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Dalit Feminism:

A New Strategy in the Selected Short Stories of Gogu Shyamala's
Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But...

Balande Chandoba Narsing, M. Phil./ Ph.D. Research Scholar



Gogu Shyamala

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Abstract

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This paper is an attempt to project how the Dalit writers have been acquiring and creating a space for themselves in the literary world which was once denied to them. Gogu Shyamala demonstrates differences rather than subsuming to the universalized mainstream practises of so-called 'feminism'. How the Dalit feminists have been maintaining their differences is also analysed in this paper.

Lived Experiences

Generally Dalit men and women writers write about their 'lived experiences' thereby forming a new discourse. The objective of this paper is to bring to light how Gogu Shyamala has depicted the inhuman practices such as 'brutal patriarchy', 'violence within domestic life' and 'discrimination on the basis of gender and caste' through her short stories.

Differences in Feminism

This paper is an attempt to project how Gogu Shyamala demonstrates differences rather than subsuming to the universalized mainstream practises of the so-called 'feminism' through her writing. Dalit writers have been shaping their literary works with a consciousness of maintaining their uniqueness. Generally Dalit men and women writers write about their 'lived experiences'. And sometimes these lived experiences form a new discourse. Urmila Pawar in Maharashtra, Bama in Tamil Nadu, and Gogu Shyamala in Andhra Pradesh have contributed much to the Dalit feminist movement. The issues that have been brought to light by Dalit feminists are the 'brutal patriarchy', 'violence within domestic life' and 'discrimination on the basis of gender and caste'.

Questioning the Mainstream Literary Theories

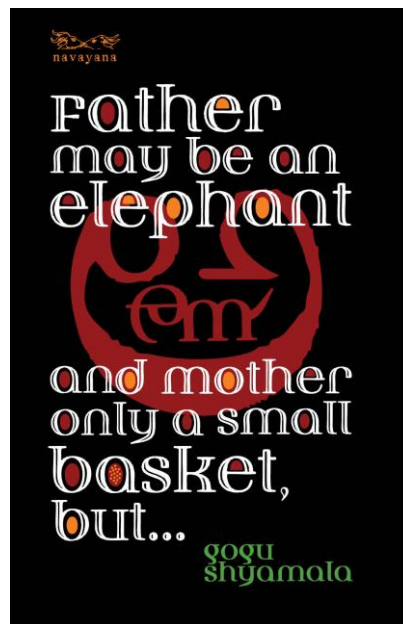
Generally Dalit literature is considered to be questioning the mainstream literary theories and the upper caste ideology. It brings to light the neglected and the ignored aspects of life. The sweeping statements made in the West i.e. 'All women are Niggers.' was blindly put into Indian context calling 'All women are Dalits'. But here one should not forget that the "social status of the upper caste woman is never like that of Dalit men or women". (Ghosh 57) It is difficult to trace the origin of Dalit Feminism but according to Sharmila Rege "In the early nineties, Dalit feminism articulation especially on the issue of quotas within quotas, challenged the conceptions of 'genderless caste' and 'casteless gender'". (Rege 3) It emerged

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with a powerful voice in the nineties. In India there has often been a critique of the feminism of the 1970s for being brahmanical in its theory and practice. (Rege 3) Dalit Feminist “aims at actively participating in eradicating all forms of violence, intolerance hierarchy and discrimination in society. An effective way of achieving this ideal is to take these ‘differences’ seriously and engage with the politics of the difference.” (Ghosh 57-58) Therefore Dalit writing celebrates its differences by projecting the social evils and inhuman practices.



Depiction of the Day-to-day Struggle

Gogu Shyamala, a distinguished Dalit writer from Andhra Pradesh who writes in Telugu is known for her depiction of the day today struggle of the Dalit woman through her short story collection *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But...*

Themes

Her short story ‘Raw Wound’ unveils a different kind of social problem which has hardly been seen as a problem. This issue can be the one she has seen in or around her. Through this short story she has projected how the rustic tradition has forcefully been imposed on the uneducated Dalits in the name of ritual or work of god. There is a girl, Syamma, from Madiga community, who has been forced to become a jogini. Jogini is a woman who is devoted to god, who is seen as a wife of the whole village. She is good at studies and her father Balappa, though uneducated, seems to have enough ability to

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distinguish between good and bad. Initially the father of the girl is informed by the Patel that the present jogini is too old to carry out her practices and therefore they need to make his daughter as a new jogini. Balappa is shocked to listen to it. But he has no other way; he is forced to follow the orders by the Patel. But by disobeying the Patel he dares to send his daughter to the Hostel for studying further. After some time the Patel with all the other reputed men in village takes the decision either to make the father force his daughter to become the jogini, or make him leave the village.

Conflicts

There have always been threats to Dalit lives in the villages. Most of the times, the upper caste people impose their decisions on the dalits without having any concern for them. A caste Hindu does not want a Dalit girl to get herself educated. They are afraid if they get educated there would be a great threat to their position. The Patel tries to convince Balappa by telling how education would be of no use to her. He mentions that her becoming jogini would solve the problem of the whole village; therefore, it is very much needed to make her the jogini. But her father does not seem to step easily into this kind of trapping. And the Patel gets angry and beats him. He bleeds and is about to die, but does not accept the Patel's decision. He is even ready to leave his house, land and village for a better future for his daughter.

Enforcement of Jogini System

Though the jogini system has been banned by the government laws, the so-called government in the village, including the Sarpanch want this practice to be continued. In villages they are the law. Dalit feminism gives thought to such kinds of differences of a particular group, rather than believing in universal problems of the women. This is the problem and a threat that Dalit woman is always facing. This problem was never addressed by the universalised notion of Feminism or the mainstream feminism. These problems are very much present in society, but hardly taken into account. Therefore, there emerged a distinct kind of feminism that depicts the actual problem of Dalit women through their writing. Gogu Shyamala can be seen as the Dalit feminist who has given voice to these problems that women are facing at the ground level. Here the oppressors are the Hindu men and women.

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Is Compartmentalization Justified?

We generally understand that this kind of compartmentalisation is something unnecessary and all women face the similar problems. But through 'Raw Wound' Gogu Shyamala has depicted a crucial factor. When Balappa is beaten, is bleeding and needs water, his wife goes to a Patel's wife asking for water. If a woman understands other women irrespective of caste, and feels any compassion, she should help her out. But she denies her even the little water she asks for.

Resistance to Traditional Norm – The Story of Balamma

In her other short story 'Tataki Wins Again' a resistance to the traditionally accepted norm is realistically depicted. In Indian society Dalit women's harassment and molestation is not something new. It was normalised to such an extent that this kind of activity is hardly seen as a crime. Most of such cases go undocumented, unregistered. But through Balamma, Gogu Shyamala in 'Tataki Wins Again' has rejected this normalised notion. Dora, the landlord, has maintained his power and supremacy in the whole village. He has very strategically snatched back the land which had officially been given to Dalit farmers through Bhoodan movement.

Balamma, an eleven year old girl, goes to water her land even before dawn, and this makes the neighbouring landlord angry because he could not get water for his land. Through this short story Gogu Shyamala has tried to bring a picture before us that this kind of conflict can be inherited from one generation to another. Dora's grandfather had a clash with Balamma's great grandfather and now the Dora Tirumal Rao tries to take revenge. Balamma can be seen as a representative of the modern Dalit woman who can no longer be tied in the name of tradition and convention. When the Dora tries to molest her, she kicks him between his legs and escapes. So the modern Dalit woman is not a lamb any longer. She can overcome many of the difficulties. Through the same incident one thing can be understood that Dalit woman is no longer dependent on Dalit man for her protection. When Narsadu and Yelladu, Balamma's friends make excuses for not going into the lake for catching the rabbit, Balamma goes into that deep water, swims and gets the rabbit. Here Gogu Shyamala has depicted a girl ready to involve herself in an activity when even boys dare not do.

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Oppression of Dalit Woman

In the two short stories mentioned above, the oppressed is Dalit woman and the oppressor is the upper caste Hindu. Gogu Shyamala in another short story 'Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But...' draws an image where the Dalit woman is oppressed by the Dalit man himself, where the caste Hindu is not the oppressor. "Brutal patriarchy within Dalit communities is one issue which repeatedly appears in Dalit feminist discourse". (Ghosh 58) Most of the Dalit writings share patriarchal set up in depiction of the domestic background as it is in actual life. But very few writers have drawn this kind of picture without any partiality. Gogu Shyamala is one among them.

Oppression of Dalit Women within the Dalit Community

Shyamala does not hesitate to give the actual picture of the community. While depicting the domestic violence in 'Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But...' she clearly gives a picture of a husband beating his wife: "Father beat her like she was cattle. She was wailing saying, "Oh mother, I am dead, he'll take my life."'" (Shyamala 24) This kind of violence has been normalised for quite a long time. Women tolerated it without questioning it for centuries. But in the 80s and the 90s there came an outburst. Dalit women writers came forward and started narrating their experiences through life narratives. And one who was quite voiceless got her voice. Very few male writers have depicted such kind of violence. Women were not at all taken into account. She was rarely considered for decision making. She was a kind of animal who had a tongue but had no right to talk back.

Dalit woman more often than not is dependent on her own labour. She labours outside her home from morning till evening. When she comes home, her husband will be waiting to snatch her hard-earned money which the only source to feed the family. If the woman refuses to give the money the husband beats her up. (Ghosh 58)

This is what is exactly drawn by Gogu Shyamala in 'Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But...' where the wife comes home after the whole day's work

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with some amount of money the husband beats her for not giving him the money for drinking. Father is the ultimate authority in the house that cannot be questioned. In the family not only women but children also become victims of this kind of incidents. The fear functions directly and indirectly in the family. This kind of violence affects the children's psyche. The girl narrator who witnesses this beating says,

But father did not stop. I felt as if I would die, watching my mother being beaten like that. My younger brother trembled and pissed in his pants. We did not have the courage to stop the father. We were scared that he might beat us too if we went near him. We were also scared that Mother might also die. (Shyamala 24)

Oppression within the Family

This kind of animal like treatment is given to Dalit woman not by any upper caste men, but by her own husband. When somebody is beaten hard one thinks of taking the judicious action against him, but for a Dalit woman, how to feed the stomachs is more important than taking any judicious action. When he beats his wife his mother interferes and says, "How much will you beat her? Look at the injuries all over her body. You have made her helpless! How do you think she will work? (Shyamala 24) Dalit woman, just like a man, is capable enough to look after the family. "When you left us to wander around the country, she looked after your children and me. Anyone else would have left us to our fate. She starved her own stomach to fill ours." (Shyamala 24-25) She devotes herself to the welfare of the family. Though she is beaten, the next day she has to go and find work in order to feed her family.

Bonded Labour

Most of the Dalit women are bonded labourers, and sometimes a child is born when they are working. For them the maternity leave does not matter. This harsh reality is depicted in this short story, "They brought the news that my elder sister had given birth prematurely. She had gone to work and she delivered there." (Shyamala 25) It is very much visible that there has been patriarchal family set up in the Dalit community. Kancha Ilaiah, the Dalit intellectual says that the patriarchy practiced in the Dalit family is more 'democratic' than the

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Hindu patriarchy. How can patriarchy be democratic? He says that the Dalit woman, most of the time has a right to abuse her husband and beat him back. (Ghosh 58) When a husband beats his wife his mother abuses him in public saying, “What will you do now, a shameless idiot? I gave a birth to a good-for nothing fellow.” (24)

Father and Mother Images

At the end of the short story Gogu Shyamala comes with a saying “Did the elders say in vain that ‘an elephant-like father may go, but the small basket-like mother should stay’?” (Shyamala 26) Through this saying she may be justifying that only a woman can understand a woman, woman is capable enough to carry out all the jobs that men do. Thus this short story gives a realistic picture of the Dalit family.

The father image depicted in the ‘Raw Wound’ is totally different than the father image in ‘Father May Be an Elephant and Mother a Small Basket, But...’ In the later story it is the father who has been seen as a problem to the family. He is drunken who hardly pays any attention to his family and family affairs. His wife works. He too sometimes works. He was blamed for stealing but later it is proved wrong. He beats his wife for not giving him money for drinking alcohol. This kind of domestic violence is not there in the ‘Raw Wound’ because the father here is capable enough to fight with the upper caste Hindus, whereas the father in ‘Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But...’ is unable to fight back with the upper caste people. And therefore he exercises his power in the domestic sphere. He abuses and beats his wife. His mother at one point mentions, “If you have the balls go show this anger to the people (upper caste people) who called you a thief.” (Shyamala 24) But his inability is very much understood. He cannot exercise his power outside his house.

Common Evil is Depicted

Thus Gogu Shyamala, as a Dalit writer and social activist has been pointing out the evil practices in our society which led to institutionalising violence. She does not blame the Dalit male for the subjugation of Dalit women; at the same time she does not celebrate Dalit male being the ideal figure. She gives us a reminder that the caste Hindu male and female attitude towards the Dalit is yet to change. The Impartial depiction of the community can be seen in her short stories. Dalit women writers are much aware that in future they have to be

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more conscious in maintaining their uniqueness among the other movements. Ghosh, a scholar of Dalit literature, warns, “The Young Dalit women should not get subsumed in the relatively micro identities of mainstream progressive movements such as male Dalit movement or the upper caste feminist movement.” (Ghosh 59)

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