in the performance at the school's Annual Day. Invited for lunch as part of the group of friends, Deepa participates in the performance. When the music stops because the CD player breaks down, the other dancers stop moving, However not Deepa, who begins to sing and dance:

So when the rest of us stop dancing, Deepa keeps listening. Keeps hearing. Keeps moving.

Kaaa, kaaa, kaaa, she sings with the crows, spreading her arms like they are black-feathered wings.

Haaa, haaa, haaa, she sings with the motorcycles honking and revving on the main road.

Tamaataaaar, thakaleee, tomatooo, she croons along with the vegetable vendors pushing their carts through the alleys and lanes. Swerves her hips. Rattles her anklets. Bends her elbows just so. (Subramanian 34–35)

The scene has numerous possibilities for social models. Deepa does not need the aid of the recorded song to dance; she uses the sounds that surround her, including animal sounds, human voices, and religious prayers. By dancing, she redefines her own “stage” and the performers themselves. The unease of her audience is evidence of their ableist perception because they are not used to seeing a blind child dance. However, there is nothing sad in this situation; it is joyful and liberating. Deepa turns the potential disturbance of her performance into continuity. In addition, it takes more than one person to achieve such an outcome.

"Chee! Absolutely not. Today, you stay here."

"What? Why?"

"It is not safe."

"Not safe? However all the other girls are out there. Why should it be different for me?"

"Of course it should be different for you! You are—" (Subramanian 239–40)

The involvement of Deepa in the broader protest by the larger community against demolition reinforces this idea. The mothers and their daughters create a human chain, with hijabs, dupattas, and saris flapping with the wind in order to stop the bulldozers. This is something that Deepa does with the rest of them. Within such an environment where people with disabilities are seen as passive beings and those who need care, Deepa's participation in politics proves that inner strength allows them to exercise their citizenship rights. The novel seems to imply that what actually disables people is not only blindness or poverty; rather, it is violence against urban poor people, preventing them from living within the city limits.

"Of course," the boy says. Reaches for Deepa's elbow like he has done it before. Like it is his right.

"One minute, young lady," Banu's ajji says. Fighting to find the strict mother she knows is still inside her, the one that kept Kadhira Uncle and Neelamma Aunty and so many of our mothers out of harm's way for so many years. "Where do you think you are going? Who gave you permission? And who is this boy?"

"This boy," Deepa says, "is my future husband." (Subramanian 261)

Subramanian also hints at romantic and sexual autonomy. Deepa gets into a romantic relationship with a young boy who, like her, happens to be disabled physically. Their relationship seems to be based on mutual understanding rather than sympathy or saviour complex. In an era when characters with disabilities are either de-sexualised or made to appear helpless in literature, the depiction becomes somewhat subversive in itself. In all these instances, Subramanian identifies with the social model. However, adds further dimensions by bringing in the intersectional perspective, along with the feminist one. Deepa's female identity adds to her

disabilities and lower economic status, However simultaneously produces forms of sisterhood, maternal love, and mass activism.

Although the social model of disability directly aligns with Deepa's experience, as her struggles predominantly stem from society's barriers, stereotypes and stigma that limit her wishes and desires, Davis's concept of normalcy can also be interlinked. Normalcy, constituted by a set of rigid norms according to what 'creates' the problem, truly 'disables' an individual with disability. Without the idea of normalcy, an individual's disability is not conceived as a 'problem' in the same way (David 63-72; Clarke, 2021). For a better understanding of how these two ideas connect, the social model tells us that society is what disables an individual, whereas Davis's concept of normalcy further explains why society builds barriers, paves the way for stereotypes and stigma in the first place. The rigid baseline of what a normal body should look like and how it should function is set by society, due to which anyone who falls outside of it is labelled as defective, helpless, or a problem. Therefore, the stigma and restrictions Deepa faces do not just appear out of nowhere; they exist because society is always in defence of its rigid and ableist standard of normalcy. Without the pressure to fit a rigid norm, Deepa's blindness would simply be a neutral human bodily difference or variation rather than a source of limitation or social exclusion.

Matangi Ma: Intuitive Perception and Emotional Anchorage in *The Blind Matriarch*

Namita Gokhale's *The Blind Matriarch* relocates the setting to an upper-middle-class joint family household (C100) amidst the coronavirus-induced lockdown in Delhi. Matangi Ma, the blind older woman who is the central character of the narrative, resides in the highest level along with her caretaker, Lali. Her three sons and their families reside in the lower levels. In the

novel, it is seen that the family members had to deal with some unresolved issues due to lockdown induced by the pandemic.

She too remembered that Holi.

She had seen him with that woman, watched them go into the house together.

Matangi had been in her forties.

Her husband, Prabodh Kumar Sharma, of the Indian audits and accounts service.

He had loved pakodas and chhole puri. And other people's wives. (Gokhale 31)

The pointed, three-color indictment of Prabodh Kumar's character underscores both the banality and the brutality of the patriarchal betrayal at hand. In depicting the development of Matangi Ma's subsequent blindness as a condition that grows stronger following the arrival of her youngest child, Gokhale constructs a disability experience that exists beyond biomedicine. Through the metaphorical decision "not to see" what had become a pattern of domestic violence and marital cheating, Matangi Ma has effectively blinded herself as a psychosomatic coping mechanism. Indeed, according to the social model, this disability experience represents a somatic withdrawal from a violent patriarchal society. However, Gokhale does not portray her in a weakened manner. On the contrary, her senses are very sharp and acute, as mentioned in the novel many times before. It is claimed that she lived as if she was able to see with all her body parts, with her fingertips, with the ends of her toes which were encircled by rings and with her pointed hair which grew all over her skin and arms. She pays attention to the sound of her heartbeat, songs of birds and even rhythms of her house.

'Mataji is going on and on about some bird,' Lali sighed. 'I do not know what to do with her. She can be like a little child, sometimes.'

Samir sauntered in. Matangi-Ma stroked his hand, made him sit beside her. 'There is a bird,' she said again. 'An injured bird. It cannot fly. Bring the bird here. It needs to heal.'

'I will go in search of this mysterious bird which has sent you such a powerful telepathic distress signal,' he said indulgently. It was always good to step out of the house, whatever the excuse. He put on the cloth mask that Shanta bua had given him, handstitched by Anna. (Gokhale 88–89)

Another very memorable scene revolves around the green bird that has been wounded. Matangi Ma 'sees' this bird by virtue of her intuitive capacity and asks her grandson, Samir, to help the bird and take care of it. Samir finds the bird, which later gets named Mirchi, who has been injured and becomes an object of nursing, thus serving as an impetus for the family's healing process. This is another excellent example of literalised theme, where perception does not revolve around vision. Instead, Matangi Ma's 'vision' is based on the affective and ethical capacity to perceive pain and help the object of suffering.

In the course of the lockdown period, Matangi Ma takes up more roles than usual. Rather than compounding her disabilities, the virus uncovers the fragility inherent in the family's structure and highlighting her resilience, which becomes a necessity. She provides comfort, acts as a mediator, and offers space for mourning as death touches the family. A distant cousin once referred to her as 'the soldier... with the fortitude of a saint', and she lived up to the description, running the house with military precision, maintaining morale, ensuring that there was enough and more for everyone. While she performs her emotional labour of listening, intuiting, and being strong, this emotional work constitutes part of her caregiving function within the collective. Through Gokhale, resilience appears as a fundamentally relational process whereby

Matangi Ma turns inward to access her inner strength However then turns that strength outwards towards her children and grandchildren.

Shanta had peeped cautiously through the drawn curtains. Her father was slapping her mother; she could hear the sound of his palm as it settled on her cheeks. Once, twice, thrice. The slaps reverberated across her colour-drenched cheeks. Then he pulled at her hair, at the long plait, so that her neck jerked backwards and her eyes rolled around in their orbs. Another resounding slap, and then he went inside their bathroom to bathe.

However she did not leave. Of course, she could not leave. She had resigned herself to being a prisoner in that house, in that life. She was an Indian woman, a Hindu lady. She had children. She had nowhere to go.

Her vision began to blur even more. She had chosen not to see. Perhaps she had resolved to become blind. (Gokhale 29-31)

However, the novel also makes sure not to idealise her predicament. Matangi Ma comes from an oppressive background involving domestic abuse. Her decision to choose blindness, in order to shield herself from painful memories, is both a form of self-protection and a heartbreaking move. What Gokhale does is demonstrate not only that trauma and disability are connected through someone's life However also how Matangi Ma uses those experiences to develop empathy and stability. According to the social model approach, there are other things besides physical barriers that make a person disabled. There is also the impact of gendered violence and a new wave of isolation due to lock-downs.

The way Gokhale addresses the themes of ageing and disability is especially significant. In a society where growing old usually means becoming weak and dependent, Matangi Ma

continues to be the guiding spirit of the family. The blindness she suffers from does not make her inactive. However, rather makes her rely on her other senses and helps her focus on sounds, touches, and emotions. It is fair to assert that the novel sheds light on an area called "crip ageing" or the overlap between disability studies and ageing studies.

In this novel, Leonard Davis's concept of normalcy similarly interlinks with the social model of disability, as Matangi Ma's experience demonstrates how society uses a rigid standard of sight to construct non-visual ways of being as inherently deficient. Although the social model directly aligns with her circumstance by showing that she is restricted by a world designed exclusively for the sighted, Davis's concept of normalcy explains why society views her blindness through a lens of passivity and helplessness (63-72). By establishing visual sight as the mandatory baseline for "normal" perception, authority, and agency, society automatically frames any deviation from this norm as a problem to be pitied or managed. When Matangi Ma's blindness develops as a psychosomatic withdrawal from patriarchal trauma and domestic violence, her family expects her to fit the normative stereotype of an elderly, dependent figure confined to the background of the household. However, Gokhale subverts this expectation by showing that Matangi Ma does not lack perception. She simply defies and operates outside the narrow boundaries of visual normalcy. She 'sees' through acute intuitive and sensory awareness, feeling the house's rhythm, hearing the heartbeat of her home, and perceiving the suffering of an injured bird long before anyone else. Matangi Ma, acting as the emotional anchor and guiding force for her family during the lockdown, succeeds in subverting the expectation that a disabled older woman must be passive or helpless. She turns what society views as a 'lack' or 'defective' into a powerful, non-visual mode of agency and leadership, proving that capability does not depend on conforming to rigid norms that define normalcy.

Comparative Discussion: Convergent Strengths, Divergent Contexts

When reading the two novels side by side, one can observe clear parallels and interesting points of difference. In both *Deepa* and *Matangi Ma*, we see how inner strength, within the framework of being blind, is a relational phenomenon, and an emotional one as well. While *Deepa* performs her dance among and for her friends, as part of a larger political movement, *Matangi Ma*'s strength is shown through her willingness to care for her loved ones and even a wounded bird.

Adaptation to the sensory environment is yet another common theme. *Deepa* in *A People's History of Heaven* relies on sound in the slums after formal music lets her down. In *The Blind Matriarch*, *Matangi Ma* 'sees' with her fingers and senses rather than eyesight. They both embody what is often referred to as 'crip wisdom' (Wong 2016), which refers to their understanding of moving through the world in other ways. This is not compensation or inspiration. However simply survival.

Victimization is another commonality between the two novels. Neither *Deepa* nor *Matangi Ma* is constructed as a victim. While *Deepa* makes her presence known through dance and politics, *Matangi Ma* makes her presence known through emotional grounding. Thus, the texts resist dominant cultural narratives about disabled bodies, particularly those of disabled women, as being weak and pitiable.

However, there are also significant distinctions that highlight different lived experiences of disability in relation to social class, age, and era. *Deepa*'s is the story of life in the city characterised by precariousness and struggle against displacement caused by development. The source of *Deepa*'s strength is publicly visible and political. On the other hand, *Matangi Ma*'s story revolves around the domestic sphere and generational relationships. It is through her

personal strength that she manages to deal with patriarchy within the family and social isolation due to the pandemic.

These differences are not contradictions, However complementary perspectives. In combination, the novels illustrate that the social model of disability needs to allow for variations among environments that create disabilities – slum development, lack of access to education, domestic abuse, lock-downs – while also acknowledging that individual strength has its unique cultural forms. The novels also point out that resilience does not exist in opposition to vulnerability. Both protagonists have experienced exclusion and suffering in the past, and thus their strength exists alongside vulnerability.

Lastly, both of the novels touch upon issues that are topical in today's literary and cultural analysis – the issue of pandemics and imaginaries of life during the virus, issues of trauma and memory, care ethics, and the politics of bodily knowledge. The work by Subramanian is an early representation of the pandemic times that brings about important questions related to who has the legitimacy to stay within urban space. In turn, the novel written by Gokhale during the time of pandemic demonstrates how existing disabilities and vulnerabilities were magnified.

Conclusion

Subramanian's *A People's History of Heaven* and Gokhale's *The Blind Matriarch* have made notable contributions to the portrayal of disabilities in modern Indian English literature. By depicting the experiences of Deepa and Matangi Ma, these novels demonstrate how challenges faced by individuals due to social circumstances such as exclusion from education, ableism, patriarchy, urbanisation, and even pandemic conditions can be overcome by drawing upon inner power through sensory creativity, emotional strength, and caring for relations. In both

cases, the subjects in question are not elevated above their limitations; rather, they engage fully within them.

These representations are important because they contribute significantly to the social model by illustrating the lived experience of disability from the perspective of intersectionality, namely, how disability operates within the interstices of gender, class, generationality, and crisis. Ultimately, by taking into account the subaltern spaces of "Heaven" and the claustrophobic fears of the characters confined in a quarantined home, both narratives provide a new mapping of the geography of care. It is demonstrated that the lack of accommodation on the part of the state forces the subaltern and the disabled bodies to "crip" space by engaging in a kinship community. This paper therefore provides a significant postcolonial supplement to the existing literature in global disability studies, where the answer to disability lies in relational dependency rather than state architecture. Additionally, they contribute to the repository of resilient disabled subjectivities for readers and academics. These texts also serve as an example of literary disability studies that consider both affect and structure.

In both novels, the social model of disability is interlinked with the concept of normalcy. In *A People's History of Heaven*, it is explored how the struggles of Deepa stem predominantly from social barriers, stereotypes, and stigma, all of which are attributed to the rigid notion of normalcy. The same is explored in *The Blind Matriarch*, shedding light on how the character Matangi Ma actively resists this by turning her apparent lack, which is her blindness, into a powerful, non-visual mode of agency and leadership.

It should be noted that there are limitations in regard to the social model of disability itself. As some researchers indicate, it might be challenging for the distinction that is drawn

between impairment and disability to consider physiological aspects like pain and fatigue. However, despite neither the story nor the novel highlighting such physiological issues as pain and tiredness explicitly, it is important to note that both stories concentrate on the idea of disabling situations rather than a medical approach to disability. Both texts consider the physical reality of blindness. However, they emphasise societal disabling issues. Perhaps future work should consider how these novels interact with other portrayals of disability in Indian literature.

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