

# The Cost of Survival: A Discursive Reading of Namita Gokhale's *The Blind Matriarch*

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**Abstract** In late 2019, the world was confronted with the emergence of an unprecedented infectious disease known as COVID-19, which gradually spread globally, resulting in widespread chaos. This event garnered the attention of not only the general public but also creative and intellectual minds worldwide. As a newly re-emerged genre, pandemic literature necessitates critical investigation from various discursive perspectives. It generally focuses on themes of human suffering, the breakdown of order, heroism, and resilience, while overlooking issues associated with fear, mental health, institutional banality, and the politics that accompany them. Addressing this gap, this article examines Namita Gokhale's *The Blind Matriarch* (2021) and its portrayal of the complex challenges people faced during the pandemic, along with their survival strategies. Additionally, it problematises the morality of time by questioning the so-called value of life and its homogenous acceptance in human societies, highlighting how an individual's social class often determines whether their voice is deemed worthy of attention. It also examines how power is manifested and exploited to advance agendas and ambitions at the expense of those outside its influence. The article's theoretical frameworks include Agamben's theory of bare life, Foucault's concept of biopower, and Becker's theory of the denial of death.

**Keywords** Covid-19; pandemic; survival strategies; death; lockdown

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### **Introduction**

Throughout its long history of evolution, the human race has faced numerous diseases. These diseases have been classified into various categories, like pandemic, epidemic, and endemic, depending on the scale of infection. Defining epidemiologically, the pandemic is “an epidemic occurring worldwide, or over a very wide area, crossing international boundaries and usually affecting a large number of people” (Feinleib 93; Morens 1019). Pandemics have been a recurring phenomenon throughout human history, profoundly impacting societies, economies, and healthcare systems. Dr V. L. Rinawmi rightly remarks, “tracing back to the past till the present day, pandemics have affected human history in innumerable ways, demographically, socially, culturally, politically, financially, and biologically” (35). Among many outbreaks throughout the history of human civilisation, the Black Death (Plague) in the 14th century, the 1918 Spanish Flu, Smallpox, Cholera, HIV/AIDS and the most recent COVID-19 are notable ones owing to their scale of devastation. These outbreaks provided the necessary conditions for the invention of advanced modern medicines and highlighted societal inequalities (Huremović 10, Dasgupta and Crunkhorn 1). For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, governments, pharmaceutical companies, academic institutions, and global health organisations collaborated on a scale that had never been seen before. The collaboration paved the way for the development of vaccines, innovation in diagnostics, and the creation of public health technology infrastructures, including apps and telemedicine platforms. Apart from these, the pandemic also exposed and amplified the existing healthcare disparities, economic inequality, digital divide, vaccine apartheid (rich countries hoarded vaccines while many poorer nations waited months and years for the same), and vulnerable conditions of the marginalised section of society. Arvind M. Nawale rightly remarks, “the COVID-19 outbreak triggered a global health crisis that endangers our financial stability, economy, employment, security and social well-being. The shutdown has put people in a deplorable, unsettling situation” (45). In such a situation, it is necessary to take into account the human cost of the pandemic, like the loss of lives, anxiety, depression, economic hardships, social isolation, strain on healthcare workers and administrative bodies, erosion of trust and social cohesion. The outbreaks of various

infectious diseases have significantly impacted our societies and cultures, but little attention has been given to these phenomena (Huremović 7).

Art, since its inception, has been a powerful medium for representing different facets of human life, and the pandemic, being one of the recurring phenomena in human history, has been documented through artistic representations. Painters chose colours as their medium to depict death, pain, fear, and emotional traces of epidemics since the Middle Ages. These works of art often employed religious frameworks to interpret epidemics and pandemics as divine punishment for human sins. Artistic responses to pandemics reveal recurring themes such as divine revelation, “othering,” freedom, and exile, following a four-part dramaturgical structure (Hanson and Small 880). In this modern era, numerous media, including films, paintings, graphics, and many others, attempt to capture both the hazardous and resilient aspects of such unpredictable situations. Among the various media, literature is one medium that vividly represents the various aspects of such situations and helps us to understand the human perspective. It serves multiple functions during pandemics, consoles hearts, fosters resilience, and encourages readers to maintain sanity and hope (Nawale 46). As the spread of COVID-19 increased, numerous writings in various forms of outlets, including books and magazines, appeared globally, aiming to represent the responses of ordinary people to the pandemic’s uncertainty (Rinawmi 35). Writers across continents, through their works like *Companion Piece* (2022) by Ali Smith, *Delphi* (2022) by Claire Pollard, and *The Fell* (2021) by Sarah Moss, among many others, have attempted to represent the horrors of the pandemic. Similar to these global responses, Indian writers such as Shobha De, Tabish Khair, Amitav Kumar, and Namita Gokhale have sketched the complex socio-political dynamics, threats, and resilience strategies employed by people in the subcontinent during the pandemic.

Along similar lines, Namita Gokhale's twentieth book, *The Blind Matriarch* (2021), revisits the COVID-19 pandemic through the story of Matangi, a blind woman who is the matriarch of her family. The novel is unique because it mingles the upside-down world of the pandemic, where death haunts the living while testing their resilience, with a story of familial bonds. It allows us to examine the pandemic and its inherent realities through the eyes of blind Matangi Ma, who holds her family together against all odds. The text portrays the diverse challenges encountered by people during the pandemic through a range of characters who represent their distinct socio-political and financial statuses, yet possess a sense of individuality. Using subplots within the main plot of Matangi’s story, it illustrates the survival tactics and mechanisms that people employed during the COVID-19

pandemic. Its uniqueness stems from the fact that while most classic works on Contagion narratives especially Priscila Wald's *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (2008), investigate how pandemic literature is often analysed as narratives of casualty, outbreak, and resolution, the selected text interweaves the discourses of class, religion, gender, agency, power and death into the story subtly. This subtle mixture provides the novel with an unprecedented scope for interpretation and reinterpretation. Many scholars, including MR Bhuvaneshwari (2022), Swati Singh and Nupur Das (2024), Shristi Dey and Aratika Das (2025), among others, examine it from a gendered perspective, highlighting the elements of caregiving within it. Deepali Rajshekhhar Patil reads the text as a chronicle of the pandemic and resilience, equating it to a microcosm for India (372). However, these studies consider the pandemic as an event that changed everything. The discourses surrounding the value of human life vary drastically, especially in situations like a pandemic; therefore, it is necessary to investigate these discourses with respect to their contextual nuances.

Discussions of pandemic literature are generally centred on hospitals, frontline workers, and dystopian settings, which cast the pandemic as a spectacular event. The present text moves away from that spectacularity towards a more domestic and contemporary narrative, in which the crisis transforms everyday life into a triage regime. The text is not simply a COVID-19 chronicle; it represents the shift in governance towards kinship in times of crisis. The article argues that *The Blind Matriarch* lays bare the cost of survival in contemporary India by localising Agamben's idea of bare life, which is essentially a Eurocentric concept. It also shows how biopower and the denial of death operate together to control and manage lives. When viewed through this tripartite framework, it becomes a site where biopower is exercised not only at the state level but also at the family level through scolding, monitoring, and isolation. This idea of care slides into a form of control over more vulnerable bodies. It further explores the tendency of the pandemic to generate death-anxious caretakers. These caretakers enforce life-regimes while narratively unseeing death, mirroring Matangi-Ma's charged symbolism of sight and blindness and what a family can or cannot face. It also explains how the pandemic brings mortality into living room discussions and the household's constant struggle to metabolise this idea using stories, distractions and even dreams. Therefore, this article contributes to the field of pandemic literature by moving it away from event literature towards an infrastructure-of-life literature.

To discuss all these aspects of the pandemic, this article is divided into three sections. The first section aims to explore the discourse of survival and its

variations, depending on the socio-political context of the subject, through the concept of "Bare Life" by Giorgio Agamben. According to Agamben, bare life is "the first separation between the simple, animal life we are born into and the 'good' life of political participation that we enter into a conceptual separation which, at times pronounced and at other times blurred, still haunts our politics" (Nikolopoulou 124). Applying this concept, the article attempts to situate the text's treatment of the idea of life within the context of the recent COVID-19 pandemic. This section aims to explore the circumstances under which individuals make compromises to ensure their survival. These compromises often strip individuals of their agency over their own lives. The second section attempts to decipher the relationship between the pandemic and politics by using Michel Foucault's concept of Biopower. According to Foucault, biopower is "the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power" (1). During the pandemic, the state implemented various measures to manage the population, including quarantine, social distancing, and mass vaccination campaigns. For these disciplinary measures, the state utilised technologies such as contact tracing apps and health surveillance systems to exercise biopower over its citizens. This article further seeks to decipher how the novel represents the subtle application of these apparatuses within the world of Matangi. The final section of the article deals with the depiction of the heightened collective fear of death amidst the health crisis. During pandemics, death is quantified, displayed, and analysed as a key metric for public health success or failure. The constant presence of death, like a hidden enemy in such situations, gives birth to a sense of fear that strikes with death anxiety. Although death anxiety exists since birth and continues throughout the life of an individual, during the pandemic, it escalates so much that individuals constantly feel a sense of existential crisis (Özgüç et al. 823). This fear of death eventually legitimises the state's control over bodies, such as enforcing quarantines or requiring compliance with health measures. This article is an attempt to look at the survival tactics that various characters employ to overcome the terror of death by using the lens of death denial given by Earnest Becker.

### **Survival and Bare Life**

Survival is a process in which one continues to exist, even after facing challenges, threats, adversities, natural disasters, conflicts, resource scarcity and many other difficulties. It encompasses numerous aspects, including physical, emotional, environmental, social and cultural. The concept of survival has evolved to

encompass more than mere physical existence, becoming a central metaphor for understanding contemporary life in the face of global threats (Höcker 116). In the face of global threats like terrorism and climate change, survival has replaced harmonious coexistence as the primary goal of politics (Abélès and Kleinman 89). However, this rhetoric of survival gained weight again with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic significantly altered human behaviours, priorities and needs. In doing so, it not only triggered the survival instincts but also altered adaptive responses. The pandemic has intensified survival concerns, increased subsistence activities, and strengthened interdependency (Greenfield et al., 2). People demonstrated resilience, empathy, and collective struggle for survival. In such extreme conditions, individuals become increasingly concerned with the most basic things that sustain their existence, reducing their lives to mere survival. This reduction in the quality of life is termed “bare life” by Agamben (*Homo* 17). Agamben argues that a situation like a pandemic alters the nature of freedom and the subjects of a democracy, where liberty is the rallying cry (*Where* 52). He further extends his argument and writes:

The first thing that the wave of panic which has paralyzed the country showed, was that our society believes in nothing more than bare life... Bare life, and the fear of losing it, is not something that unites people: rather, it blinds and separates them. (Agamben 17)

Agamben asserts that when one uses the word life, especially in the political sphere, it refers almost exclusively to the biological dimension. It does not guarantee anything about the quality of life. The pandemic brought this concept into sharp focus by highlighting how sovereign power can reduce human existence to mere biological survival (Zhyhal 3; Тимофеев 24). Namita Gokhale’s *The Blind Matriarch* problematises this reduction of life to mere existence by portraying how people were religiously following each and every guideline without even questioning it once. She takes the example of the “Janta Curfew that the prime minister had imposed” (34). Here, the use of the word “imposed” (34) illustrates how the state exercises power over the people of a democratic nation during the pandemic. Gokhale presents the intensity and seriousness of the “Janta Curfew” (34) further when she writes, “nobody was to step out all day, from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. At 5 p.m., the nation was to assemble to clap and beat pots and pans...” (34). In any other circumstance, people of a country like India, with the largest population in the world, would not have followed any such restrictions but the urge to remain

alive led people to compromise their freedom during the pandemic. Moreover, what makes it more interesting is that such a pandemic-struck world has been introduced through the perspective of Matangi, the blind matriarch. Matangi's blindness is both literal and metaphorical as it makes her vulnerable, but at the same time provides her with the wisdom and vision that others lack. Not seeing here becomes a narrative device that sensitises about human vulnerability and gives an affective turn to the discussion. The lockdown, followed by "the play curfew" (34), has a different impact on everyone, aptly illustrated through the contrast of different characters within the text. In doing so, it provides narrative agency to each character, making the novel a polyphonic site for multiple voices that exist simultaneously. For instance, through the character of Shanta, Gokhale comments on the larger socio-political and psychological impact of the pandemic. Shanta's character demonstrates structural helplessness and compares the pre- and post-pandemic scenarios. It is stated that, "Now, deep into total lockdown, she felt panic and despair... This was about capture, submission and stagnation, about selfhood and loss of agency... This forced incarceration was a test, at so many levels, of so many things" (99). This is in complete contrast to what her life had been before the pandemic: "Before the lockdown, before the virus had frightened the world into submission, before it had leapt out of China to wreak its havoc, before all that, Shanta had a busy, stimulating life" (99). The imposed lockdown brought all the fault lines to the surface. The business firms, companies, and the market at large were collapsing, and everyone was bound to look silently as the destruction unfolded. This has been best illustrated through Ritika's stance, especially her comments on the economic aspects of the pandemic. She, positioning herself as the representative of the country's young workforce, experiences her life "falling apart" (52) as "the company... was just a few steps away from going to liquidation" (55).

It is often perceived that when situations go against human beings, they begin to think about the things that are devoid of human values like kindness, sympathy, and compassion, among many other things, as survival becomes the core concern. This lack of responsibility towards other human beings is evident in the rationale that Matangi gives to Lali, instructing her to stock up on everything for the lockdown. Matangi says, "we have to look after ourselves first before we can look after others" (Gokhale 35). This urge to think about oneself first before anything and anyone else compels us to examine the figure of *Homo sacer* in Agamben's work, a figure who is paradoxically both sacred and killable. Agamben views this figure as an embodiment of bare life because this individual is included in the political order solely through exclusion. The state denies him basic legal rights

and civic protection, and as a result, he becomes a person who can be subjected to violence, and it would not be classified as a crime. Such a condition exposes the radical vulnerability of one's subject position and how power can relegate someone to a domain where the law can be applied or withheld at will. This also aligns with Agamben's concept of *Homo sacer*, which explains the condition of a person excluded from political life but subjected to the state's power. In other words, it is the power structures of a system which determine who has the right to live as a full human being and who does not.

The figure of *Homo sacer* finds a contemporary parallel in the "asymptomatic patient" (Тимофеев 25). Just like *Homo sacer*, these asymptomatic patients embodied a new zone of suspicion during the pandemic as they could be quarantined, restricted from travelling and subjected to forceful testing for the disease despite showing no symptoms. Moreover, specifically in India, certain social groups were also treated as the carriers of the disease, which led to their stigmatisation and discrimination based on creed, class, and religion (Bhanot et al. 3). The media also portrayed a biased narrative to ignite hatred for such communities. As Gokhale correctly comments on the situation through Shanta, who was deliberately "avoiding the news channels, trying to blank out images of charred homes and toxic hatred. It was that, or the China virus- very little else seemed to be occupying the minds of the media" (19). Individuals in vulnerable social positions were disproportionately affected by graded caste inequality, making it challenging to follow prescribed guidelines for social distancing and home quarantine (Mondal and Karmakar 116). Gokhale highlights this vulnerability by portraying the family of a migrant labourer who was hiding in bushes in her society "for the night" (65). These people "set off for their village" (65) when they realised that "the city is no place for" them "anymore" (65). Their socio-political condition compels them to breach the state prescribed guidelines. Indeed, the measures that the government institutions provided were for the larger welfare, but the totalitarian approach without considering the socio-economic heterogeneity of the country proved fatal, especially in the case of Indian migrant labourers. Gokhale also highlights how these vulnerabilities vary from person to person, owing to their diverse challenges. She portrays the character of Babli Mohan, a police inspector, who constantly struggles with her long and tiring duty hours. Apparently, she has a government job, and a sense of economic and social security unlike those migrant workers. However, as a frontline worker, she is at constant risk of contracting the infection. Her duty is so demanding that she doesn't get enough time to cook food for herself and her family. Babli tells Shanta;

I haven't had time to cook since this Covid business began... My aged mother lives with us... I cook dal and potatoes for her every three days. My brother and I live on fried eggs and omelettes, and bread, whenever we get it. (63)

Babli's condition aptly represents the efforts that people make to survive in chaotic times. During such emergencies, the only thing that governs life is the imperative of survival, rather than the usual checks and balances or the debates about the quality of civic life that we engage in. According to Agamben, this emphasis on health measures can convert citizens into biological bodies and provide the state with emergency powers that take the form of biopolitics.

However, many critics, such as Roberto Esposito, Sergei Pozorov, and Jean-Luc Nancy, among others, criticise Agamben's overgeneralization of the idea of bare life in the context of COVID-19. They argue that there is an inherent paradox in Agamben's ethical and political stance, which minimised the severity of the disease and denounced the emergency measures as excessive. This leads to thanatopolitical traits by suggesting that letting die should be accepted for the sake of freedom and political functioning over preservation of life. Despite its ontological and empirical problems, Agamben's idea remains relevant because it challenges the commonly accepted assumptions and behavioural norms dominating the mainstream narratives of the pandemic. In a way, it exposes how the pandemic has laid bare the existing precarious conditions in which many people in human society find themselves in a state of non-being. As it can be seen from the examples given in the text, in India, not everyone is reduced to bare life equally. The people belonging to the lower strata of society, either economically or socially, experienced more vulnerable conditions in the form of hunger, eviction risk, police coercion and forced migration. It selectively produces bare life on the margins, connecting biopower and bare life by withdrawing protection while asserting control simultaneously.

### **Politics around Pandemic**

Politics, in general, refers to the distribution and implementation of power to regulate society. This regulation can occur through numerous institutions established by the people in the form of political systems, administrative bodies, and ideologies. The regulation of any society through a set of rules, which we call laws, requires agents who can implement those laws. This urge to exercise power over others gives rise to a struggle for power sharing. Max Weber rightly defined politics as the "striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power, either

among states or among groups within a state” (4). It involves the struggle for power and justice among individuals and groups, as well as the governance of people through different regimes. Politics also encompasses protection, order, authority, ideology, patriotism, class, and the use of information. These systems are there to provide a better life for the people living in a state as citizens. However, a situation like the pandemic forces us to acknowledge the loopholes that exist in the political systems and institutions. Pandemics often highlight political divisions and how these divisions are used in order to control the population (Dionne and Turkmen E214). For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, debates over mask mandates, vaccination policies, and restrictions became partisan issues. Different political groups framed these health measures according to their ideologies, often leading to polarised public opinion. This polarisation played an important role in consolidating power within governments while mobilising interest groups and businesses to adapt their lobbying strategies (Xhaferaj 104). The crisis has underscored the importance of understanding the political factors that shape government responses, encompassing social policies, regime type, political institutions, and state capacity (Greer et al. 1414). All these nuances can be explained more effectively when viewed through the lens of biopower, which reveals the underlying politics surrounding the pandemic. Foucault, through his concept of Biopower, argues that nation-states, police, government, legal practices, human sciences and medical institutions have their rationale, cause and effects, strategies, technologies, mechanisms and codes and have managed successfully to obscure their workings by hiding behind observation and scrutiny. While explaining Biopower, Foucault writes:

By this I mean several phenomena that seem to me to be quite significant, namely, the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power, or, in other words, how, starting from the 18th century, modern Western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species. This is what I have called biopower. (Foucault 1)

Foucault sees these differences in techniques as behaviour control technologies, and modern biopower as nothing more than a series of webs and networks working their way around the societal body to control the powerless section of the existing system. By power, he means different kinds of privileges that people enjoy, for example, good immunity, a good financial condition, a stable family, and a young

age, all of which were privileges during the coronavirus times. After the lockdown, many workers who worked in metro cities on daily wages faced a situation where they were bound to die either of coronavirus or starvation. In that case, they decided to go back to their village at any cost. Does it not raise questions about whether civilisation truly promises the well-being of human beings? Is it not forcing us to acknowledge that capitalism is the law of human society? Those who have money can afford to remain locked, and everything will reach them in just one click, but what about those who do not have a place to be locked up? Gokhale asks this question by putting the family of a daily wage worker, who is hiding from security and other people living in the locality at night, because if they were caught, they would be subjected to disciplinary action. This incident presents the reality of our country, where people are subjected to inequalities at various levels. Dionne and Turkmen rightly remark, “as the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, political leaders and citizens alike sought a source to blame and avoid. Often the targets of blame were people from marginalised groups, including religious, ethnic, or racial minorities and migrants” (E213).

Amidst the chaos created by the pandemic, the internet has become a vital medium for keeping citizens informed. We live in an era where most of the people in our country, as well as worldwide, use the internet without having proper digital education to secure their data. Moreover, there was a sense of terror because people saw death as a daily affair; in that situation, whatever gave them a sense of security and hope, they submitted to that idea. As a result, we happily submitted to the idea of surveillance by providing data to necessary health apps, which compromised our privacy. The world became like a panopticon where human beings are under constant surveillance. The Panopticon was originally an architectural design for a prison, conceived by Jeremy Bentham in the year 1791, which allowed for constant surveillance of people living inside the prison (Fiddler 2). Foucault modified this idea as a “diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form” (Fiddler 4) and employed it as a metaphor to explain modern ways of exercising power and social control. Social media plays a crucial role in establishing this social control by utilising the personal data of consumers, including their demographics, location, browsing habits, and social connections. Analysing this seemingly useless information reveals more sensitive details, ranging from political leanings to health statuses. Much of the surveillance capability arises from metadata shared by various social media platforms to advertisers, analytics firms, and other third parties, enabling the delivery of targeted ads and services. Similarly, state agencies also employ this technique to monitor individuals or groups deemed suspicious

and collect evidence for investigations. As social media is so ingrained in modern life, users often accept different clauses offered by the platforms as the norm. This normalisation diminishes public scrutiny of invasive surveillance practices. Öngün and Demirağ, rightly remark that social media introduces a dual dynamic of surveillance: the panoptic effect where the few watch the many, and the synoptic effect where the many watch the few (28-29). The pandemic significantly increased digital surveillance, as the world in a way shifted to virtual reality. The crisis facilitated digital surveillance by shifting communication online, motivating the development of new surveillance tools, and justifying prolonged surveillance measures. Gokhale presents this transition and the resultant distrust through Shanta's thoughts, "there were containment zones, the interstate boundaries, the mandatory health app that would rob her, and everyone she knew and all those she didn't know of their privacy" (Gokhale 99). Here, surveillance is being carried out without proximity. These platforms do not merely observe, but they rank visibility, monetise attention, amplify outrage and automate suspicion. In the novel, there are instances where marginalised groups and religious minorities were targeted and over-policed because of the viral social media content. This shows how people are disciplined not by punishment but by algorithmic disappearance or amplification. Data becomes destiny, and as Shanta reflects, the virus made the whole world powerless before the fear of death and the pandemic became a synonym for "capture, submission and stagnation... and the loss of agency" (99). In India, surveillance and discipline do not operate as neutral universal techniques. They are filtered through caste hierarchies, religious nationalism and digital capitalism. Caste is a form of discipline enforced through family, kinship, village and everyday interaction. It is not centralised but diffused throughout society, and the watchtower here is not a prison guard but rather neighbours, elders, employers, and relatives, who ensure that marginalised people do not have agency over their lives through soft power. This loss of agency is evident in the situation of Lali and Munni, who are the family's maids. Lali is almost same age as Matangi, but she does not get the same amount of care that Matangi does because Matangi has agency over herself, which Lali lacks due to her subject position. While everyone else in the house is locked up due to the pandemic, Lali had to go to the market to bring mangoes as per Mtangi's orders. As someone from a socioeconomically disadvantaged background, she is obligated to follow her employer's orders. Moreover, even when Surya objects to this act of Matangi, it is not out of care for Lali but rather out of fear of contracting COVID-19. Surya reprovably says, "you should not let that Lali out at all! Who knows where she will float off if she is allowed to be footloose and fancy-free! We have to watch

out for infections” (Gokhale 50). Ironically, Lali, in a way, has the freedom to go out, but this freedom has not been a choice of hers. She is rather forced into it, more like a possession that has no agency over its actions. It can be noted that biopower works on different levels over people depending on their subject position, and what actually regulates it is the fear of death. In totality, surveillance and control here is participatory, where the citizens watch each other in the name of religion, caste and nation, dissolving the boundary between state power and popular power. This is not simply discipline but affective governance, where fear, resentment, pride and humiliation are weaponised to produce obedient subjects. The disciplinary and regulatory power that the state employs in this case does not explicitly kill, but excludes certain populations from protection and lets them die. This letting die links the idea of biopower to necropolitics, where Foucault’s letting die becomes, in Mbembe’s context, an active process of abandonment, exposure to violence, slow death and permanent insecurity. Necropolitics demonstrates how the same political order that can promote health and security for some can lead to premature death for others.

### **Fear and the Denial of Death**

Death is an abstract concept that has been explored from multiple aspects, including biology, philosophy, theology and psychology; each of these offers a unique perspective. From a biological perspective, death is defined as the cessation of all necessary functions, such as respiration, heartbeat, and brain activity (Bernat et al., 389). Several philosophers have attempted to define death by posing questions about existence, identity, the afterlife, and other related topics. For Epicurus, death is “the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death has not come, and, when death has come, we are not” (3), whereas, for an existentialist like Heidegger, death is something that exists parallel to life. Heidegger writes, “as soon as man comes to life, he is at once old enough to die” (291). Theologically, death is not seen as the end of existence but rather a transition to another state (Davies 2). From a psychological viewpoint, death is also considered in terms of how humans cope with their mortality (Pyszczynski et al. 329).

During the pandemic, death became such a common affair that its constant presence affected people psychologically, socially and culturally, and people tried their best to cope with it. Gokhale’s novel conveys this idea in several ways by having characters react in peculiar ways. The fear of death, helplessness, and insecurity grew so much that even ordinary allergies were enough to make people anxious and hysterical. For instance, when Rahul brought some *semal* pods to show

his mother, out of anger, anxiety, and discomfort she started shouting at Rahul; “You want your mother to die? You want me to die, don’t you... ‘Why not just go and collect some coronavirus instead and spit it into my face? What have I done to deserve this?’” (Gokhale 104). Her reaction can be understood when one looks at it from Becker’s lens and his claim that “the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity” (Becker ix). In a normal situation, Ritika would have reacted differently, but the pandemic and its consequences, like the lockdown, joblessness, and uncertainty about the future, among many other problems, led her to react in such a violent manner. In her case, fear works as a complex phenomenon that plays a significant role in both personal and professional contexts. It can be experienced as an emotion or a propositional attitude, with experiential fear defined as involuntary arousal and unhappiness caused by a fear of harm (Davis 460).

The fear of death and the urge to live are overtly visible in the central character Matangi. This urge to survive makes her repeat the lines of Ramdhari Singh Dinkar’s *Rashmirathi* “*Saubhagya na sab din sota h / Dekhe aage kya hota h*” (Good fortune does not sleep forever,/Let's see what happens next) (Gokhale 61). The constant repetition of this line serves as the motif of this novel, namely, the theme of courage and resilience in the face of crisis. The *saubhagya* here can be interpreted as an end of the pandemic, but till then, resilience is necessary. Even though Covid-19 took away her eldest son, she did not lose her courage. Her strength can be seen in Samir’s remark: “She held us all together, in those days, after we found Surya slouched over his desk. She did not weep when she heard the news” (Gokhale 187-188). For an old mother, how difficult it would have been to look at the dead body of her eldest and most beloved child, but she not only held herself but also her family together. For Matangi, the approach was not to deny vulnerability but to avoid panic as an epistemology. Her blindness situates her outside the visual regime of fear, producing subtle resistance. Narratively, her stoicism becomes a refusal of acceleration, which is also reflected in the novel’s pace, where events unfold with a smooth transition rather than a sense of urgency.

Matangi’s daughter, Shanta, also forms her coping mechanism to deal with the changed situation. She always tries her best to keep the family together, but after Surya’s death, she becomes shattered and devastated. She realises that just like Surya, this pandemic can take away other people whom she loved and therefore, she does not have much time to follow her dreams. With this realisation, she decides to give herself a chance to live her life for herself. As the Lockdown ended, she also unlocked herself, started meeting friends, and hanging out with them, and

finally, she made a decision for herself, i.e., leaving the metropolis and moving to the hills with her mother Matangi to enjoy the peaceful life in the lap of nature. she declares; “I am moving to the hills...I have found the perfect place, in Sattaal. I am relocating there this May. We have all to follow our dreams- it’s our duty to ourselves” (Gokhale 193). Shanta constructs certain “symbolic systems, like culture, societal roles” (Becker 26) and many other activities that allow her to cope with the fundamental fear of death by making her life meaningful. Shanta’s last decision changes her character arc by offering a unique mode of resistance in the form of reorientation rather than endurance. She acknowledges the conditions, such as the suspension of her future, reduction of life to mere maintenance, and loss of family members, among many other things, and tries to shift her focus from control to care, from abstract fear to a concrete, relational life, and finally from past and future to the present. This adjustment from her side makes the narrative, a narrative of resistance through adaptive agency rather than defiance.

The pandemic and the events that followed it had a different impact on Rahul’s young mind. He, being the youngest of all, was the most vulnerable and the lockdown, the death of Surya and Matangi Ma, and the migration of Rahul and his parents from the city to Mumbai for better opportunities got their manifestation in his dreams.

I dream of death a lot these days. I see him in the daytime too- always as he, never as she... Death looks like a cross between Yama, the god of Death from *Amar Chitra Katha Comics*, and Thanos, the intergalactic warlord from *Avengers: Endgame*. (Gokhale 200)

Rahul’s response to the situation and the concretisation of death in the form of various characters whom he saw in films or comics shows how a child’s mind tends to concretise everything. The idea that death is often depicted as a male figure in Rahul’s imagination is also symbolic in nature. Firstly, it can be interpreted in relation to the love and care between Rahul and Matangi. Secondly, it can also be looked at as the influence of Indian cultural narratives, where death is associated with Yama. Rahul’s Yama, however, is different as he rides a bike and takes people with him due to a lack of oxygen cylinders. This image of the shortage of oxygen cylinders becomes pertinent in shifting the discussion away from the pandemic's spectacularity and addressing it as an infrastructural narrative, which provides an opportunity to examine the systemic failures that exacerbated the situation. Dreams of death show the fear that most of us do not acknowledge but experience in our

unconscious. This is the practice of death denial, which people often do when they have no options to escape it. According to Earnest Becker, human beings constantly practice conscious or unconscious denial of death to survive and dreams about death might reveal a person's repressed fears about mortality. Therefore, dreams are the conscious mind's defence mechanism to express inexpressible fears (16-17). Rahul's reaction is a child's urge to concretise, something too abstract for him to understand. It can be observed that imagination mingles with everyday reality when Rahul describes his dream, "that night I dreamt of death again. He had come for me on a speeding motorcycle, carrying an empty oxygen cylinder. I woke up sweating and told myself not to panic" (Gokhale 201). This entire episode reveals Rahul's denial, but it can also be viewed as a mechanism that a child is using to live his regular life despite so many emotional and psychological upheavals. This denial becomes necessary during the pandemic because the constantly increasing deaths remind us of our mortality. This heightened awareness sometimes becomes the source of anxiety and fear, which works as a catalyst for the adoption of certain strategies that may help us to survive. Higher death anxiety leads to avoidance coping, moderated by spirituality and national identity (Partouche-Sebban et al. 1816). Sometimes, this anxiety motivates protective behaviour among people, which helps strengthen resilience towards the disease and fosters a sense of community. However, it often leads to social tensions, misinformation and hatred among different groups, creating an us-versus-them mentality. Therefore, Gokhale's novel becomes important as it helps to understand these psychological and social forces and how they can govern the behaviour of individuals and communities, especially during times of crisis. It does not view resistance as a force that completely dismantles power structures, but rather situates it as an ethical modulation that operates through stoicism, reorientation, and solidarity.

### **Conclusion**

In the history of human civilisation, the COVID-19 pandemic has been one of the most significant events to affect the globe. It became a global crisis that virtually affected almost every aspect of human life. It not only claimed millions of lives but also forced the human race to acknowledge its limitations. It exposed all the vulnerabilities of human society, including healthcare problems, economic challenges and fragile social structures to the surface. This disruption broke personal and social connections, exposing the inequalities that existed in our society on multiple levels. Art, therefore, emerged as a powerful medium for exploring and representing the multifaceted aspects of the pandemic. Moreover,

these artistic media also played an important role in fostering hope and solidarity in an era marked by fear and uncertainty. In the series of such creative outputs, Namita Gokhale's *The Blind Matriarch* becomes a crucial document that captures the pandemic in a nuanced manner. While being a fictional narrative, it is largely based on the real experiences of the people during the COVID-19 pandemic in India, which provides Gokhale with an opportunity to merge lived experiences with creative imagination. She highlights the emotional realities, such as fear and resilience, along with the broader socio-political issues, including inequality and misinformation. Through the story of Matangi and her family, Gokhale attempts to offer catharsis and provides readers with an opportunity to reflect on the long-term impact of the pandemic. It can be read as a narrative of domestic realism, where the pandemic operates as a structural agent rather than a narrative event, addressing the issues of care, vulnerability and authority. The article reformulates the narratives written around the pandemic away from the general idea of exceptionalism with which they are often viewed. This reading argues that the pandemic is not a break from normal life, rather it is an intensifier of existing disparities in the form of class, caste, gender, religion and age-based hierarchies. Furthermore, it analyses how power survives itself through emotional, moral and intimate structures. This elucidates why the sanctions imposed in the name of pandemic governance were not questioned, even when they were oppressive, because they were presented under the guise of care, love, concern, and duty. The article also visualises death as something central to human existence, as seen through Becker. It outlines how the pandemic put the whole cultural management of death through rituals, mourning and collective meaning at stake. This collapse took the form of an existential improvisation, where each character devised their own ways to deal with it. Finally, this approach provincialises Western theory without discarding it. *The Blind Matriarch* demonstrates that biopolitics in postcolonial contexts does not primarily operate through camps or overt states of exception, but through stratified domestic life and moral obligation. In short, the article does not simply underline how pandemics threaten existence, it also reveals how social institutions and norms decide whose life is livable, whose death is speakable, and which forms of care quietly function as control.

The tripartite framework helps to examine the complex relationship between power and the fear of death, as well as the human instinct to survive. It also explains the way this particular relationship is often used to exploit the marginalized sections of society. The article relocates biopower as the intimate economy of care rather than being a state machinery, which transforms death from a natural, arbitrary event

to a more structured and minutely managed presence. It investigates the mechanisms that people use for death management especially in difficult times like the pandemic, as we see in the case of Matangi, Shanta, Rahul and other characters. By critically analysing Gokhale's fictional universe, this study shows how the novel not only chronicles the happenings at the time of the pandemic but also presents different ways in which we may look at the changed world and empathize with people and their ways of reacting in times of crisis. Finally, the article engages with *The Blind Matriarch* as a distinctive text, rather than a representative one, as it explores the domestic and relational dimensions of the pandemic.

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