



DALIT WOMEN AND IDENTITY: STUDY ON GOGU SHYAMALA'S SELECT SHORT STORIES FROM FATHER MAY BE AN ELEPHANT AND MOTHER ONLY A SMALL BASKET, BUT...

Renu Raj

Ph.D Research Scholar, Sree Shankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady, Kerala

Cite This Article: Renu Raj, "Dalit Women and Identity: Study on Gogu Shyamala's Select Short Stories from Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But..." *International Journal of Current Research and Modern Education*, Volume 6, Issue 1, Page Number 18-21, 2021.

Copy Right: © IJCRME, 2021 (All Rights Reserved). This is an Open Access Article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Abstract:

Dalit women in India are the victims of triple oppression of caste, class and gender which are the key factors for their discrimination, humiliation and subjugation. They are subjected to violence, inhuman living conditions and discrimination which deny them better choices, opportunities, and freedom in every walk of their life. Each of the works studied here represents the female protagonist's constant search for her authentic self. Separating themselves from oppressive familial ties, these women seek to find meaning and values in their life. Dalit women, who have been labelled as "weak" and "untouchable," overcome all obstacles to create an identity of their own. The present paper explains how this happens in the short stories selected for study.

Key Words: triple oppression, Dalit women, identity, caste, discrimination.

As the victims of triple oppression of gender, class and caste, Dalit women have been labelled as untouchable and weak. They belong to the lower strata of caste hierarchy. They never get justice in a caste-ridden Indian society and never get the respectable place that they truly deserve in the society they live in and in their families as well. This paper studies how the downtrodden, oppressed Dalit female characters in select short stories by Gogu Shyamala come up in life with their own identity and voice. For the present study, two short stories, "But Why Shouldn't the Baidla Woman Ask for Her Land?" and "Tataki Wins Again" from *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But...* are selected. These stories represent women as strong, determined and self-contained beings.

Gogu Shyamala is an acclaimed Dalit feminist activist, writer and translator from Telangana. She is a part of Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies. Her book, *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But...* is a short story collection published in 2012. Each story in this collection is being translated by individual authors and it comprises the stories and events that happened in her own village in Telangana. The twelve short stories in this collection are a powerful representation of Dalit women in her community. As against the stereotypical representation of Dalit women as both powerless and helpless beings, Shyamala portrays them as courageous and powerful.

As we analyse all the select short stories of Shyamala, we could see that her short stories are narrated from the perspective of a woman or a little girl. Her stories always project dalit women's issues of sexual and physical abuse and representing them as agents of social change and not as victims. Pramod K. Nayar asserts: Shyamala also works her stories around issues that have been at the epicentre of the Telangana campaign: irrigation and water resources. Thus, Shyamala refuses to make the stories domestic, so escaping the usual trap laid for women writers.

Her female characters are not trapped inside the walls of their houses but they are skilled labourers and hard workers who earn for their living. They reject the roles assigned to them by the unjust social system and fight against the casteist, classist and sexist forces.

Just as Shyamala writes in her stories, there are certain things that are enjoyable only for Dalits, such as the scent of new rice, the taste of *jowar* sap and the power to invoke the goddesses which are perhaps otherwise unknown to the upper caste people. Through her writing, Shyamala tries to picture the real Dalit experience. Most of her stories reflect an evident oral quality. She focuses on *Madiga* women and she pictures them as powerful, tough and courageous unlike the mainstream literature in which Dalit women are portrayed as vulnerable. She has also beautifully rendered colloquialism, slang and songs to give local colour.

In "Tataki Wins Again," Shyamala recounts the story of Bamma, an eleven-year-old Dalit girl. It is actually based on the author's recollection of her own older sister. Shyamala was the only child from her family who was lucky enough to attend school. Deepa Sreenivas in her article, "Forging New Communities: Gendered Childhood through the Lens of Caste (2010)" writes: ...recalls with feeling that she was the one from her family who tired of carrying a heavy load under the hard sun before anyone else... her sister, on the other hand, could work in the fields with a rare stamina and involvement...after many years and an extremely difficult journey through school and college as a Dalit girl/woman...she pays tribute to the sister and the family and the community that are the absent Others in the mainstream discourses of childhood. (272)

Balamma is a hard worker who gets up early to irrigate her family's fields. She has been portrayed as a strong, fearless and smart energetic young girl who breaks the traditional and conventional image of a Dalit woman.

In the caste-based Indian society, Dalit women's sexual harassment and molestation is not a new thing. It is hardly seen as a crime and it has been normalized so that the upper caste people are always in the safe zone. As long as Dalit women remain passive and accept these humiliations, it tends to follow them like nightmares throughout their lifetime. In such a situation most such cases go unnoticed and unheard. The toughest ordeal for every Dalit woman is to live as a Dalit woman in India. Through the story of Balamma, Shyamala shows how to be both brave and powerful fighting all the odds that the caste based Indian society has imposed upon them. In truth, this story has totally succeeded in rejecting the traditional and conventional status of Dalit women.

The first episode of the story begins describing how Balamma starts her day by cutting the bund to let in the canal water to her groundnut field with a spade. "Spade on shoulder, Balamma patrolled the mud banks of the canal...The mud walls around the other fields had not yet been cut, so the water flowed plentifully into her field" (87). Balamma would reach the field before the *karnam's* bonded labourers come to water their field. Every single attempt of these labourers to block the stream to water theirs would be resisted by Balamma. In one such an instance, she "sped like a rocket and stomped down the mud bank he had built" (88). Unlike other Dalit girls of her age, she appears to be more mature, determined and strong.

Most of the people in Balamma's playing gang are boys. However, when she is playing with her friends, she always has a leading role to play. She has perfect plans for games and she is the one who assigns tasks for all including the boys. Her commanding voice is so strong that even boys would follow everything she says. Here, it is important to compare how Bama talks about the assigned roles of boys and girls in her community, in her novel *Sangati*. Bama describes how boys are treated with special care compared to girls. Boys enjoy more freedom. But Balamma on the other hand expresses the spirit of an independent strong woman.

There are many instances in the story which prove that Dalit girls could do things much better than Dalit boys. One such instance is Balamma and friends trying to catch a rabbit which accidentally runs towards the lake. When everyone starts making silly excuses not to get into the lake to catch the rabbit, Balamma bravely takes the risk, swims across the lake and catches the rabbit:

"These fellows are no good!" thought Balamma, tucking up her skirt between her legs and jumping into the lake. She swam strongly in the direction that the rabbit took. Moving with the ease of a fish, she reached the rabbit in no time. She caught it by the scruff of the neck with one hand, and swam to the bank. (91)

Here Shyamala depicts a Dalit girl who is willing to take up a challenge which the boys dare not do. The image of Balamma goes far beyond the usual image of Dalit women as shy, cowardly and powerless. She has power in her voice, strength in her actions and even boys are afraid of her. Shyamala not only portrays a fearless Dalit girl, but also repaints the conventional image of Dalit women.

The landlord, *dora* has maintained his power and authority in the village. Reasons why he has hatred towards Balamma and her family are many. One reason is that he could not get enough water for his land as Balamma waters her crops just before dawn itself. Another reason is a conflict between the *dora's* grandfather and Balamma's grandfather that had been inherited from one generation and carried to the next, and on this account, the *dora* now seeks revenge on Balamma's family.

The last episode of the story is yet another instance to show the real strength and power of Balamma. It describes how the landlord *karnam* tried to attack and molest her. The field next to Balamma's had *jowar* crop and it looked like sugarcane. Even a tall man standing in the field wouldn't be seen. When the *karnam* dragged Balamma in to the crops, many thoughts rushed into her mind. "The *karnam* were of a higher caste. They would never touch a *madiga*. Why was he pulling her?" (97). She doesn't lose her mind or even get perplexed by the situation. But rather she contemplates in one corner of her mind and suddenly she recalls how the *Mala* and *Madiga* women used to whisper about how the landlords abuse in one way or the other. The *dora* with all his force got hold of her and showered all bad words on her. He says:

"Tataki! You bloody bitch! You are a small girl, are you? What makes you come here like a man and water the groundnut fields? In our house, girls like you don't step into the field. You *mala* and *madiga* don't even know that girls have to be kept at home! You are a small girl, are you?" Cursing her, he thrust his hand into her blouse...His body felt like an iron post. (97)

Even the *dora* admits the fact that Balamma had potentials just like a man. He questions the freedom she enjoyed in her community. His words and actions reflect the attitude of an upper caste patriarchal man.

All possible attempts are made by Balamma to free herself from the hold of the *karnam*. He slaps her hard on her face and she is thrown to a distance. What happens next becomes the turning point of the story. "She took aim and kicked him as hard as she could on the groin with both her legs" (98). Not every Dalit woman would have the courage to do what Balamma does. Resistance is as important as living for Dalit women. Just like Balamma, Dalit women should react and resist all such oppressive situations.

What makes Balamma different from other girls of her age is indeed the support of her family, especially her father's. He is proud of his daughter as well as his wife. He respects them for who they are and

never believes that the position of a woman is in the kitchen or inside the four walls of their house. He never believes that a girl child is a burden to his family as well...my wife's wages will add to this amount. Balamma too has been a great help by watering the fields. Had she not done so, I would not have been able to come to work with you... "My Balamma's nature is to work," her father would proudly say...When her father praised her this way, Balamma would feel so happy...My father will say sebbas! She thought as she worked on. (93-97)

These are the words of a proud, encouraging father and a husband. Basayya is proud of his wife for being a self-reliant woman and tries to bring up their daughter as a strong, courageous and a self-sufficient girl. An image of a supportive husband and a father could be seen in Basayya. He is not a patriarchal figure who controls and spoils the life of his wife and daughter. This positive environment in Balamma's house has in fact shaped her identity. She reveals her own identity as a powerful, courageous and a strong girl.

Another story of significance is "But why shouldn't the Baindla woman ask for her land?." Rural Telangana has been affected by the Green Revolution and it affects agricultural land, farmers, and consumers. Gogu Shyamala's family earns through agriculture and the story describes how the caste system influences the lives of farmers. The short story, "But why shouldn't the Baindla woman ask for her land?" begins with the question, "Why does the dora keep saying the baindla woman banged her fist on the table? She didn't do it for nothing. It was only to ask for her land" (53). The protagonist, Saayamma is a combative and outspoken low-caste soothsayer. She is known as *Baindla* Saayamma or *Erpula* Saayamma. The first prefix denotes her caste group and the second her social function. This story illustrates Saayamma's battle to recover her ancestral land from an upper-caste landlord. Dalits' displacement from their own land is portrayed by Shyamala in this story, which relates how an ordinary Dalit woman fights for her land. Saayamma is a priest by profession, offering prayers to please goddesses. She demands the dora to return her land. The dora on the other hand is surprised by the guts of an *erpula* woman.

The story begins by relating the dream that the *dora* had the previous night. The *dora*, Narendra Reddy has summoned all the caste elders to his house to discuss the dream. Ooradamma, goddess of rain and prosperity, appeared in his dream and demanded a sacrifice for the prosperity of the village. She threatened that otherwise she would create havoc and destroy the village. Besides she asked to please her sisters Mysamma, Pochamma, Raktamysamma, Bangaramma and Eedamma with a gift of seven he-goats. Finally, Saayamma has been summoned and they decide to conduct *Ooradamajatra* to please the goddesses.

All the arrangements for the *Ooradamajatra* have almost finished and there comes an instance to settle the payment of Saayamma. She takes this chance to ask for the land that the *dora* had snatch from her aunt. She questions the *dora*:

...But first tell me about my land. Earlier when my paternal aunt used to perform the ritual function, the Nizam Sankar gave her three acres of land. Now, that the land has been taken over and is being cultivated by one of your cousins. You've got to get that land returned to me. (59)

Saayamma, just like Ellamma and Balamma, is courageous enough to question the upper caste landlords for their unjust treatment. She appears to be a strong, fearless and determined dalit woman. Nothing could have stopped her from questioning the *dora*, although the caste elders gesture Saayamma to leave fearing that the *dora* might lose his temper.

The *dora* who weren't expecting such a stern mood from Saayamma, warns her. Surprised by her behaviour the *dora* says:

If we give her the slightest chance to talk, she starts digging up things from the past....The problem is she does not know her place and doesn't know how to talk to her superiors....What guts she has...Even if she suspects something, how dare she speak so openly?...See now, all you do is ask them to perform the *erpula*'s role in the Ooradamma festival and they start talking about land.... why do these riff-raff need land? (59-60)

The *dora* couldn't tolerate the resistance shown by Saayamma and he is trying to question her guts in questioning him. The patriarchal attitude of the *dora* is clearly revealed here and he considers himself to be superior to anyone else. Even his words reflect how he treats the lower caste people and no value and respect is given to them.

The upper caste landlords are indeed tricky. They need *erpula* women to perform the rituals but at the same time they treat them poorly. In order to complete the festival smoothly, the *karnam* suggests to the *dora* that "We have to sweet-talk her into performing the rituals and the soothsaying...If she makes a fuss, it will affect the madiga and then the sabbanda" (60). On the next day as well, during the meeting with Saayamma, the *karnam* makes every possible attempt to convince her that the land never belonged to her aunt. However, in defiance of his argument, Saayamma affirms that she has all the receipts of the taxes she has paid for the land. Besides, she has inherited the *erpula* duties from her aunt and she is the successor to both her profession and her property. Neither the *karnam* nor Saayamma is ready to deflect from their decision and there comes a point when Saayamma loses her control and she speaks out:

Dora, don't pay me coolie wages. Just give your daughter away as a jogini. Tell her to do the soothsaying during the festivals. I will pay her the wages. Saying this, Saayamma pounded the table in front of the dora with her fist. (63)

The piled-up frustration and anger comes forth through Saayamma's powerful and sharp words. Saayamma's resistance to the hegemonic patriarchy and caste discrimination is clearly depicted here. The Patels are shocked hearing Saayamma's words, "the dora's eyes popped out and his mouth felt open...their mouths dried up and they fell silent" (63). The entire story reaches a different level when *sabbanda* elders start saying that Saayamma is possessed with Ooradamma. The Patels pay obeisance to her and their palms join in salutation. She looks like a cheetah with a fierce look in her eyes now. Threatening the Patels she says, "I'll see how you get this done by paying wages, you bastards! If you don't vacate my land, I'll sacrifice you. Only then will the curse be lifted from this village" (67). Using rituals as a form of resistance, she is questioning and threatening the feudalistic, hegemonic landlord and demanding the land she is entitled to. Now, she is an empowered woman. She realizes the strength of her productive culture and revolts against the age old suppressive and exploitative culture of the dora. Her identity as a strong dalit woman has been shaped by the experiences she has faced in her life. Just like Balamma, Saayamma is also raised by caring and loving parents who never hinder her freedom by confining her to the feminine duties that society has imposed upon her.

Shyamala truthfully portrays how her female protagonists construct resistance against the oppressive upper caste people. Their persistent struggles pose a threat to the upper caste people. All the female protagonists in the studied short stories are strong women who fight against an oppressive and abusive patriarchal/casteist/classist society. More importantly, the protagonists progress from oppression to liberation as they fight and prove that they are not helpless victims but human beings with dignity.

As Mridula Garg in "Intervention of Women's Writing in Making of Literature" (2013) says about women writers:

We write because we are not willing to accept either the world we live in or the self-formed by the accepted value systems. We have a vision of an alternate world substantially different from the given world, in which our own self also has a different connotation. (181)

Shyamala's protagonists also struggle to create a world of their own which is different from their present troubled world. Dalit women are capable of practicing irony and subversion within the system as well as taking steps to transgress its boundaries.

References:

1. Ahmed, Imtiaz, and Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay, eds. *Dalit Assertion in Society, Literature and History*. New Delhi: Deshkal Publication, 2007. Print.
2. Garg, Mridula. "Intervention of Women's writing in Making of Literature." *Indian Literature* 57.4 (2013): 181-190. JSTOR. Web. 15 Aug. 2018.
3. Ghurye, G.S. *Caste and Race in India*. Bombay: Popular Book Depot, 1950. Print.
4. Jogdand, P.G., ed. *Dalit Women in India: Issues and Perspectives*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2013. Print.
5. Nayar, Pramod K. "Book Review: Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But...." *Dna India*. n.p., 17 June 2012. Web. 29 Mar. 2018.
6. Omvedt, Gail. *Dalit Visions: The Anti-caste Movement and the Construction of an Indian Identity*. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2006. Print.
7. Paswan, Sanjay, and Paramanshi Jaideva, eds. *Encyclopaedia of Dalits in India: Women*. Vol. 9. New Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2002. Print.
8. Rao, Anupama, ed. *Gender and Caste*. New Delhi: Sage, 2004. Print.
9. Rege, Sharmila. "Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of Difference and Towards a Dalit Feminist Stand Point Position." *Economic and Political Weekly* 33.44 (1998): 39-46. Web. 28 Nov. 2016.
10. Shyamala, Gogu. *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But...* New Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2012. Print.
11. Sreenivas, Deepa. "Forging New Communities: Gendered Childhood through the Lens of Caste." *Feminist Theory*. 11.3 (2010): 267-281. Print.
12. Tomar, Ruchi. "Dalit Feminism: A Transformation of Rejection into Resistance." *The Criterion* 3.12 (2013): 1-8. Web. 29 July 2015.