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VOICING THE VOICELESS: A STUDY OF GOGU SHYAMALA'S FATHER MAY BE AN ELEPHANT AND MOTHER ONLY A SMALL BASKET, BUT...

¹KOMAL & ²DR. BIJENDER SINGH

¹Research Scholar, Department of English Indira Gandhi University Meerpur, Rewari (Haryana)

Email Id: komalkalra1105@gmail.com

²Associate Professor, Department of English Indira Gandhi University Meerpur, Rewari (Haryana)

Email Id: bijendersingh8t@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Even after seventy-five years of independence, women in India are still interpellated as others. They cannot consider themselves decolonized as for them colonial masters are quite present in the form of Patriarchy, not only in society but even at home. Women are always compelled to remain in the periphery designed by Patriarchy, as a result always marginalized on the axes of caste and gender. However, the condition of upper-caste women is better to some extent than Dalit women. Dalit women are treated as outcasts not only by patriarchy, but upper caste women also consider them inferior. They have very little approach to the basic means of livelihood. Being Untouchable or outcast, they have to face different kinds of atrocities. They are forced to do menial work like scavenging. To throw light on the heart rendering conditions of Dalit women the present research triesto critically examine Gogu Shyamala's short story collection Father Maybe an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, but... which focuses on the condition of Dalits, especially Dalit women and their position in the phallogocentric society. The focus of the paper will remain on the multiplicity of oppression and atrocities suffered by Dalit women which arise out of the intersection of their caste, class, and gender identity, and how sexual violence is central to caste domination.

KEYWORDS: Patriarchy, Outcaste, Subaltern, Oppression, Violence.

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INTRODUCTION:

India emerges as one of the world's largest democratic countries but is ironically divided into a caste-structured society. In India, we find a large section of people living a life as 'subaltern' or 'other'. The prevailing caste system in India has set apart thousands of subalterns from the mainstream of culture to a subhuman and debased existence. In the words of Archana Thakur "Caste system is an integral part of Indian society and now it seems almost impossible to do away with this obnoxious practice" (Thakur 26). The caste system is such an evil that hinders the progress of society by giving different treatment to its citizens. The upper caste is privileged with all types of resources while outcast people are struggled to fulfill their basic requirements. In India caste is not just a social practice but is a question of power. As Diane Mines says "Caste is a mode of social differentiation. It is a mode of power, a mode of action" (3). Indian society is divided into four 'varnas' and the lowest of the low in this varna hierarchy are known as Untouchable. Although, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar addressed untouchables as a 'depressed class' while Mahatma Gandhi denoted them as 'Harijan' means children of a lord. Despite these, there are several other names given to them such as Dalit, untouchable, depressed class, schedule caste, outcaste, harijan, etc. But now the question is that however society designated them with different synonyms, is this naming process bring any significant change in their social status? And the answer is No. "no matter what labels they have been given over time, one thing has remained constant and that is their oppression... they might earn money, but to live a respectable life is still a faraway dream for most of the Dalit community" (26). On one side we desire to grab the title of a developed nation rather than a developing country, on the other hand, we constrain ourselves with the shackles of hierarchy (caste). According to Ambedkar, "There can't be a more degrading system of social organization than the caste system... it is the system that deadens, paralysis, and cripples the people from helpful activity" (25). In a country like India "Your life is your caste; your caste is your life" (3) one can change religion but not caste'.

On contrary, if we throw light on the state of Dalit women their condition is even worse. Because they are double oppressed. Although Dalit men face oppression in casteist society, at home they rule like a king. In the words of Bama "they... control their women, rule over them and find their pleasure. Within the home, they lay down the law, their world is scripture" (59). But comparatively, the life of Dalit women is most humiliating. In this context, Ambedkar's example of a pyramid is quite apt. He structured Hindu society as a pyramid. In this structure, brahmins are placed at the top and Dalits at the bottom. But, women in general are at the bottom in their respective categories. Thus, Dalit women are at the lowest of the low rung of the hierarchy. Consequently, Dalit women are the most deprived section of Indian society triple marginalized firstly, being Dalit, secondly, being a woman, and thirdly, being Dalit women. Annie Namala argues that "Dalit women are the Dalits among the Dalits,

the thrice marginalized and thrice alienated” (27) to quote Archana Thakur. On the other hand, a lack of economic strength increases their pain. Kamble argues “Our place was in the garbage pits outside the village, where everyone threw away their waste... we ate the leftover without complaining and labored for others” (49). Thus, hunger is like a monster for the outcaste community. Dalit women in India are still forced to live in an extremely adverse situation, without land or excess to better education or employment, and are forbidden to wear even some modern outfits. As Sujatha Gidla argues “Untouchable men and women were traditionally forced to wear loin cloths” (17). Further, she argues “Every day in an Indian newspaper you can read of an untouchable beaten or killed for wearing sandals, for riding a bicycle” (2).

Gogu Shyamala’s aggregation of short narratives is an amalgamation of virtuous as well as immoral events occurring in the Madiga (dalit caste) community of Telangana state. In her writings, her primary focus remains on the marginalization, oppression, and suppression of Dalit women within and outside the casteist community. Her short story entitled “Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket but...” portrays a very harsh but true picture of patriarchy that always compels women to remain on the periphery. The narrator of the story is a small Madiga girl. She tells how her mother works hard to meet both ends in the long absence of her father. Although sometimes they have to sleep without food, their eyes always imagine a sweet dream “...next year father will come back from the town. He will pay back the debts” (Shyamala 19) and then their all sufferings will end automatically. However, the father so-called head of the family coming didn’t bring any soothing effect on their suffering but rather aggravates their pain. In his absence, although they don’t have enough food to satisfy their hunger, or cloth to wrap their bodies, or even the tenant couldn’t save them from the wrath of the weather but still they were living a peaceful life with a hope of a better future at the arrival of the father. But his presence made their life worse than hell. He usually beats her wife blue and black for not giving him cash (which she saved to fulfill the daily needs) to buy toddy (alcohol). At her provocation and daring to refuse money, he ambushes her as his man ego heart “You’ve learned to talk! What? Have I seen everything? How do I know what you have done?” (Shyamala 24). The daughter of Balappanarrates by taking the example of her mother the very fate of every Dalit woman which in one and another way ends with a beating, “He kicked her hard on her back. My younger brother and I screamed...Father beat her like she was cattle. She was crying, ‘Oh! Mother! I am dead, he’ll take my life. But father didn’t stop...We are also scared that Mother might die” (24). The narrator's baba, Balappa, has unreasonable expectations while being fully aware of his clan's financial situation. And he questions his wife's fidelity because she must go outside to work and beats her ruthlessly like an animal. Surprisingly, the same person that run away long ago to leave their children alone devastated now arises questions about the loyalty of her wife. He believes that she can’t run away like him as he tied tali around her neck and so he is her swami and can do with her whatever he wants. Paradoxically, patriarchy is a system of unequal power relations that

indulgence men over women. Gerda Lerner in her book entitled *The Creation of Patriarchy* defines it as “...manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general. It implies that men hold power in all the important institutions of society and the women are deprived of access to such power” (239). The narrator’s mother portrays the life of every dalit woman because all the women of the Dalit community at different spaces and times have the same articulation, they have to suffer on account of being poor, for being a woman, and more adversely for being a Dalit woman. No doubt, Dalit men are themselves impoverished of numerous rights because of getting birth into the dalit clan and economically underprivileged yet they don’t hesitate to use physical force against their spouses whom they view as subordinate.

Shyamala’s other two short stories entitled *Raw Wound* and *But Why Shouldn’t a Baidla Woman Ask for Her Land?* brings forth the evil practice of making dalit beautiful young girls Devdasi. Devdasi is a “. . . Sanskrit word, which literary meaning in translation is ‘female slave of God’” (Shingal 108). Jogini (Devdasi) is a godly proselyte in which village panches (patels) marry off a young Dalit girl to a village deity, and she is trained to remain as a devotee in the feet of God her whole life. She can’t marry a man but has to make happy everyman in her society. Any man from the village can come any time and ask her for physical gratification and she has no right to refuse whether she is willing or not. Another story *Raw Wound* talks about Balappa, a poor father who risks not only his life but his means of livelihood, a small piece of land also to save her daughter Shyamamma from the clutches of the cruel inhuman practice of becoming ‘Jogini’ by the village Patels. From very early, he and his family know very well that the village heads have had an eye on their beautiful daughter. So, to rescue her from becoming a concubine in the name of God he sends his daughter to a girl hostel. He requests the hostel warden by placing his head cloth on her feet. He wails and describes the whole matter as

“The patel will take her as his woman in the name of God, with the approval of all the upper castes and the priest in the village. She will then be available to every man in the village in the god’s name! I brought her here without the knowledge of the elders as soon as I heard of this decision” (Shyamala 141).

Though, when village high men become aware of Balappa’s dare to challenge the rituals, they beat and abused him “Balappa, you son of a bitch! Sending your daughter to study, are you? Don’t you know the ways of the village, you bastard?... How dare you stop a tradition that we have upheld in the village for so long, you ignorant fool?” (141). They beat him to a pulp and then in a state of half-consciousness they forcibly take his dactylogram on a paper and announce that Balappa’s piece of land now appertains to village panchayat, and he is declared as excommunicated from the village and question him along with his brood to leave the village for

forever by giving him bus fare. Although, they leave their motherland heartbroken. Their pain of dislocation and uprootedness is unbearable, but they wipe their tears with the satisfaction that they rescued from getting lost in the obscurity of darkness.

In a nutshell, we can say that those savarn Samaj consider themselves defiled by the mere shadow of a Dalit man and don't even speculate before the molestation of a Dalit woman. Gidla argues that "I knew the cross-eyed, a drooly-mouthed man was fucking my aunt, making children with them, but not marrying them" (Gidla 4). Upper-caste man considers it prestigious to have a mistress. They can accept a woman from the dalit community concubine or devadasi but can't accept her as their wife. This system can be easily understood by taking the reference to another short story entitled A Beauteous Light which shows clearly how a Brahmin boy considers polluted for his insolence in thinking to marry a Dalit girl. And the same swaran people do not think even a single time before touching her here and there. Arundhati Roy argued, "Men of the privileged caste had undisputed rights over bodies of untouchable women. Love is polluting, Rape is pure. In many parts of India, much of it continues to this day" (25). In a conclusion, we may state that protecting women's safety and security is essential if a country truly wants to progress.

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