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## The Healing Mother: Ecological Consciousness in Namita Gokhale's *The Blind Matriarch*

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### Research Article

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### Abstract

**Aims:** *The present study is focused on exploring the conceptual connection between women and nature discussing how Namita Gokhale, a famous Indian novelist in English, has created the character of Matangi Ma who has deep rooted ecological consciousness and holds a benign and protective attitude to the natural world.*

**Methodology and Approaches:** *Both primary and secondary sources are consulted to explore a conceptual connection between women and nature, a kind of positive affinity where women hold a more benign and protective attitude to the natural world and also feel a spiritual connection with her.*

**Outcome:** *The findings of the study highlight that the ecological ways of knowing nature are primarily participatory and Matangi Ma is attributed with this kind of participatory epistemology. The textual analysis makes explicit the close affinity between nature and women in which the most common similarity lies in the concept of maternity that both Nature and Women are mothers. Moreover, both Nature and Matangi Ma are in the role of a healing mother- to others as well as to each other.*

**Conclusion and Suggestions:** *As we are closely tied to the environment, the ecological consciousness enables us to understand the relevance of being connected to the roots that define the sense of identity, sense of existence. It is suggested that the future researchers should explore the novel *The Blind Matriarch* how there is an ethical substrate – a cosmic sympathy, expressed through emotional qualia, that comes alive or becomes apparent in communicative encounters between living entities.*

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William Wordsworth writes in his poem “Tintern Abbey” that “nature never did betray the heart that loved her”. This line of the high priest of Nature is deeply suggestive of the eternal relationship between Nature and Humans. However, the growing industrialization and the increasing capitalism of the West and the third world countries have become so self-obsessed that it is constantly harming the ecology. The patriarchal mindset of having hegemony and control over environment (ecology) has gone to the excessive exploitation of Nature in the name of development that has affected badly the entire eco system and the cruel consequence of it can be seen in the form of global warming and pandemic period caused by COVID 19. In *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, Vandana Shiva critiques the western concept of development and its detrimental effects on women and the environment in developing nations. Because it is less concerned with the welfare of all people and other living things who are deprived of their place in society, she refers to this “patriarchal Western concept of development as ‘mal development’” (Krishna and Jha 103). When the environment is disturbed the most affected ones are those who are closest to nature – the women and the tribes. It is said that there is a conceptual connection between women and nature, a kind of positive affinity where women hold a more benign and protective attitude to the natural world and also feel a spiritual connection with her.

Gurpreet Kaur remarks in “Postcolonial Ecofeminism in Indian Novels in English” that Indian women writers in the present scenario have started to “voice their concerns on globalization in India, and its impact on gender and family relations as well as the environment” (388) Namita Gokhale is one such novelist who incorporates in her novels a variety of themes and theories like feminism, Indian and Greek myths, tradition and modernity, and the ecocritical approach. Nature often appears as companion to the depressed and devastated hearts in her novels providing calm and comfort. *The Blind Matriarch* (2021) also stands in that line in which the novelist dextrously demonstrates the comforting connection between the nature and the characters, particularly Matangi Ma. In this sense, as Juliet Sylvia Pasi writes in her thesis that Alice Walker’s *The Colour Purple* can be used “as an illustration of nature as solace in a troubled world” (05) Gokhale’s

*The Blind Matriarch (TBM)* can be used as an illustration of nature as a solace in a world where people were troubled by the COVID 19 pandemic.

The novel is focused on Matangi Ma and her children and grandchildren. The story is set during the COVID 19 pandemic in India and how it had halted the life of people. However, one can also trace ecological consciousness, particularly in the context of Matangi Ma who seems to have mystically spiritual connection with nature. It is noteworthy that, although, she is blind and old yet she is the guardian of her family consisting of two sons, a daughter, a daughter in law and two grandsons apart from maids and pets. She could not see yet she felt as though she had eyes everywhere, “in her finger tips, in her silver be ringed toes, in her alert grey hair” etc (*TBM* 8-9). Everyone in the family finds solace and comfort in her company and in this role she appears very much like mother Nature. Like Nature she also has healing power healing every element of eco-system, be it human or other beings. Both nature and Matangi Ma are in the role of a healing mother- to others as well as to each other. According to Luca Valera, the core concern of ecofeminism is to make explicit the close affinity between nature and women in which the most common similarity lies in the concept of maternity that both Nature and Women are mothers. In her essay “Francis d’Eaubonne and Ecofeminism: Rediscovering the link between Women and Nature” Valera cites Roach (1991) who said that “we are closely tied to the environment, that our very existence derives from and depends on a healthy environment, as our existence once depended on a mother (or mother-figures, almost always female)” (Valera 12). This connection aptly suggests the importance of the roles played by nature to protect and nurture the humans in general, and, by a mother to nourish and protect a child in particular.

In Indian tradition women have been “an intimate part of nature”, as Vandana Shiva writes in her book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, “both in imagination and in practice” (37). She views nature to be symbolized at one level as the “embodiment of the feminine principle” and at another level, she is also nurtured and protected by the feminine to “produce life and provide sustenance” (37). In the Foreword of Shiva’s book Rajni Kothari writes that Shiva seems to point at the deeper meanings of “femininity and

Prakriti”, the Indian world view of nature which has been portrayed as Prakriti, “a living and creative process, the feminine principles from which all life arises” (Shiva XVI).

Referring to the concept of Indian cosmology Shiva highlights the attributes of Nature, which includes both animate and inanimate and considers it the expression of “Shakti, the feminine and creative principle of the cosmos” who, in conjunction with “the masculine principle (Purush),” creates the world. Thus, she says, Nature as Prakriti is “inherently active, a powerful, productive force in the dialectic of the creation, renewal and sustenance” (37). In *The Blind Matriarch*, Matangi Ma resembles to the traits of Prakriti engaging herself actively to protect and give sustenance to the animate element of nature, the little barbet. She saves the life of little barbet when she seems to have a spiritual revelation about the bird. The way she tells about the bird is very suggestive of her spiritual affinity with nature- “there is a bird... a green bird. It is hurt. It has fallen off a branch. It doesn’t know how to fly” (*TBM* 87). And when Samir goes in search of that bird he finds “a small bird, with its wings spread out, as though it had fallen from a height. It looked frightened and frail, but alive” (*TBM* 89). This mystical connectivity can be understood through the definition of “sympathy” given by Hartshorne as “feeling of feeling” that resides in ethical awareness which is a “matter of connecting to the substrate of cosmic sympathy” expressed through “*emotional qualia*” (Cited by Donovan 98). Later on, when the little barbet flutters around Matangi after a long gap she immediately identifies it and communicates mystically, “So you have come back to see me, Mirchi ... I must learn to fly too. We will fly away together, one of these days” (*TBM* 180). Even Samir also feels a strange connection with the little barbet comparing his own situation to that of the little bird whose “mother, sitting beside her empty nest, worrying about her chick” (*TBM* 89) that made him to think of his own mother, Samira Susan and the tears start rolling from his eyes.

Vandana Shiva opines that in contemporary western views nature seems to be fraught with the dichotomy of duality between man and woman, and person and nature whereas in Indian cosmology, “person and nature (Purush-Prakriti) are a duality in unity” (39). She also emphasizes at the role of Nature as Lalita,

popular in Indian mythology, who likes to do *lila* or play and through her creative impulse “creates the diversity of living forms in nature” like “mountains, trees, rivers, animals” which are the “expression of the diversity that Prakriti gives rise to” (39). This kind of creative impulse of nature is explicit also in the novel when Samir is able to communicate his feelings of love to his dream girl only through flowers, trees and season. He is shy and feels hesitant to start conversation with her, so the conversation about plants, flowers, rain, birds etc. become the medium to understand each other. Gokhale also shows in her novel how the life of the child, Pappu is saved from snakebite by a villager using the medicinal plants of wilderness. Later on when Riyaz (Pappu) expresses his desire to learn “how to cure a snakebite” (*TBM* 177) Pandu, the villager tells him just to chant “Astik! Astik!”, which is the name of the king of snakes. He also tells that most of the people die from snakebite, in fact, “die from terror, not poison” (*TBM* 177). This event reflects how people of the villages are deeply attached to nature, who has everything to heal we suffer through its different role, and are very conscious of its every part.

Here, Josephine Donovan’s observation seems relevant when she writes in “Participatory Epistemology, sympathy, and Animal Ethics” that ethical knowledge “inheres in and emerges from the communicative encounter between subjects” because there is an “ethical substrate – a cosmic sympathy, expressed through . . . *emotional qualia*, that comes alive or becomes apparent in communicative encounters between living entities” (91). She argues that just as qualitative attributes like “the taste, smell, or feel of a physical entity” emerge when a subject “encounters that object, so *emotional qualia*” arises in one’s “encounter with another subject”. So the knowledge of “that subject” certainly includes “an ethical dimension” (91). In the novel Matangi Ma seems to be entrusted with this ‘ethical substrate - a cosmic sympathy’ which is expressed through her *emotional qualia* when she communicates with the little barbet. In fact, the entire family has the consciousness of understanding the value of each element of nature. They had many pets, like Dollar, the dog, Trump, the cat and the bird Barbet. The crows also visit the balcony of Matangi Ma revealing she understood their presence. The flowers, the morning breeze, the moonlit night –

all added to their life of fulfilment. Ritika, the daughter-in-law, also feels relaxed in the lap of nature under the moonlit night when she is depressed, “she inhaled the fragrance of the night flowers and smiled. The moon behind the neem tree emerged to smile back at her” (*TBM* 18). Donovan points out that “participatory epistemology” is the ground for “human ethical knowledge of the natural physical world” (Donovan 92) including animals also.

The ecological consciousness also enables us to understand the relevance of being connected to the roots that define the sense of identity, sense of existence. After revealing to Samir about his real parents Aditya Saran Jha and Samir Susan, Surya tries to fill up the emotional void felt lately by Samir due to the revelation and explains him the relevance of being conscious to one’s roots:

Look around at the trees in this park ... the banyan tree with its sprawling aerial roots, which return to the earth. The ashoka trees, tall and aloof. The neem trees, shedding their leaves sprouting new ones. The mango trees, That kadam tree there. They are all connected at the roots. They share their sustenance, their nutrients. They speak to each other under the soil, they sing and they weep, and they rejoice together when the rains come. (*TBM* 48)

Here, Suryaveer becomes a healing mother to the troubled Samir, displaying the feminine attributes of protect and care and, in fact, he has been, as Samir himself accepts, “you are my father and, my mother too” (*TBM* 46). How Matangi Ma was caring to her children is also attested by Suryaveer – “My Matangi Ma! The cleverest and most nurturing mother in the world!” and attributes her with the honour of “Jai Mataji! Annapurna Devi herself!” (*TBM* 50).

Shiva also sees nature akin to femininity being more humane and natural than the imposing ‘scientific’ paradigm which appears to be more “macho’ in its conception” (‘Foreword’ by Kothari). The feminine principle is assertive of the “holistic perspective” along with the “inclusive agenda of concerns” which are based on its comprehensive “respect for diversity” (‘Foreword’) that actually are also the attributes of nature. Matangi Ma’s ecological consciousness in this respect is apparently overt when she appears to save the feminine principle of holism which is grounded on diversity, dignity of all beings with a shared sense of

community. This is the reason, perhaps, that the male members of the family like Samir, Rahul, etc. also feel peace and comfort in the nature's lap and are sensitive towards happenings and movements taking place in nature as they all have been brought up and guided by the blind matriarch who herself seems to have mystical connections with nature in all its forms. Had the male members of the family been under the patriarchal dominance of their father, they might not have been so sensitized to every single movement of their ecosystem. Matangi Ma even has instinctive revelation of the earthquake. She had always faced misfortune starting from the day of earthquake when she lost her father, Matang Kashyap, in Assam. She had intuition to know if some disaster had to take place and that day also she had stomach ache before the earthquake occurred. It was the day of Indian independence, 15 August. As a child she saw "trees howling, wooden rafters wailing, the earth weeping" (*TBM* 12) and a lizard fell on her shoulder. After that she had "never forgotten the darkness that had overtaken them" and now were only "blurred memories of her father, dead" (*TBM* 13). The memories of past are revived often whenever Matangi's ecological consciousness are awakened by the touch or fragrance of nature's elements whether in the form of morning breeze, earthquake, the first mangoes of the season or the advent of spring season. The fragrance of the mango once leads her to the crevices of past memories of a summer "redolent with the scent of mangoes" in Kaka Nagar:

It was still the early part of summer, probably May. The dry heat was like a moving flame around them. She was sucking at a mango kernel. Her husband and children had been offered the more succulent slices and she had saved the leftovers for herself. (*TBM* 50-51)

This was the day when she had defeated her husband, Prabodh, in the game of badminton but he accused her of cheating in the game. It was perhaps his male ego that prevented him to accept defeat from a woman, and even more that, from his own wife. The mangoes made her memories of the past alive also recalling the sight of parrot thinking that "she could feel the flapping of wings" that a "beady-eyed parrot feathered in green, was examining her intently" (*TBM* 57).

Thus, it can be said that the ecological ways of knowing nature are primarily participatory and Matangi Ma is attributed with this kind of

participatory epistemology that's why she demonstrates that sympathetic caring alertness to the sign communicated by the mother of little barbet or the cawing of the crows at the balcony. This is very much suggestive that she has a comprehensive ethical understanding and because of that she is able to protect the little barbet along with other animate and inanimate objects. In this context Shiva's statement also seems relevant that women's "productivity in the sustaining of life is based on nature's productivity", and therefore, the death of "Prakriti is simultaneously a beginning of their marginalization" (40). When we see the characters of this novel we find them having the principles of connectedness, wholeness, interdependence and spiritual consciousness. The efforts and struggle of these characters to protect and nurture the nature's subsistence, also become the very base for the "women's liberation and preservation of life on earth" (Rao 129). We see how Samir feels his own image in the little barbet and finds his connectivity with it as both are separated from their biological mother and are being protected and nurtured by Matangi Ma. Just like Wordsworth's description of Nature as "the nurse, / The guide, the guardian" (*Fifteen Poets* 238) of heart and soul, Matangi Ma emerges as a healing mother to the devastated hearts and souls. Through this character, Namita Gokhale exhorts people to preserve the natural world and its inhabitants, such as animals and birds suggesting that consideration of the natural world is necessary for a safer and better future.



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