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Care and Vulnerability in Liminal Spaces: A Study of *The Blind Matriarch*

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we address the nuanced treatises on care in light of Namita Gokhale's The Blind Matriarch (2021). *With the aim of liberating care from its archaic association with feminine attributes and unidirectional dependency, we politicise and situate it alongside universal and continuous vulnerability (Butler, 2009), affecting and assorting human precariousness. Our understanding of care as a discourse entails an investigation of human and non-human relationality in a myriad of spaces. As demonstrated in the aforementioned text, the pandemic evinces the shredding of unvarying lives of the residents of house no. C100- with extended lockdowns and uncertainties hanging in the air, everybody starts noticing the puny. Tapping into these mundane aspects, the characters of the novel can be understood as assemblages interacting with care, all the while exposing the 'universal, inevitable condition of humanity' (Fineman, 2010), i.e., vulnerability at multiple fronts. By employing the concept of 'care' and 'vulnerability studies', this article examines the pandemic as a finite 'event' in both temporal and spatial scope, yet one that encompasses diverse entities. The findings situate Gokhale's* The Blind Matriarch *as a seminal text for understanding the precarious human condition during the pandemic and further advocate for a new episteme that prioritises care and vulnerability as integral to literary analysis.*

Keywords: Care; liminal; materialities of care; pandemic; vulnerability

INTRODUCTION

Arundhati Roy (2020), in the essay titled "The pandemic is a portal," talks about how COVID-19 provided an opening to envision an alternative world. It compelled a selective (privileged) section of society, initially dunked in resilience and endurance, to notice the mundane: "Who can look at anything anymore — a door handle, a cardboard carton, a bag of vegetables — without imagining it swarming with those unseeable, undead, unliving blobs dotted with suction pads waiting to fasten themselves onto our lungs?" (Roy, 2020) Slavjok Zizek, while explicating the harrowing circumstances during the pandemic, wrote, "The only thing that is clear is that the virus will shatter the very foundations of our lives… [and] there is no return to normal, the new "normal" will have to be constructed on the ruins of our old lives" (Žižek, 2020, p. 3).

The world unravelled right at the onset of COVID-19 because the virus did not discriminate; it steadily became a global phenomenon. However, the hierarchical structures of society were privileged and impoverished accordingly. As per the United Nations Report in the context of women, "the pandemic is deepening pre-existing inequalities, exposing vulnerabilities in social, political and economic systems which are in turn amplifying the impacts of the pandemic" (Policy Brief, p. 2). COVID-19 undoubtedly compelled us to exist at the junction of two realities- one that was familiar terrain, comprising the yearning for the passing of the virus, and the other was the obligatory compliance with the changing realities. As Jamjoom (2022) puts it, the pandemic sanctioned "the state of being in-between knowns and unknowns" (1316). Ergo,

COVID-19 provided a liminal window for developing alternatives on individual and communal levels and can be delineated as an 'event' (Arendt, 1985, 1990; Badiou, 2006; Heidegger, 2013) that is commonly understood as a rare and singular occurrence, crisis or rupture that ushers in a radically new formation. It cuts through notions of time, history, and truth, and therefore, effectively, political change and transformation" (Repo & Richter, 2022, p. 221).

Judith Butler (2020), from a phenomenological standpoint, discusses the implications of the virus at length. She iterates, "[I]t is as if the pandemic keeps insisting on the pan, drawing attention to the world, and the world keeps dividing into unequally exposed zones" (p. 6). For them, the pandemic enabled the bearer of life (i.e., air) to be the destroyer of life, thereby linking us and "establishing our ties as both precarious and persistent" (p. 28). They contend that humans nurture suffering and endorse precarity by being vulnerable to others and themselves.

> The pandemic has brought with it this oscillation between world and worlds. Whereas some insist that the pandemic intensifies all that was already wrong with the world, others suggest that the pandemic opens us to a new sense of global interconnection and interdependency. Both propositions are wagers that emerge amid a continuing contemporary disorientation. The pandemic distributes itself in waves and surges, and those correlate phenomenologically with hope and despair.
>
> (Butler, 2020, p. 8)

Taking a cue from Butler's argument, we reconceptualise vulnerability (Butler, 2009, 2020; Held, 2006) as an ally of care and shall take it up in the subsequent section of this paper. The understanding of care partaken in this article marks a departure from its feminist understanding as presented in the works of Nel Noddings (1984). Instead, it builds on the assorted arguments of Maurice Hamington (2004, 2015, 2021, 2024), who considers conceptualising care as a complex and interconnected relationship, and Buse et al. (2018a, 2018b), who focus on the "ordinary, tacit and non-verbal aspects of care practices" (p. 2). Materialities of care refer to "a heuristic device for making visible the mundane and often unnoticed aspects of material culture within health and social care contexts, and exploring interrelations between materials and care in practice" (Buse et al., 2018a, p. 243). These assertions forge a comprehensive understanding of care in pandemic times and shall be further developed in the later section of this article. Additionally, we intend to reclaim liminality as a means of recuperation in COVID-19 times. Liminality can be understood here as "a transitory and precarious phase between stable states, which is marked off by conceptual, spatial and/or temporal barriers, within which individuals, groups and/or objects are set apart from society and/or the everyday" (Skjoldager-Nielsen & Edelman, 2014, p. 33).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, as overwhelming precariousness blanketed the world, writers such as Jodi Picoult, Louise Erdrich, Shobhaa De, and Namita Gokhale documented the impact of COVID-19 through fictional narratives. One of the earliest Indian literary (fictional) responses to the pandemic was *The Blind Matriarch* (2021) by Namita Gokhale. *The Blind Matriarch* caresses the vulnerabilities of residents of C100, an upper-middle-class family. While they continue to care for everyone and everything (individually and collectively) during the nationwide lockdown imposed by the Government of India, their own lives continue to oscillate in a sea of ambivalence, only to encounter a poignant end. The first section of this article presents a comprehensive understanding of care. The second section delineates an unconventional collaboration of care and vulnerability promulgating during COVID-19, and the last section explores the novel landscape of materialities of care by considering the mundane and (in)significant agential objects and spaces.

WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT CARE?

Care, as a term, connotes multiple meanings as it pervades our lives on multiple fronts every day. As Maurice Hamington puts it, "[c]are hinges on the relational ontology (i.e., a fundamental way of being) of humans, as well as an epistemology (i.e., coming to knowledge) of particular others in addition to its moral dimensions" (Hamington, 2024, p. 9). The works of Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings inaugurated Western scholarship around care. Initially, it was understood as a female attribute- an innate quality that belonged to females alone. Another outlook presents care outgrowing the feminist categorisation, where care appeals "[t]o care about what we care for" (Chen, 2015, p. 789). It situates care in the ambit of a dynamic moral framework, with habits, methodologies, and normative considerations as its benefactors.

Consequently, Arthur Kleinman (2009) affirm that Martin Heidegger opted for the term 'care' (Sorge) to delineate the fundamental nature of existence in his work *Sein und Zeit* (1927). Heidegger postulates that 'caring' (sorgen) encapsulates the core dynamics of human existence, involving a dual movement: one is towards others, and the other is towards the future. To be human inadvertently entails aligning oneself with the presence of fellow individuals, thereby inherently involving caregiving and care-receiving. Human existence, with its relational attributes, also necessitates Sorge to signify an orientation toward the future as it involves progression, self-projection, and a continual forward orientation. (sich vorweg schon sein). Heidegger contends that the acts of caring for oneself and others, along with the disposition of 'care-fulness,' define the essence and structure of being a 'human being'; 'care' stands as the vital hallmark of existence (Kleinman, 2009, pp. 159-160). Adding to this philosophical understanding of care, Harry Frankfurt (1982) further talks about how philosophers tend to rationalise "what to care about" (p. 257) profusely among their other epistemological inquiries. According to him:

> Caring, insofar as it consists in guiding oneself along a distinctive course or in a particular manner, presupposes both agency and self-consciousness. It is a matter of being active in a certain way, and the activity is essentially a reflexive one… A person who cares about something is, as it were, invested in it. He identifies himself with what he cares about in the sense that makes him vulnerable to losses and susceptible to benefits depending upon whether what he cares about is diminished or enhanced.
>
> (Frankfurt, 1982, p. 260)

In contrast, Agnieszka Jaworska (2007) challenges Frankfurt's view by presenting two illustrative examples that question the essentialisation of reflectivity in conceptions of caring. She argues that genuine care does not necessarily depend on higher-order reflective capacities but can be grounded in emotionally engaged and contextually responsive forms of attachment. She goes on to emphasise the emotional engagements pertaining to oneself as well as others because "[w]hen we think about caring, among other things, we certainly think about the ways people are caught up in what they care about" (May, 2023, 18). However, the recent and ongoing scholarship on care (Bellacasa, 2017; Buse et al., 2018a; Llanera, 2019) has rendered it a mammoth postulation encompassing multifaceted implications that influence the social, moral, emotional, and political milieu. While situating care "at the heart of debates on how we reproduce society" (Raghuram, 2016, p. 514), Parvati Raghuram lists the diverse scholarship on care:

> Care theorists and policy makers have discussed a number of issues relating to care, such as the economics of care (Fraser, 2014); the relationship between choice and need (Mol, 2008); who deserves care (Clarke, 2005); and how these questions relate to issues of justice (Engster, 2005). Of particular interest to disability studies scholars are concerns over the relationship between autonomy and dependence (see, for instance, Kröger, 2009; Shakespeare, 2006) and for an excellent analysis of the tensions between feminism and disability perspectives on care (Kelly, 2013) and hence to both moral philosophy and social practice (Conradi, 2015). This work on care has provided a route to thinking beyond capitalism (Fraser, 2014) and masculinism (Gilligan, 1982), challenging dominant structures of gendered and classed inequality in the world.
>
> (p. 514)

Subsequently, Raghuram surmises that 'care thinking' demonstrates a political undertaking that endeavours to move past the limitations of existing theories by challenging the established norms of what the supposed ideal world should be. A similar line of argument has been postulated in the work of Rummery and Fine (2012). Taking into account the definition provided by Joan Tronto (2013, p. 103), they reckon care is an evolving social phenomenon. They go on to describe the three indispensable facets of care: feelings/emotions, physical work, and social relationships. Therefore, care transcends boundaries and is pervasive in nature; it affects and is affected by the corporeal world.

LAYOUTS OF CARE AND VULNERABILITY IN PRECARIOUS TIMES

Described by Virginia Held as "the most deeply fundamental value" (2006, p.17), care, for some theorists, reinforces dependency (Shakespeare, 2006; Tronto, 1993, 1995) and is "necessarily relational" (Tronto, 1993, p. 282). It is, however, not limited to the dyadic relationship of caregiving and care-receiving. In his paper titled "Rethinking Care Theory: The Practice of Care," Daniel Engster characterises care as a form of ungendered "reproductive labour" (2005, p. 51) serving three primary objectives. Firstly, care warrants individual survival by looking after the biological requirements essential for basic sustenance and functioning. Secondly, it promotes development by catering to others' core competencies. Lastly, it contributes to social production by helping individuals evade or alleviate suffering and pain and pursue gratifying lives. *The Blind Matriarch* is an exemplary text demonstrating these objectives. Every resident of C100 takes care of themselves on a regular basis- they try to remain busy and look out for each other at the same time to the possible extent. In the initial pages of the novel, Shanta chooses to rest after the police visit and decides to visit her mother the next day. Matangi Ma breaches her own schedule and sleeps whenever she feels exhausted. We find these characters receiving aid whenever required- Matangi Ma has Lali to assist her day in and day out. Shanta has Munni to help her with "cooking up a storm" (Gokhale, 2021, p. 25). However, they reciprocate and contribute to the social milieu as well: Shanta cooks for her NGO Women for Peace for as long as the government permits it; Matangi Ma allows Lali to keep her nephew Pappo/Riyaz during the lockdown; and Suryaveer finally reveals the identity of Samir's biological parents to him and helps him reconnect with his relatives.

Owing to its affective demeanour, care entails networks of relationships that might be extended (beyond caregiving and care-receiving relationships), disseminated (care involving friends, family, humanity), monetised (palliative care, geriatric care, nursing care), and so on and so forth. Care fosters a universal grid of interdependencies, as it encompasses every facet of day-to-day life activities. So, why is there a manifold lack at the familial, communal, national, and universal levels? There can be no single but a plethora of gendered social and political reasons for abridging the connotation of care. Andreas Chatzidakis, Jamie Hakim, Jo Littler, Catherine

Rottenberg, and Lynne Segal in *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* (2020) dissent against the ongoing curtailing of care as a mere service, industry, and choice. To unravel the "contemporary hierarchies of care in the direction of radical egalitarianism" (p. 34) and deal with the "crisis of care" (p. 14), Chatzidakis et al. propose the ethics of "promiscuous care" (p. 30). Promiscuous care fosters multidirectional networks of care that operate at both individual and community levels, extending beyond conventional human-centred frameworks and subsequently contributing to the politicisation of care. It encourages the assimilation of diverse forms of care- towards humans, non-humans, and environments alike- thereby challenging hierarchical or exclusionary notions of who or what deserves attention and support. By promoting care that is "valued, recognised, and resourced equally, according to their needs or ongoing sustainability" (p. 34), promiscuous care envisions an ethics grounded in reciprocity and interdependence. Such an approach democratises care, redistributing it across species, systems, and relations, and acknowledges that sustaining life and wellbeing requires a collective, non-hierarchical commitment to mutual flourishing. We can easily highlight promiscuous care in several (in)consequential instances. When Satish finds Ritika distressed after her official conference call, he asks, "Should I make you some tea, sweetheart?... You look troubled" (Gokhale, 2021, p. 54). When Munni is restless after Shanta shifts to Matangi's floor to take care of her, she cooks biryani for Suryaveer and the others. Despite Matangi's sickness, she instructs Shanta to hand over the photographs that Rahul wanted for his family tree project. In another instance, when the famous Bollywood actor Irrfan Khan died, Shanta felt the loss to be personal until Matangi Ma mourned her wearisome life without vision. Matangi was with her grandchild, Rahul, when she came across the news of another Bollywood actor, Rishi Kapoor's death. She began praying silently, "Let me die now…Let me gift my remaining years to this beloved boy [Rahul]. May he live to be a hundred years, or more. But take me away. I have lived enough" (p. 106).

Subsequently, in this article, we situate our understanding of care alongside the concept of vulnerability. Used interchangeably with weakness and fragility, vulnerability is often laden with negative connotations (Office for Human Research Protections, 2022; Proag, 2014; Upton, 2006). An alternative perspective renders vulnerability susceptible, open, and receptive, making it "a universal, inevitable, enduring aspect of the human" (Fineman, 2010, p. 8). Care spurts from the multifarious engagements and numerous everyday social relationships, and vulnerability is a cardinal characteristic of human existence. Therefore, by identifying vulnerability as "an ontological condition of human embodiment" (Dev & Mishra, 2023, p. 113) and adhering to this line of thought, we posit that vulnerability is an ally of care. The connection between care and vulnerability has predominantly been jeopardised because of the shared negative connotation, i.e., only vulnerable entities demand/require care. As Jenine Wiles (2011) contends, "[t]hose whose vulnerability is in a sense 'marked out' through the need to receive care, which means their vulnerability cannot be normalised, hidden, or 'denied', must negotiate with these pervasive social norms that vulnerability is weakness" (p. 579). Ergo, as we redefine and broaden the concept of care in this paper, vulnerability emerges as an integral aspect of care, and conversely, care becomes inseparable from vulnerability. Both vulnerability and care highlight the susceptibility and embrace the inherent precariousness of both humans and non-humans. The anecdotes of COVID-19 strengthen this understanding further. We see Shanta offering food to the policewoman while she is already cooking for her NGO. When she went out to look for her cat, Trump, she found a family of three (man, woman, and child) hiding in the bushes for the night. She cared enough to enquire if they had eaten anything. Upon knowing their fleeing situation, she immediately said, "Stay here, behind the bushes… I don't want the security guard to catch sight of you. I will return

with some food for your journey to Bhadauli" (Gokhale, 2021, p. 65). In the novel, we find several other incidents where it is impossible to dissociate care from vulnerability. Munni, Shanta's house help, leads a relatively safer life than most people. She does not have to migrate to her native land. Yet, she is vulnerable to the virus and the precarious situations that both her families (the one she is connected to by blood and the other that she is associated with by choice) are subjected to. She expresses her qualms in one of her conversations with Suryaveer: “This is my home, and Shanta didi and this cat are my family. But I have a son, a daughter-in-law, and grandchildren. I worry about their safety. day and night, day and night, I worry about their safety" (p. 137). Likewise, the self-isolation tapped on Shanta's zen, indicating the mesh of care and vulnerability. While ensuring that Matangi is nursed back to health properly, she begins to feel "claustrophobic and ill-tempered and snappy" (p. 146). Even though she was in the same building, "she missed her flat, the comfort of her room. She missed the comfort of her room. She missed Trump. She missed Munni" (p. 146). A similar outburst of intertwined care and vulnerability is observed in Ritika's demeanour. She makes calls for her hairdresser's sick child. When she receives her "much-delayed dues" (p. 149), she immediately pays for one year of her mother's care in advance and feels relieved. Due to practical reasons (her steady income and relatively stable financial situation), she always paid for her mother’s care on a monthly basis. However, the pandemic invited precarity and a rickety job situation, forcing Ritika to reconsider her actions and assertions.

> She had earlier always paid on a monthly basis, convincing herself that this was the more practical thing to do. If her mother were to pass away, to suddenly drop dead, it would be difficult and also ungracious to push for a refund. “Better to pay month by month, and take it as it comes,” she had told herself. It was an enormous mental relief to have paid up for a year. Her duties were now confined to weekly phone calls, as travel seemed an almost impossible option in the year ahead. Unless.
>
> (p. 150)

The Blind Matriarch emphasises the unwarranted dynamics of care and interconnected vulnerabilities within mother-daughter relationships. Munni kills her father for killing her mother, and ever since then, she has been on the run. Shanta loves her mother, and despite feeling claustrophobic, she stays with Matangi until she gets better. Ritika never shared an intimate bond with her parents, yet she deposits money in advance so that her mother continues to receive care without any hindrance. These intertwined relationships comprise the significant and the 'taken for granted,' which will be discussed in the next section.

MATERIALITIES OF CARE

Bruno Latour (1987, 1993, 1996), a prominent French sociologist, anthropologist, and philosopher, marked a departure from the conventional distinction between natural and social sciences, redirecting attention to materiality and the role of non-human entities in determining social interactions. With "actants" (comprising human and non-human entities) shaping the social milieu, he advocates for an interconnected world where materialities actively contribute to constructing social meaning and practices. Building upon his effort to integrate materiality into the social sciences, where technologies, objects, and other similar entities are indispensable and actively contribute to society, we can situate materiality as a requisite in shaping social interactions, identities, and practices. Daniel Miller (1987) also upholds the association of the 'materiality of the artefact' and the 'materiality of space' (p. 121) as individuals conjure a world intertwined with material culture. Furthermore, Foucault and Miskowiec (1986) offer numerous

examples of architectural forms that literally emplace mundane embodied practices, giving rise to his idea of the heterotopic qualities of hybrid and contested spaces and the multiplicities of meaning inscribed onto social spaces" (Martin et al., 2015, p. 1008).

Furthermore, Christina Buse, Daryl Martin, and Sarah Nettleton, in their *Materialities of Care: Encountering Health and Illness Through Artefacts and Architecture* (2018), expand on our reception of spatial dimensions, temporal aspects, and care practices by engaging with care "as felt and lived in and through such mundane practices" (Latimer, 2018, p. 137). Materialities of care underscore the significance of the mundane by foregrounding them in the relational orbit of objects, spatiality, and temporality. It involves recognising the significance of tangible (materialities) and their active roles (agency) within specific physical contexts (spatiality). This approach acknowledges that the physical aspects of care environments and tools contribute significantly to the overall care experience. In *The Blind Matriarch,* we find many instances establishing the significance of agential objects in the lives of the residents of C100 in pandemic times. Matangi's handkerchief serves as a reminder of the past that she cannot let go of.

> She reached for the handkerchief under her pillow, tracing the pattern of embroidered flowers with her fingers. Matangi's mother had given her an embroidery kit and a book on the 'how-tos' of various styles of embroidery…As a teenager, she had spent long hours embroidering twelve cambric handkerchiefs, intended as a part of her wedding trousseau. She had dreamt of how her husband would delight in and compliment her artistry, the flowers and birds she conjured up with needle and thread. Perhaps she would make special ones for him, monogrammed with his name. Three of the handkerchiefs had miraculously survived- they had remained her companions through those years of pain and torture, consoling her, wiping her tears.
>
> (pp. 7-8)

The emphasis on the material aspect delineates humans as assemblages who affect and are affected by non-human entities as they coproduce their everyday reality. When Samir receives his mother's "gold chain, with a gold cross" (p. 72) from Matangi, he immediately returns to his room, takes out his mother's photograph, lights a candle, and says, "'So, here I am Mummy…Your son Samir.' He held the gold chain with the diamond cross in his hand, feeling the weight of it" (p. 72). He later wears that gold chain, and "the gold, cold yet warm, felt unfamiliar against his skin" (p. 73). Here, the gold chain, a material object, tethers Samir and his mother, Samira. Similarly, when Suryaveer stumbles upon Debiprasad Chattopadhyay's *Lokayata*, given to him by his friend and Samir's uncle, Aniruddha Jha (p. 121), he realises that he should introduce Samir to his paternal uncle. We also find Samir's biological uncle bombarding him with emails, incessantly sharing photographs of their family with the motive of familiarising him with his biological relatives. These material objects, coupled with the coronavirus (a non-human entity), force people to stay indoors, accentuating the interconnectedness of the family. The novel projects the significance of liminal spaces during the lockdown, as explored in the following section, with C100 echoing the strength and dynamics of familial bonds.

PANDEMIC AS A WAGON OF LIMINAL SPACE

Liminality, derived from the Latin term 'limen', refers to 'threshold. It was first used by Arnold van Gennep (1960) in his description of a ritual structure comprising separation, transition (or liminality), and incorporation. Victor Turner (1980), taking a cue from van Gennep's arguments, emphasised that liminality breaches the pre-existing social context because of its spatiotemporal detachment and simultaneously redefines an individual's social framework by being a realm of uncertainty. In the words of Bjørn Thomassen (2014), "Liminality is…a paradoxical state, both at

the individual and the societal level. At the level of the individual, it is the destruction of identity, while at the level of society it involves the suspension of the structure of social order" (p. 92). Therefore, liminality, trespassing all possible absolutes, can be understood as "the moment between moments, and the place between places" (Bell, 2021, p. 81). It cannot be reduced to a mere transitioning period in which one partakes to reach a fixed goal. Jamjoom (2022) has described how other researchers, preceding her, employed liminality to explore their pandemic experiences (Bell, 2021; Cai et al., 2021; Lee, 2021). She artistically situates her exploration of the pandemic as a liminal space by adjoining her ten-kilometre journey (her autoethnographic account) with the fusion of precarity and pandemic. With each kilometre, she provides "a passage into various emotions, thoughts, and spaces"(Jamjoom, 2022, p. 1318). For instance, she questions her tumultuous identity, the blurring of multiple boundaries with amplified domestic responsibilities, contested motherhood, a distorted temporal sensibility with a severed connection to the physical world, and heightened expectations of productivity and performance. For her tenth kilometre, she proclaims,

> [t]here is no finish line… COVID-19 is not gone (yet?) and will continue to be here for the foreseeable future. The prolonged exhaustion from the run is intensified because... There are no certainties. What will the next few months look like? I'm not sure. Where will I be? I'm not sure. The liminal passage from the run is still there, permeating its way into my pandemic reality.
>
> (Jamjoom, 2022, p. 1326)

A similar angst be found in the pages of the novel, which upholds the idea of liminality- the four-storeyed building with one subset of Matangi's family stationed at every floor with the staircase, resonating Bhabha's (1994) example of the stairwell as a liminal space, providing "the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities" (p. 5). On several occasions, we find Rahul, Ritika, and Samir lurking on the staircase. When Matangi is bedridden, the entire family, except Shanta and Lali, keeps track of Matangi's health from the staircase because of the pandemic. When observed through a social and cultural lens, the state of in-betweenness and ambivalence is inherent to the perpetual state of being, as liminality extends beyond mere transition (Bhabha, 1984). Consequently, identities may be liminal, hybrid, complex, and poised between various locations and frameworks.

According to Edward H. Powley (2009), "Liminal suspension is the alteration of relational structures and the emergence of new relational patterns. That is, suspended relational structures encouraged new and different kinds of interaction among organisation members – interactions that would not have occurred otherwise" (Powley 1298). The veranda serves as a liminal space as it captures in-between instances and 'relational structures' in *The Blind Matriarch*: Riyaz/Pappo stays briefly with Lali and Matangi; Ritika steps out every now and then to smoke a cigarette; Matangi keeps taking occasional walks and sings "to the moon she could not see" (Gokhale, 2021, p. 18). It is due to the pandemic that Shanta comes into contact with Babli Mohan, or those migrant labourers, and decides to end her procrastination, ultimately choosing to live her life in the mountains towards the end of the novel. It was during the pandemic when "The 'Janta Curfew' that the prime minister had imposed" (p. 34) forced people to stay in a liminal space of their homes. Subsequently, these liminal situations became an everyday reality because of a single 'event '- the COVID-19 pandemic, which served as a 'portal' (Roy). In this regard, Drucilla K. Barker, building on Arundhati Roy's arguments, says, "…on the other side of the portal, a world freed from the carcasses of prejudice and hatred requires that we put social reproduction at the centre" (28). Adhering to Gilles Deleuze's theorisation, "events are not extraordinary at all – all incorporeal effects that unfold motions and activity as a result of the interaction between bodies are events"

(Repo & Richter, 2022, p. 227). It is true that COVID-19 took the 'worlds' (Butler, 2022) by surprise and sanctioned new ways of living and surviving while affecting the mundane simultaneously.

Pandemic as an 'event' enabled multitudes of juxtaposition- "Instead of confining ourselves, we feel confined primarily by force, even if for the sake of our own welfare. We experience isolation as a deprivation, even when it is a protection" (Nancy, 2020). In the words of Repo and Richter (2022):

> The pandemic's political quality is here underpinned by its status as an event. Both the reproductive and the rupturing interpretation of the pandemic assume that it is indeed an event, that it is something exceptional and reveals or unfolds something unique that political thought must capture, analyse and interpret.
>
> (p. 224)

Repo and Richter further build on Deleuze's understanding of events as 'quasi-causes' (Deleuze, 1990, p. 6)- they are perpetually conditioned and consolidated in material as well as epistemic entities, all the while emanating a productive force that is distinct from its fundamental components. However, the most apposite understanding of the pandemic as an 'event' can be derived from Michel Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (1972). While advocating "discourse as regular series and distinct events" (Foucault 231), it situates any event as a peculiar response to a spatio-temporal problem. The exploration of liminality as an 'event' during the pandemic serves as a means to expand the scope of involvement by examining how complications are identified and addressed by uncovering concealed mechanisms and inconsistencies.

TOWARDS A NEW EPISTEME

In many ways, the pandemic stirred the 'worlds' (Butler, 2022) from their haze of slumber by resurfacing the unruly and conformist idiosyncrasies pertaining to the class and caste divide (especially in the Indian context); the pandemic affected everyone, as the virus did not abide by social structures. When "care is a value with the widest possible social implications" (Held, 2006, p. 19), then "[w]hy are the principles of reciprocity and mutual care, which are the basis of other social formations, seemingly so absent…? What can we do to center those principles here and now?" (Barker, 2020, p. 34) Jamjoom (2022), while emphasising the absence of reflection and introspection, posits relocating the focus to care and its ethical concerns. For Raghunathan, "The ability to bring together emotive, moral and political registers has meant that care offers a route into thinking ethically about relationships between self and others – both proximate and distant" (Raghuram, 2016, p. 514). Analogously, Meenakshi Gigi Durham (2024) contends that feminist care ethics "has transformational potential for a field designed to investigate and challenge processes of power, especially those processes that create and sustain embodied vulnerability" (p. 9).

Building on this premise by situating care alongside vulnerability, this article presented a novel understanding of care by considering the overlooked and the mundane. The pandemic rendered us all vulnerable in multifarious ways, thereby forcing us to reconsider our actions, priorities and inhibitions. The paper further delved into the expansive domain of materialities to sieve the diverse ways in which care can be comprehended. It, therefore, inscribes a gradual drift towards a new episteme within the literary analysis that emphasises care and vulnerability with its

materialistic bearings as integral components. The article further studied the pandemic as an 'event' through the lens of liminality. Despite being a fictional account, *The Blind Matriarch* bespoke the upheavals of an upper-middle-class family stationed in a metropolitan city during the pandemic. Gokhale paints a picture of the pandemic as a force that drew families closer together, even as the larger social structure gradually began to collapse (Sharmila & Sivakumar, 2025, p. 246). With episodic ruptures of the past and the frailties of the future, the novel can be described as an assemblage of pandemic spells, comprising fear, uncertainty, insecurity, hope, care, and vulnerability.

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