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Paradoxical Space, Blindness, And Mothering in Namita Gokhale's *The Blind Matriarch*

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Abstract:

Namita Gokhale's *The Blind Matriarch* explores the lives and experiences of Matangi and her family. Matangi, the blind matriarch of the family, is loved and respected, as well as doubted and feared by her family members. Her matriarchal position is both interesting and unique inside a patriarchal society. This paper discusses the novel using the lenses of gender, feminist geography, and space. It argues that Matangi occupies a paradoxical space inside the patriarchal society. Through this, she creates a nuanced domestic space, one where her family members can negotiate their identities and agencies with considerable freedom inside a patriarchal society. It engages with Sara Ahmed's concept of paradoxical space, and critically uses Tuan's concepts of space, crowding, and vertical axis, with caution and critique, to delineate the complex space of Matangi's matriarchal household, and its potential to reconfigure masculinist spaces.

Keywords: Feminist Geography, Paradoxical Space, Gender, COVID-19, Matriarchy.

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Introduction

Space is central in a person's experience of freedom, independence, and selfhood. Space is not innocuous but highly political and it is enmeshed with the many concerns of gender and power, among other things. Women, for the longest, have been told that the only space they can or should embody is the domestic space of their homes. Consequently, they experience a constriction of space living inside a system which is androcentric, or as Gillian Rose would call it, masculinist. Feminism has long examined the gendered division of public and private spheres in society. Public spaces that are attributed to men are traditionally seen as privileged and powerful, while private space, often the only one available to women, is marginalised, and secondary, stripped of institutional authority. Even as women and mothers are seen to embody private spaces of their home, they remain mostly powerless in front of the patriarchs of their households. Motherhood is often, culturally, recognised as the biological destiny of women. It is construed by patriarchy as the personal and private domain of the woman. However, motherhood is also political. Jasodhara Bagchi in her book *Interrogating Motherhood* talks about the need to carve out matriliny in patriliny, that is, to excavate and identify a female tradition inside the primarily patriarchal setup. The patriarchal society is not a natural occurrence. Rather, it is one which has been naturalised through years of gendered conditioning and socialisation. The patriarchal family is not a natural, untainted space either, but rather an institution which maintains and renews much of the gendered system, maintains the difference of the sexes, and their binary positions allocated in the private home versus the public world. It is not surprising, then, that even after the allocation of the women to the intimate location of the family, in a patriarchy, the man remains the head of the family, controlling and coercing a specific gendered behaviour from the home.

Hence, the presence of a matriarchy within the patriarchal society is an interesting occurrence, one which creates a unique opportunity for the interrogation of space, place, and identity. Namita Gokhale's *The Blind Matriarch* (2021) takes place during the COVID-19 lockdown of India, where people are confined to their homes. In classic humanist geography, Tuan conceptualises place as static, bounded, and limiting, as a pause in movement, whereas space is seen as dynamic, ever-changing, and shifting. Home in traditional masculinist geography is seen as a place, fixed, stable and unmoving (Tuan 3, 147). In contrast to this view, Rose's feminist delineation of space and place provides more nuance to the understanding of a space ridden with complexities of gender and power. Her understanding of space moves away from a masculinist geography which ignores the complicated relation women have with space and home, towards a feminist geography where home may paradoxically become an active site of struggle, power and containment. This research paper discusses these two contradictory understandings of home, place, and space to dissect the world of Matangi and her family. It first analyses the traditional masculinist understanding of place and space, which it then critiques and re-evaluates through the lens of feminist geography. As the matriarch of her household, Matangi exists in an unusual position of power. She is a matriarch inside a patriarchy; her subject position, therefore, sits in the liminal space between power and powerlessness. Tuan's exploration of space is not sufficient for understanding such a complex subject position as Matangi's. Rose's concept of 'paradoxical space', on the other hand, is indispensable in dissecting this liminal subject position. It becomes a vital tool to analyse this ambivalent position as it "allows the subject of feminism to occupy both the centre and the margin, the inside and the outside" (155).

Rose argues that spaces can be re-thought and re-interpreted in a way that can liberate them from the masculinist gaze of traditional masculinist geography (156). Her nuanced approach towards the ambivalent nature of such liminal spaces effectively reflects Matangi's subject position in this paradoxical space of matriarchy within patriarchy. Tuan with his focus on the Same, on the other hand, is not completely discarded but used with caution to underline the masculinist vision of patriarchal cultures. His masculinist geography is further informed and criticised by using feminist geography to discuss and discern the difference that Matangi's occupation of the paradoxical space creates for her and her family. In this re-interpretation of the home space, this paper locates a rebellion against the masculinist understanding of place and space.

This paper delineates the household space of Matangi's home, C100. It explores Matangi's role as a matriarch, within the wider patriarchal society, and her embodiment of a paradoxical space, through which her house becomes a space where identities and agencies can be negotiated more freely. It looks into the subject positions of the women of her house, her daughter and daughter-in-law. It argues that through Matangi's position as a matriarch and occupation of a paradoxical space, they come to embody spaciousness and agency. The concepts of Tuan's vertical space and crowding are used with caution and critique to delineate the physical high position of Matangi in her house, and the initial feeling of suffocation that Matangi's daughter-in-law feels inside the house, watched by Matangi from her residence at the topmost floor of the house. Following Rose's "refusal to distinguish between real and metaphorical space", this paper, too, does not distinguish between the two (155). It maintains and revels in the overflowing and intermixing of the physical and mental, as well as the real and metaphorical space, to delineate the complex tapestry of the lived experience of space of C100, as the home of the matriarch within a patriarchy.

Space, Place, And Crowding in *The Blind Matriarch*

The novel unfolds during the lockdown of COVID-19, and hence, in a world where the movement of the story, in the absence of any outdoor movement, is internal. The lockdown forced the members of households into a constricted space, causing the density of the family members to increase, as the spaces they could occupy decreased. This resulted in alteration of daily geographies of people, making homes office spaces and classrooms in the absence of offices and schools (Laituri et al. 2). Laituri believes that this constriction of space led to a change in the relation between people and spaces, "especially between bodies confined to the totalising home space" (225). She argues that this had pronounced negative effects on mental health and well-being, driven primarily by social isolation, as well as loneliness, anxiety about the various facets of life, and stress of coping with a pandemic (27). As often observed in other times of crisis, the COVID-19 lockdown also significantly increased and complicated women's unpaid workload; as more and more members stayed at home, the burden of care and public services fell onto the shoulders of women (Blanco and Gock 33). Matangi, in such a time of crisis, guides the members of her home who are experiencing spatial constriction along with the many anxieties of the pandemic: from the fear of job loss to the anxiety arising from the lack of movement, among others.

Tuan, in traditional humanist geography, describes crowding as the awareness that one is being observed and scrutinised. While a room cluttered with objects may still feel cramped, without a room to breathe, it is, primarily, people that crowd a person. Tuan believes that the requirement of space for humans is innate, though there is no constant, quantitative amount of space which is enough for a person. However, space is not a fixed notion and Tuan posits that the need for space can sometimes take the form of greed for space, where any amount of space may feel insufficient. Further, for Tuan, home is not a space but a place which is fixed and unmovable.

It can be seen that Tuan's masculinist geography does not leave room to explore the ever-complex space of the home, riddled with the issues of power, control, and gender for women in a patriarchal world. Addressing this conundrum requires the perspective of Rose's feminist geography.

Home is an ever-changing, dynamic space, experienced through negotiations. In the tradition of Virginia Woolf, Sara Ahmed argues for a space for a woman in her house, a space she embodies and experiences considerable freedom within (11). Looking at the members of Matangi's family, one can argue that they experience considerable space in their households, with each house holding "pockets of privacy" (Gokhale 81). All three of her children reside on separate floors of the house, and thus occupy specific private, physical places within the home. It can be argued that a person may experience 'crowding' even within these pockets of private space in one's own home, contrary to Tuan's framework of home. Matangi's daughter-in-law, Ritika, experiences space very differently from her in-laws. Initially, she does not experience the same breadth of space the other members of the family do, feeling cramped in her marital home. After years of marriage, she still feels like an outsider among people who are mostly related by blood to each other; she also finds these people somewhat eccentric, which adds to the distance between them.

Traditional rules of patrilineal households often make women embody a space that is alien to them after their marriage. Socialisation also actively informs them that they will be scrutinised and judged in this marital home. Ritika, living away from her blood family, in a house with a non-traditional head—a matriarch—believes the same socialised truth. Thus, her sense of crowding comes not from the lack of physical space, but the feeling and the fear of being observed by her mother-in-law and not understood in a strange home.

Tuan believes that conflicting activities create feelings of "crowding" in people (64). If one applies that to the home space of Matangi, it can be observed that Ritika sees the older

woman's position and identity at conflict with her identity and agency. There are instances where Ritika asks Matangi not to feed chocolates to her son, but moved by the requests of a young boy she adores, Matangi, every once in a while, offers him some sweet treats. In Ritika's eyes, this encroaches on her authority over her son, as well as on her agency over her own life. Ritika is baffled by the respect and devotion Matangi receives from the household. She does not trust Matangi, her mother-in-law, who controls the finances of the family, and fears that she and her husband might not be fairly treated. This apprehension that Ritika feels towards Matangi does not come out of any particular incident or negative experience with Matangi. On the contrary, it seems to arise simply from her fear of the unknown, and the lack of a personal relationship she has with Matangi and the rest of the family.

Ahmed argues that "Loving one's home is not about being fixed into a place, but rather it is about becoming part of a space where one has expanded one's body, saturating the space with bodily matter: home as overflowing and flowing over" (11). Ritika does not love her home because she does not feel the expansion of her body or mind in this space. Whenever she goes to her balcony to take a smoke break, she feels watched by Matangi and others. She does not feel at peace, and does not experience the freedom of flowing over the boundaries of the balcony; rather, she feels limited by it. Yet, Ritika is not actually watched or controlled by the matriarch—none of the residents of C100 are. Nonetheless, reminiscent of a patriarchal household, Ritika feels the curtailment of her solitude and space in the presence of Matangi. She does not understand Matangi, nor does she feel understood by her. She prefers distance from this enigmatic blind woman who runs the family and seems to know too much despite her blindness. How does Matangi, as the matriarch, solve this conundrum? How do the other members of her family experience the home space's overflowing warmth and freedom? To understand this, one needs to move beyond

traditional, masculinist geography towards Rose's feminist geography and her concept of paradoxical space.

Paradoxical Space and the Matriarch Within Patriarchy

Matangi is the head of her household, the residing goddess of their home, respected and loved by her children and grandchildren. She, however, has not always held this kind of authority and awe. For a significant part of her life, she lived under the control of her husband who controlled and coerced her existence. His infidelity, anger, and disrespect broke her. As a young woman, Matangi desired independence, a career, and a space of her own in her life. However, at that time, she lacked the agency to achieve this, trapped in a marriage where she always had to remain without a voice, subservient to her husband. As a young married woman, Matangi experienced a poignant constriction of space and identity, the extent of which is reflected in the fact that she was not even able to react after she was slapped many times by her husband for simply questioning his unfaithfulness. As a woman entrapped in the workings of patriarchy, she "is expected to be a housewife and therefore in the kitchen, the site of much of her domestic labour… she is not to speak her mind…" (Rose 142).

Later, after her husband's death, Matangi takes up the reins of her household and assumes the role of the matriarch. However, even as a matriarch, she still exists in a patriarchal society that sees women as subservient and silent. The space that Matangi occupies is thus a paradoxical space and state where "centre and margin, inside and outside - are occupied simultaneously" (Rose 140). She occupies the centre as the head of her household, and the margin as a woman in a patriarchal society. Rose argues that "Spaces are felt as part of patriarchal power" (146). Within a patriarchal society, it is natural to assume that a matriarch would wield power just like a patriarch, and create

a polarised space of power and control. In the patriarchal imagination, this allusion to a patriarchy when exploring the idea of a matriarchy is so strong that Sanday talks about how, for the longest, anthropology was unable to identify matriarchies, as it expected to find a "mirror-image of patriarchy, its female twin" (xi). Sanday criticises this androcentric view of matriarchy. She points out how feminists have rightly identified "love, duty, and common commitment to a sacred tradition" as the markers of the matriarchal traditions (xi). She finds egalitarian principles where the sexes are seen on an equal footing reflected in matriarchal societies.

When one looks at Matangi in the light of this understanding of matriarchy, it becomes clear that even though she makes many important decisions for her family, she never quite resembles a patriarch. She does not control or coerce her family members like her husband; on the contrary, she is dedicated to their wellbeing, and appreciates their life choices even when it goes against the grain of the society. Sanday points out that there is a system of ranking and domination in a patriarchy; however, Matangi's matriarchal household relations are more 'linked' and in 'partnership' with the members of her family (xi). Nonetheless, Matangi, as a matriarch, exists in a paradoxical space: as a matriarch within the wider structure of a patriarchy. Unlike the more unambiguous position of a matriarch within a matriarchal society, Matangi occupies both the centre and the margin—a liminal, paradoxical space.

Rose firmly argues that embodying a paradoxical space in a patriarchy "can challenge the exclusions of masculinist geography", and thus "offer us one new way of thinking geography…[which] refuses the exclusions of the old" (141). Matangi, who exists in this paradoxical space, occupies a paradoxical subject position. She is loved by her children, and even her household helps for her loving, caring and discerning nature. However, she is feared by Ritika, and at times, by the household staff, who do not understand her authority. These individuals, who

are not the blood relatives of Matangi and do not share the same bond of trust with her as her children, often question how much Matangi knows and can see in her blindness; they fear she can see more than she lets on. This fear originates not from Matangi's blindness but from her unusual position of power. Matangi holds the key to the family finances. Even in her advanced, ailing state, the family respects her and consults her in every significant decision. Ritika, who neither understands nor trusts Matangi, fears an unfair distribution of wealth after Matangi's death. She cannot fathom why Matangi, in her frail physical condition, still controls the household finances, or why the family defers to her authority.

An educated, modern working woman, Ritika has a considerable amount of agency over herself. Nonetheless, she also sits somewhere in the liminal, paradoxical space of Rose. Her presence in Matangi's family itself is reminiscent of the patriarchy that surrounds Matangi's matriarchy. Ritika lives in her wedded home, as many women do in patriarchal and patrilineal traditions. It cannot be denied that patriarchy is not synonymous with patrilineality, just as matriarchy is not interchangeable with matriliny; a society can be matrilineal even in patriarchal setups. However, Leela Dube shows that in a "patrilineal system the lines of authority and descent converge", even though the same is not often true for matrilineal systems (155). In the light of this, one can argue that Ritika would likely not be living with Matangi in C100 were it not for the broader patriarchal society outside their household. Ritika's position is thus, essentially paradoxical: as a woman living within a domestic matriarchy, she also exists inside the predominantly patrilineal rules of the North-Indian patriarchal society. Hence, while her living inside a matriarchy empowers her to carve a space of her own, the overlapping patriarchal society makes her wary of this space.

Nonetheless, Matangi's embodiment of this paradoxical space challenges patriarchal cultures. This provides a safe space for her family to carve their own identities, living under the protection of a matriarch who neither judges them nor coerces specific, gendered, or cultural performances from them. Surya, her eldest child, is a middle-aged, unmarried man and a father to an adopted son. An inquisitive individual who keeps changing his political views throughout his life, he finds solace in Matangi's presence. He recites his favorite poems to her and unburdens his soul to her empathetic ears; she becomes his refuge every time he feels distraught with the world around him. Shanta, Matangi's second child, is an unmarried woman, who is empathetic and kind, and actively involved in her NGO. Shanta is Matangi's caregiver, someone who offers her and others solace in the highly dysfunctional world of the COVID-19. Satish is Matangi's third child; he is a young man married to Ritika and a father to a young boy, Rahul. Satish often turns to Matangi to seek monetary help during his financial troubles. Matangi always obliges. Further, Matangi's two grandsons Samir and Rahul are also extremely attached to and fond of Matangi. They have deep, personal relationships with her and often find refuge in her wisdom and empathy. As the matriarch, Matangi does not expect a specific, normative performance from any of her family members. All her children and grandchildren, very different from one another, are given the space to pursue the life they want without her coercive interference. It could be argued, then, that Matangi's occupation of paradoxical space as a matriarch confers a spaciousness onto her family members and, in a way, challenges patriarchal control, replacing it with matriarchal partnership and cooperation.

Vertical Axis, Space and the Matriarch Who Is Not a Patriarch

Tuan interprets physical high and low positions on the vertical axis as two extremes of social status and power. One who occupies the 'high' position in a building also occupies a high position in the social structure of the place. "Residential locations show a similar hierarchy of values…The rich and powerful…command more visual space…reassured of their position in life each time they look out the window and see the world at their feet" (Tuan 38). Matangi resides on the top floor of the building, C100, as the other family members each occupy a certain floor below her. It is natural, thus, to think of this position of hers as signifying her status and power, and even control, in the family. To a distant observer, her spatial location may seem to operate like a panopticon: a place from which the members of the house are observed and regulated.

However, Matangi's blindness disrupts the simplicity of this power equation. Her elevated panoptic position along the vertical axis of the house becomes deeply ambiguous when paired with her physical incapacity of visual scrutiny. Consequently, Matangi's spatial location turns from a position of control to one of a more ambiguous, liminal site. She cannot 'look' out of her balcony or window and watch the world, her family, at her feet. In fact, she cannot see at all. The sense of sight holds an important position in experiencing and delineating space. "To an energetic child, a flight of stairs is a link between two floors, an invitation to run up and down; to an old man it is a barrier between two floors, a warning for him to stay put" (Tuan 52). To Matangi, in her old age and blindness, residing on the top-floor does not unequivocally confer the high status and power that the vertical axis may confer on a non-disabled person. On the contrary, her age and blindness add to her position the same pain of movement an infant or bedridden person may experience, threatened with many flights of stairs. Tuan has theorised that some powerful people may occupy the lower floors, or lower positions on the vertical axis when it gives them greater mobility, power,

and convenience. It becomes imperative, then, to question Matangi's choice to reside on the top-most floor, even though the ground floor offers her better mobility and access.

Tuan's humanist geography with its masculinist perspective cannot explain this occurrence. Matangi's nature and responsibilities as a matriarch have to be understood to understand her choice of a less convenient residence for herself. As the matriarch of the house, Matangi already receives love and respect from her family. She does not seek power or position to control or scrutinise the household, as a patriarch might want to, seeking the top floor of the house. Neither does she seek greater ease, access, and the implicit privilege for herself by occupying the ground floor. As a matriarch, her rule is driven by the principles of love and compassion, not fear and control which are the hallmarks of a patriarch's rule. As a subject who occupies the paradoxical space between the centre and the margin, Matangi's choice becomes a complex and nuanced statement of love and coexistence.

Matangi's residence on the top floor of her house does not hinder her family, or place them on a lower vertical axis; rather, as an act of altruistic, motherly love and understanding, she simply gives them easier movement and access to the outside world. By giving away the privilege and ease that living in the lower floor would bring to her she prioritises the comfort of her family who are more actively involved with the outside world than she is. Instead of Matangi, it is Shanta, a woman who is extremely socially active, who lives on the ground floor. Along with the many social responsibilities she has as a social worker, Shanta also takes on the wider duties of the household, as she tends to Matangi as a caregiver. Shanta's lower position in the vertical axis bestows her with a privilege: it enables her as an active social woman with many worldly pursuits a greater ease of access to the world. Shanta, in the lowest physical space of the house, is in no way in an inferior position in the household. This is further reflected in the will of Matangi; every

member of her family gets an equitable share in the family wealth, but Shanta is left with something more. She is entrusted with the responsibility of distributing Matangi's leftover finances as she sees fit. The trust and subsequent agency that Matangi bestows on Shanta reflects how deeply Matangi respects her judgement and values her intellect. Just as the family consults Matangi in their moments of crisis and doubt, Matangi seeks out Shanta in her own moments of confusion and uncertainty.

Matangi mothers her children and grandchildren, who, on one hand, look after her, while on the other, seek comfort from her. Mothering, as Adrienne Rich maintains, has great potential to empower women and mothers even though the patriarchal institution of motherhood tries to keep it under male control (lxi). Matangi, as a young woman, could not claim a space for herself either inside or outside her home. She could not even speak out when she faced domestic violence, stuck in a loveless, disrespectful marriage. However, even when she could not stand for herself, a young Matangi still spoke up for her daughter's dignity. She stood up strong against her husband and his patriarchal control over her children as she defended Shanta from his sexist remarks. Matangi, a woman who gave up on her own dreams, stood up for her daughter's dreams and education. Mothering empowered Matangi with the kind of voice and agency she could not always claim for herself as a woman. When she assumed the role of a matriarch, her position and agency grew stronger. As Sanday illustrates across matriarchies, Matangi's matriarchy does not imprison her family members but rather empowers them to hold more space for themselves and their choices.

Like other members of the family, Ritika is also provided a space in the household, a space she does not initially understand and thus distrusts. She remains unsure of her agency and Matangi's position in the household and her life. Mirrored in Matangi's elevated vertical position within the house as well as her unusual position as a matriarch, Ritika is tempted to project a

patriarch's control onto her. It is only after an angry episode with her son, Rahul, culminating in a mental breakdown, that Ritika fully recognises the love, care, and compassion Matangi offers the household. When Ritika approaches Matangi, afraid of the scrutiny she might face from the matriarch, she is, to her surprise, met with warmth and understanding. Instead of criticism, she finds solace and support in the wise woman who is deeply empathetic. Matangi not only provides Ritika with compassion but also hope, telling her that the bad days won't last forever. It is through sisterhood and solidarity that Ritika connects with Matangi on a deeply human level and starts to trust her. In Matangi, she finds not just a guide, but a source of maternal refuge who will house and nurture her child when needed. Consequently, although Ritika initially feared judgement, she grows to appreciate a matriarch who does not control or chide her family, choosing instead to understand and to support them. Matangi's love, sense of duty, and understanding—attributes that Sanday identifies as the cornerstones of a matriarchy—bring her family together, even in times of crisis.

Matangi once said to her grandson, "I don't believe in cages…I have lived in one" (Gokhale 124). She did not have an easy life. As a young woman and mother, she experienced a constriction of space in a household where the patriarch's rules quashed her agency. When she replaces her husband, the patriarch, as the leader of the house, she does not indiscriminately take over his position: instead, she carves her own position while navigating a paradoxical space. Matangi's empathy and her position inside a paradoxical space as a matriarch provide space for her children, especially for the women of her family, to exist and to carve out spaces of their own. This spaciousness, further, lets her children choose their own life paths, freely, without her scrutinising them from above. Matangi's house, C100, with its airy balconies and winding stairs becomes a metaphor for the kind of space Matangi offers her family; members of Matangi's family

experience both connection and space inside the joint family. This is not just because of the separateness of the floors between each nuclear family inside the joint one, but because Matangi's position in her house is not of a guard over a panopticon, and the members of her family are not prisoners underneath her watchful eyes. The spaciousness of the floors and distance between them reflect the space Matangi, as the matriarch provides to her family, and the interconnectedness of these floors showcases the coexistence of her matriarchy.

Conclusion

Matangi, as a matriarch, exists in a paradoxical space inside her house, C100. Her house becomes a symbol of the same interconnectedness and independence of space that Matangi channels through her position as the family matriarch. Her blindness and her gender, along with her mothering of her children, grandchildren, and her daughter-in-law, transform the crowding that may be experienced in a family home, a closed place, with the advent of COVID-19 restrictions, into a space where the members of the family experience cohabitation without crowding or excessive loss of space. Unlike what is argued in masculinist geography, Matangi's high vertical position in her house does not signal power, control, or coercion; rather, through the lens of paradoxical space, it becomes a site of altruistic care, female connectivity and subverted traditional spatial thinking. *The Blind Matriarch* shows the potential power of women holding paradoxical spaces in patriarchal setups; it re-interprets the home as a space where power and control are negotiated, and where masculinist understanding of space and place can be challenged and reconfigured.

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