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## **Resistance to Victimhood in Gogu Shyamala's *Father may be an Elephant and Mother only a Small Basket, but...*: An Intersectional Perspective**

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### **Abstract:**

The concept of 'intersectionality' is fundamental in addressing Dalit feminists' urge to situate dalit women's experiences of relatively being 'different' unlike upper caste women. The caste and gender factors have been overlooked by mainstream feminists and Dalit politics respectively, for which dalit women's issues always remain neglected in both the categories. Hence, as a consequence of being marginalized by Indian feminism as well as Dalit politics, a dire need is felt that dalit women's issues need to be addressed differently. The term intersectionality does address dalit women's problems grounded on their exploitation, domination, and discrimination at the intersection of caste, class, and gender. Intersectionality is not a solution to the problems of dalit women; instead, it is a framework for situating their overlapping marginalities of caste, class, and gender. Hence, this paper emphasizes studying intersectionality as 'a space of resistance' to social injustice meant for dalit women that provides a platform to address their multi-layered marginalities within one framework specifically. A handful of dalit women characters from selected stories are drawn from the setting in the madiga quarter of a Telengana village as delineated in Gogu Shyamala's story collection *Father may be an Elephant and Mother only a Small Basket, but...* (2012).

**Keywords:** Dalit women, victimhood, intersectionality, resistance.

## Introduction

Renown Dalit women writer and activist Urmila Pawar observes the situation of Dalit women as intersectional, located at the intersection of caste and gender, and she also urges for a possible redressal of Dalit women's always overlooked positionality:

The Dalit movement is a movement for total human freedom. It does not however seem to pay adequate attention to the women's question. Women's liberation movement also should really be a part of this movement for human liberation. It is not. A myth is harboured that unlike the Brahmin woman the Dalit woman is free from bondage and stifling restrictions. The pain of the *Devadasi*, the deserted woman and the Murali is ignored in this stand.... Dalit educated woman should also come out of the wrong impression that only with the help of men they can stand out in the world. These women should fight for their rights both as *dalits* and as women. (Pawar, 94)

Throughout the above statement, Pawar highlights the lacunae that lie in both Dalit Politics and mainstream Indian Feminism for their omissions of two crucial aspects gender and caste respectively. Besides, her statement addresses the intersectional nature of Dalit women's identity, which is a foundational notion of Dalit Feminist approach. Intersectionality emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which has been used as a single framework for analyzing power that encompasses and connects gender, class, and race-based oppression. Legal theorist Kimberly Crenshaw's observation and understanding of black women's uniqueness and difference of sufferings at the ground of race and gender intersection unlike that of white women, brings forward the concept of intersectionality in order to address the specificity and complexity of black women's experiences. Dalit feminists adopted the idea of *intersectionality* from Black Feminists. Conceptualizing a dalit feminist standpoint in her essay 'Dalit Women Talk Differently', noted dalit feminist Sharmila Rege describes dalit feminist standpoint as a position where

The subject of its knowledge is embodied and visible (i.e., the thought begins from the lives of dalit women and these lives are present and visible in the results of the thought)... It places emphasis on individual experiences within socially constructed groups and focuses on the hierarchal, multiple, changing structural power relations of caste, class, ethnicity, which construct such groups. It is obvious that the subject / agent of dalit women's standpoint is multiple, heterogeneous – such a recognition underlines the fact that

the subject of dalit feminist liberatory knowledge must also be the subject of every other liberatory project and this requires a sharp focus on the processes by which gender, race, class, caste, sexuality – all construct each other. Thus we agree that the dalit feminist standpoint itself is open to liberatory interrogations and revisions. (p.45)

Dalit woman considers marginality as a politically achieved position with its significance for the ability to intervene and transform the existing knowledge systems. The experiences of dalit women are simultaneously oppressed by the hierarchal social structures of caste and gender that becomes the starting point to an intersectional standpoint. (Pan, 39) The concept of intersectionality is at the core of Dalit Feminism through which dalit women's identity of selfhood is appropriately addressed in one framework. Hence framing/adopting the concept of intersectionality in itself is a 'space of resistance' for dalit feminists. It is a voice of resistance against injustice/victimhood that dalit women experience in their lives in the hands of mainstream Indian feminists and Dalit patriarchy which is articulated through the idea of intersectionality.

Gogu Shyamala is a well-known dalit writer and activist from Andhra Pradesh, and her anthology of short stories entitled *Father may be an Elephant and Mother only a Small Basket. But...* (2012) is a remarkable contribution to dalit literature through which she attempts to preserve the cultural heritage, tradition, and social lives of dalit community from her region. The selected anthology of short stories consists of twelve stories, and has been written originally in Telegu and translated into English by different translators. Five stories such as *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, but...*, *Raw Wound*, *Jambhava's Lineage*, *Tataki Wins Again* and *But Why Shouldn't the Baidla Woman Ask for Her Land?* are selected for this study. Apparently, that Shyamala's short stories are not limited to depicting the cultural heritage and tradition of the Madigas, instead her primary concern is to focus on the lives of rural women from her community who are oppressed and exploited in every sphere of life, unlike those *savarna* women. A dalit feminist lens is adopted in order to analyze dalit women's victimhood state, and their subsequent resistance as a means of survival.

### **Discussion:**

A dalit woman's fate is decided by her birth to a specific caste, as, for instance, Gogu Shyamala's one of the remarkable stories entitled *Raw Wound* highlights the jogini tradition existing in the village. The jogini tradition is a religiously sanctioned practice of dedicating girls,

specifically from the madiga community, to the god of the village temple as decided by the sarpanch of the village and the priest of the village temple. Besides performing the rituals of the village, joginis are religiously sanctioned prostitutes, for they are sexually available to all the villagers. In the story, Ballappa's daughter Shyamamma has been declared to be the jogini of the village temple, to which her family expresses utmost grief and tries to protect Shyamamma from this exploitative practice despite the upper caste people's extreme brutality towards them. Her grandmother cries inconsolably at the fate of Shyamamma:

They have been keeping an eye on us. It seems someone in the past laid a rule for our family. And we have to follow it – like a rule of god. Curse that god! Does he not have children? A lineage? What sin have we committed? They have come like Yama himself to spoil our child's life. (138)

It is the division of labour and labourers on the basis of caste and gender that determined Shyamamma's fate as a jogini. Shyamamma becomes a victim of this kind of traditional casteist practice. Ambedkar rightly stated in his *Annihilation of Caste* that the caste system is not just a division of labour; it is a division of labourers:

The division of labour brought about by the caste system is not a division based on choice. Individual sentiment, individual preference, has no place in it. It is based on the dogma of predestination. (36)

In *Jambhava's Lineage*, Shyamala details not only the history, culture, and traditions of madigas, but also throws light on how dalit women are abused sexually by men in public spheres. Ellamma, being a Bhagottam performer, has to perform the rituals of telling stories of the origin of different castes. While doing her responsibilities, most often she experiences sexual abuses not only from the upper caste men but also from the men of her own community.

When I performed, people used to throw bundles of currency notes at me. Then when I bent down to pick them up, they would throw more on my back. Our children, who were hiding behind, used to collect the money. Some people would pin together currency notes into garlands into garlands and put them around my neck. It is the advance that we are offering, they would say leering. (p. 81)

Dalit women frequently experience sexual abuse/violence at the hands of upper caste people. In this context, often, it is seen that a dalit women's body is the space for contesting their caste power. The Karnam targeted the body of Balamma to be the space for imposing his caste supremacy in *Tataki Wins Again*:

“Tataki! You bloody witch! You are a small girl, are you? What makes you come here like a man and water the groundnut fields? In our homes, 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 under her blouse. Her small hands couldn't throw off the landlord's fat paws. His body felt heavy like an iron post. Balamma trembled all over. Her mouth went dry. One corner of her mind recalled the women in the mala and madiga settlements whispering about how the landlord had taken one woman after another. (*Tataki Wins Again*, p.97)

It is very much apparent that Dalit women's lives are different from upper caste women, as expressed in the above extracted lines. While upper caste women are bound to abide by the pativrata ideologies, dalit women are far away from such ideologies and have to work outside their homes, in the fields as bonded labourers, just for their livelihood. Dalit women's bodies are considered polluted/untouchable, but why do the upper castes choose sexually abuse dalit women's untouchable bodies? It might be that the polluted body of a dalit woman does not need to prove her purity. It is really very ironic that the polluted, untouchable bodies of dalit women are very much touchable for the upper caste men while fulfilling their brutal desires on them.

The select stories of Gogu Shyamala throw light on the heterogeneity of women category based on caste and class by highlighting the differences between dalit women and upper caste women. Unlike upper caste women, dalit women are away from the ideologies of *pativrata* or *streedharma*, and this difference between the patriarchies of upper-caste and dalit community is addressed by Kancha Ilaiah:

A Dalit Bahujan woman does not have to perform *padapuja* (worshiping the husband's feet) to her husband either in the morning or in the evening. She does not have to address her husband in the way she would address a superior. In a situation of dispute, word in response to word, and abuse for abuse is the socially visible norm. Patriarchy as a system

does exist among Dalitbahujan, yet in this sense it is considerably more democratic. (*Why I Am Not a Hindu*, p.34)

The statement of Ilaiah expressing the democratic nature of dalit patriarchy is most often criticized by critics. Shyamala's titular story *Father May be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, but...* delineates domestic violence within a dalit family which definitely negates to what Ilaiah said. The wife works hard in the farming lands as bonded labourer from morning till evening, and her husband seizes all her wages to drink wine. If the wife refuses to give him money, then the husband starts beating her. A dalit man may not possess power in the social hierarchy, but he can impose his male dominance within the family by using domestic violence.

Indeed, all dalit women characters in the stories work outside the home, but their working outside the home does not merely mean the democratic nature of dalit patriarchy. The upper caste women's lives are always within the household boundaries and under the strict surveillance of their men. Unlike upper caste women, dalit women are bound to work as bondage labourers, sometimes as joginis or as erpula women or sometimes as Bhogattom performers. Their work outside the home is not a choice, but they are bound to work for their survival instinct. Their availability in the public sphere fuels their experience of sexual exploitation, and besides this, they are also victims of domestic violence within their household domain.

Shyamala puts forward the issue of endogamy in her story *But Why Shouldn't the Baidla Woman Ask for Her Land?* Throughout the story, she represents the character of Baidla Saayamma as a victim. Since her caste is somewhat lower than her husband Sendrappa's mudiraju caste; therefore, she has never been accepted by her husband's family, even after the death of her husband. They considered her as the mistress of mudiraju, not a wife. However, when she is not even allowed to get involved in her husband's funeral, the people of her community are about to take away the corpse of her husband, but the mudiraju elders prevent it, and eventually, arguments between madigas and mudirajus get sharper:

Why should we discuss all this with them? We are higher and they are lower in caste. She was not made a wife by the caste. She's only a mistress. (66)

Despite being married, Saayamma is never recognized as the wife of Sendrappa by the mudiraju community. She always remains as his mistress, an inferior who is an outsider according to the ideal social frame.

Dalit women's possession of land is not only a surprising but also an unacceptable fact, as narrated by Shyamala in the same story. Saayamma inherited the erpula duties and the farming lands from her aunt, and indeed she has its proof documents too. But the Dora occupied her inherited land for which she repeatedly complained but without any consequence in her favour. Saayamma becomes a victim at the intersection of her caste and gender because she is not only deprived of the status of a legal wife but also of being the legal owner of the farming land that she inherited from her aunt.

Although in all the stories, Shyamala represents all these women as victims of caste and gender intersection, it is also noteworthy to point out that all women are survivors. They evolve as survivors by negotiating with their victimhood, and it is a way to assert their agency as a means of survival. Anindita Pan, in her research work *Mapping Dalit Feminism: Towards an Intersectional Standpoint*, writes:

Dalit feminist standpoint recognizes that when intersecting systems of oppression constrict opposition, it is through negotiation that dalit women assert their agency as a means of survival. This recognition necessitates a transformation of the stereotypical representations of dalit women as a victim as well as the characteristics that define such victimhood. (141)

The mother's character in *Father May be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, but...* is a victim of caste and gender intersection. Her resistance to her victimhood can be traced in her choice to stick to her responsibilities as a mother, a wife and a daughter-in-law. She could have moved away from her responsibilities when her husband ran away in the fear of being punished by the landlord, for, he was accused of theft. But she did not; instead, she run the household in her husband's absence. Her husband beat her in black and blue, but she did not give him money to have a toddy. Despite the severe wounds and pains incurred by her husband, she went on to take care of her daughter when she delivered her first baby. She negotiates with her victimhood, and in this way, she paves the way for resistance. In *Jambhava's Lineage*, Ellamma abused her male audience while performing on the stage:

...Well, if any of them looked me up and down, I just used to give him a slap. I treated them as I would my fathers, brothers and sons. All the same I could not but reprimand some men. I used to take the opportunity of doing this when I played Chenchulakshni and Balanagamma. On stage I'd bring out all the anger and suffering hidden in my heart. I 'd indirectly abuse some of the men sitting in the audience as if I was referring to Mayala Fakir or Srihari. I'd stop only when they shrunk back in shame. Initially they were very angry, but gradually they changed, and grew more polite. (82)

Ellama's negotiation with her victimhood state provides a space for her to resist the abuses that she experiences throughout her life as a Bhagottam performer. Her art has been a way to express all her anger and sufferings that haunt her mind and heart. All her life, she has sustained this art, and in turn, this art sustained her.

The Baidla Saayamma also possesses a voice of protest against the exploitations incurred by the upper caste men. In a community gathering of her village, when she is offered the proposal of soothsaying in the village, she again asks for her land. However, she is disappointed by the Dora's negative responses, and hence Baidla Saayamma spoke:

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

Besides, the brave young Balamma (*Tataki Wins Again*) fights back the landlord while he sexually molested her:

In the village the mala and madiga women giggled through their saree ends as they shared the news, "The landlord wanted to catch our Balamani. She kicked him in the groin!" (98)

Anandita Pan also throws light on solidarity as a means to resistance against their victimhood, and this solidarity is operative across caste and gender. Regarding this aspect of solidarity in Gogu Shyamla's *Father may be an Elephant and Mother only a Small Basket. But...*, Pan analyses:

... in *Father may be an Elephant and Mother only a Small Basket. But...* solidarity is seen to be operative across genders. Gogu Shyamala's collection of short stories has gained

critical recognition for its portrayal of dalit life and culture in a small village in Andhra Pradesh. It presents a varied dalit life-world by focusing almost equally on the issues faced by both dalit men and women. Thus we see dalit men being oppressed by upper caste landlords ('Raw Wound'), dalit women successfully resisting sexual advances of an upper caste landlord ('Tataki Wins Again'), a dalit woman's oppression by her husband ('Father may be an Elephant and Mother only a Small Basket. But...'), dalit women resisting the taunts made by dalit men ('Jambava's Lineage'), dalit men supporting dalit woman during her demand to own land (But Why Shouldn't the Baidla Woman Ask for Her Land?), a dalit father's efforts to save his daughter from becoming a jogini ('Raw Wound'), and so on. (149)

Indeed, Shyamala's most short stories present both men and women of her community collectively opposing the injustice caused by the caste system. Shyamala delineates how Balappa and his entire family stood against the exploitative jogini tradition and saved Saayamma from being a jogini, even at the risk of their own land and life. All men and women from her madiga community collectively supported Baidla Saayamma in her fight for getting back her lands. Young Balamma was brought up as a carefree and fearless girl who could fight for her own sake. All these women resist and survive because survival is an utmost concern for dalit women. The intersectional nature of Dalit women's sufferings differentiates them from the stereotypes.

### **Conclusion:**

Intersectionality is always at the core of the Dalit feminist approach, for it recognizes the intersection of categories such as caste and gender and tries to build up a kind of solidarity without erasing the differences. While analyzing the stories, it is apparent that dalit women are victims of double patriarchy, i.e., Brahmanical as well as dalit patriarchy. Dalit women experience oppression not only by the upper caste men and women, but also from men of their community. Indeed, the sense of solidarity is there across genders to resist caste oppression. However, along with it Shyamala boldly portrays the patriarchal exploitation of dalit women within the family that has its seed in casteist practice of the society that ultimately turns their life at the margins of caste, class, and gender. A dalit feminist representation does not limit dalit women to victimhood; rather it provides scope for the agency through negotiation. The dalit women characters in the selected short stories undertake this transformative act of turning their victimhood into a source of survival

through negotiation. Dalit women's position is always at the intersection of these margins, and this recognition of their intersectional positionality is an emancipatory framework that thoroughly addresses their selfhood/ identity.

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