

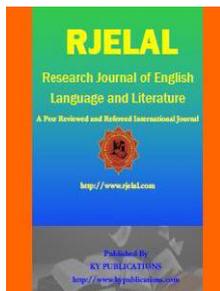


**CULTURE VERSUS EXISTENCE: THE RELENTLESS STRUGGLE OF WOMAN IN GOGU SHYAMALA'S FATHER MAY BE AN ELEPHANT AND MOTHER ONLY A SMALL BASKET, BUT..**

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**ABSTRACT**

Gogu Shyamala is a leading activist and writer in Telugu in Telangana, championing the cause of the women and the children in the subaltern communities. Her collection of short stories 'Enugantha Tandrikanna Ekulabuttantha Tallinayam' in Telugu appeared in 2013. The translation of the short stories marked a new beginning in the subaltern aesthetics of post-colonial era; as they deal with the saga of the subjugated women and the children in the productive communities. Shyamala deftly explores the cultural conflicts of the subcontinent and establishes that 'woman' can regain her lost glory with modern awareness and the child can blossom with the 'mother's care', shattering the artificial obstacles of caste humiliations and social suppression. Her protagonist, though humble and meek, rises to the occasion, shows her temerity if necessary, leads the family and children in spite of oppressive socio-cultural conditions; and remains an emulating model. She strives to put up resistance and reconstructs the ravaged cultural patterns of the devaluated productive communities. Realism foregrounds 'nativism' in all these stories and presents the protagonist waging a relentless struggle in order to herald a new dawn for mankind.

**Key Words:** Subaltern, productive woman, culture, realism, nativism, devaluated, resistance, reconstruction, patriarchy

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Gogu Shyamala's collection of short stories *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But..* was published in 2012. It is a collection of twelve short stories translated by individual translators. The stories are epoch-making as they deal with the intricate and complex construction of the culture in the sub continent of India, that has made time and again, over three thousand years, the lives of productive women in the subaltern communities tortuous, devaluated and traumatic.

The title is a Telugu saying which means a humble 'Mother' is far better than a 'Father' who may be like an elephant. All the twelve stories portray the saga of the 'woman' in the backdrop of unassumed, rustic, rural and suppressed environs of the subaltern community of the 'madiga'<sup>1</sup> of the Telangana region. The madigas are a principally productive community who also do the works of cleaning and cattle rearing in the villages. No corpse either a human being or an animal would find its last

journey without the necessary funeral works being undertaken by the madiga, even today.

The theme of the woman and her relentless struggles connect first story with the last story making the twelve stories a single canvas of a novel. Of the twelve stories, six stories portray the tortuous and devaluated saga of the 'woman' as 'Mother'. Shyamala presents the woman protagonist in the six stories as a human being wading through the patriarchal obstacles in domestic arena and caste obstacles in the social arena, yet remains a courageous human for the family and the community at large. The other six stories portray the subjugated but intuitive child characters that are also under the care of 'woman' as their mother. The narration of these stories is at times intrepid, jovial and captivating with full of aroma from the bucolic background. The image of the 'woman' and her endurance in facing the odds in the backdrop of the caste ridden hostile social environment is parallel to none. The enduring patience of the 'woman' is further tested by the similar, if not fully hostile, environment of domestic life. But her love for her progeny surpasses all the human limits and sets a new landmark for the mothers of the modern times. The writer takes the image of the 'woman' in these short stories to the status of nobler human being.

Exploitation of the woman continued unabated down from the primitive times to the modern period. She has faced many challenges and obstacles in and outside the domestic life. Despite obstacles woman pioneered the family, agricultural works and productivity not yielding to her biological limitations. Kancha Ilaiah rightly says, 'The intelligence levels of both men and women in the productive societies is same; a woman does the act of washing as the man does with the same level of outcome, a woman rears the goat and sheep as does her counterpart in the community; the working knowledge, the intelligence and the skill set are not different in men and women in these communities, rather they are inseparable; a man does the work of a woman and a woman does the work of a man without any inhibitions'<sup>2</sup>. Gradually as the communities got scattered in search of livelihood the division of labor took place with woman losing her control over 'decision making'. Shyamala's

'woman' is aware of these changes and tries to set the record straight by digging at the very root of patriarchy. She wishes to restore the culture of the productive 'woman' in her stories.

After industrialization too, woman championed the cause of production by being in the forefront, often equaling herself with her male-counterpart daring the dangerous conditions and sacrificing life. In spite of her relentless hard work both in domestic and social arenas; she is not given freedom on par with man. Chastity, sacrifice, tolerance, gracefulness were attributed to her nature and turned her into an entity of production either of children or economic goods. It is a strange irony that the very natural identities of woman led to her subjugation over the years, in the process of cultural construction. The social construction in India, from time immemorial has paved the way for usurping the natural freedom, order and space of the woman. The existence of the woman from the ancient times to the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had been 'non-existent' in terms of freedom, happiness and growth. But her contribution both for the growth of the family and economic sustainability has been immense. Gayatri Chakravathi Spivak says, 'It is women's work that has continuously survived within not only the varieties of capitalism but other historical and geographical modes of production'<sup>3</sup>

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century reformative and revivalist movements stirred the debates on women and their plight. 'Woman Progress' found primary place in every agenda. Thinkers focused on the inevitability of woman's progress, her body and health conditions and her productive capabilities. It was felt that culturally woman was at the bottom of the social ladder. Gradually reformative and revivalist tendencies led to the freedom and liberation movements of women. Hopes rose for the capability building in the women in spite of rigid social structure. Culturally woman was gaining a shaky footage in the yawning face of opposition from all corners. For Shyamala culture means, to quote Priyamvada Gopal, 'The most meaningful strategy in this minefield of contradictions and ambiguities

would be to create spaces and institutions that would enable writers to 'popularize' culture'<sup>4</sup>

In the post independence era, the rising hopes of 'woman progress' were dashed to ground. The joyous and celebratory mood of the nation pushed all the agendas of women into limbo. The feminist thinking of 1960s in Europe gradually engulfed the cultures all over the world. By the end of 1970s the battle lines were clearly drawn between those who championed the cause of woman and those who remained loyal to the old norms of social and cultural patterns of life. Simone de Beauvoir's 'Second Sex' (1949) stirred the minds of feminists. Beauvoir propagated the theory that 'men had made the woman the "other" in society by application of a false aura of "mystery" around them'<sup>5</sup>. It was gradually felt that patriarchy and state were the prime factors for the subjugation of woman. Writers wanted the dual enemies of woman, that were part of culture to go and emphasized 'self confidence' in her. While the main stream feminist writers opposed oppression from the male gender, the subaltern feminist writers opposed both the oppressive forces of gender and social divisions in the name of caste or religion. The subaltern women writers are of strong conviction that 'woman' enjoyed complete freedom and sovereignty in the initial stages of social construction. But, sanskritisation of the cultural paradigms pushed woman to backseat usurping her social and cultural existence.

In the eyes of the subaltern woman writer all the women of the community are goddesses and they are powerful. The goddess can withstand any challenge from the male domination and remain an emulating model for all others in the community. The female protagonist of Shyamala is all capable, if not all powerful, of unleashing of her wrath on the rigid, stubborn and insensitive male bastion. Shyamala's short stories cross the borders of popular canon and make a clean break with the tales of oppression and misery decreed the subject of subaltern writing. Her protagonist progresses from subjugation to sovereignty. She clings to the intuitive feeling 'where there is oppression, there is resistance', and through resistance she remodels

herself into a more courageous and enduring phenomenon.

Fear is one of the obtrusive elements that lurks the cultural paradigms of the productive classes. It reigns in the domestic and social arenas in the subaltern communities. Often the head of the family, obviously the father, yields power and at the slightest pretext causes violence to reign in the other members of the family. He is the ultimate authority who cannot be questioned by anyone including his father or mother. Often the other members of the family directly or indirectly become victims of his intemperate behavior. Fear functions in the family and decides the outcome of many issues. It does not mean father does not bear love for the family members. His love for them is influenced by the developments in the social construction. The upper caste domination and its manipulations decide the love equations of the father in the family. It is evident in the first story of the collection of the short stories.

Susie Tharu, a culture critic, analyzing the elements of violence in the first story 'Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a small Basket, But..' says, 'The father, who returns from his wanderings, weary and anxious, and suddenly turns violent, accusing his wife of having cheated on him, is her alley here, and the child's too; they pull together in the story of her escape'<sup>6</sup>. His behavior is often conditioned by the social equations and the distortions that take place in the social structure which have a direct bearing upon his psychology. The girl narrator shudders at the outburst of her father who beats her mother on a slight pretext: 'My father pounced on my mother, "You say it is not fair? You have learnt to talk! What? Have I seen everything? How do I know what you have done?" "Father beat her like she was cattle. She was wailing, saying, Oh mother, I am dead, and he'll take my life." But father did not stop. I felt as if I would die, watching my mother being beaten like that.'

The entire family had waited for several months eagerly for the father to arrive home and to be with them in the small and shaky hut. The upper caste community branded the father 'thief', though he had not stolen a piece of grain from the village landlord's harvest. To escape the humility he left the

village for town to eke out his living, forcing the entire family of six to fend for themselves. But after his arrival, he unleashes his anger on his patient and enduring wife who looked after the entire family and provided succor with her labor during his exile. The sin she committed was she could not provide a little money for his toddy that evening. The mother in this story becomes a victim of her culture that ingrained violence in the form of patriarchy.

Sukkamma the village 'jogini' died an early death having borne the 'misfortunes' of the entire village. Throughout her life she was exploited by the landlords in the name of tradition. She served a culture that could not consider her a living being with a soul. She never enjoyed her natural space. She was always treated as 'other' who treated everyone as hers. When Sukkamma died, the entire 'keri'<sup>7</sup> of the productive community performed the last rites according to their cultural practices. They went in great procession to the beat of 'dappu' and offered 'tangedu flowers'<sup>8</sup> and 'fistful of mud' and recalled her great heart and goodness. But not a single person from the upper castes, who exploited her, came to pay last respects to her nor recalled her sacrifices for the village. While the productive culture she lived held her in high esteem though she did not contribute anything for it, the upper caste culture, the village mainstream culture that exploited her did not even pay her the slightest form of respects at the end of her journey. Shyamala wishes to expose the evil nature of this culture which is anti human and anti social.

Ellamma, the mother in the story 'Braveheart Badeyya' is another emulating model for the women in the world. She rises to the occasion barring her physical infirmities in providing succor to the family. She vehemently rejects her husband's suggestion of begging food for a few days in the aftermath of injury to her foot. The cultural practice of a subaltern woman removing the slippers in the presence of a village landlord proves too dear to her. While upper caste dominant culture subjugated, her own productive culture makes her resistant and strong enough to remain with self respect. In the aftermath of her injury, Ellamma, the mother says, "No. How can I stay home without doing any work? I want to come but I'll need

slippers. And why don't you arrange for some medicine for my night blindness?" Her psychological strength that she derives from the productive culture makes her resilient and a strong protagonist. She marches against innumerable odds posed by the upper caste culture and proves her mettle. She does not curse her culture or blame fate or others for her pitiable situation, rather she moves ahead, "I am born in the caste that makes slippers for everybody, but my own feet are left bare. Let me sit for a while." She only wants a little rest to recuperate not to stop her marching! The existential urge in Ellamma forces her to go ahead braving the odds created by the culture of upper castes.

Shyamala portrays the woman characters as 'empowered' within the circumstances of the subalternity and wishes to make a statement to the world and to her readers, what Mridula Garg 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"<sup>9</sup>. Shyamala's protagonists wage relentless struggles to be different from the given world and craft their own course within the productive cultures.

The upper caste main stream culture poses a grave threat to 'Baindla Saayamma', the protagonist in the short story, 'But Why Shouldn't the Baindla Woman Ask for Her Land?' Her parents and grandparents too faced threats from the dominant forces. Land being the main factor in the caste conflicts, Saayamma having realized the exploitation of the productive castes, revolts against the feudalistic forces and sends shivers down the backbone of the caste forces. Now, she is an empowered woman. She realizes the strength of her productive culture and revolts against the age old suppressive and exploiting culture of the dora. "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.

The existential angst caused by the upper caste dominating cultural construction is relieved! The change is penetrating! Culture cauldron is boiling!

The saga of Chindu Ellamma in 'Jambava's Lineage' is another fine construction of resistance by the protagonist 'Ellamma' putting up bravery, poise and tolerance. Ellamma and her family eke out life by performing 'chindu'<sup>10</sup> to propitiate gods and goddesses of the productive cultures. But they are humiliated and ill-treated by the upper caste forces. The younger ones in Ellamma's chindu troupe find it difficult to go ahead with the performance of the art of chindu in the face of humiliations. Upper caste culture resists and denounces chindu Ellamma and her troupe. But the productive cultures extend a warm welcome to her in every village, even the elders in the 'sabbands' 'touch her feet': 'First the elders pay their respects to Ellamma by touching her feet. She places her hands on their heads and blesses them saying, "Live peacefully, my children." Now, the younger ones in the upper castes leer at Ellamma and cause obstacles to the performances. Ellamma with her poise and time tested experience tells her children that the culture of the upper castes was inhuman and anti social: "Theirs was an uncivilized world, one that knew no humanity". She continues, "Like the eagle swoops down to carry away the chickens, they have swooped down and taken away the land, the air, the water, our work and our tools". Ellamma does not lose poise and imbibes courage and tolerance into the children so that their culture can be protected and preserved for the future generations, lest the rich productive culture would be pushed to limbo. Ellamma is an emulating model for many given the way she maintains poise, tolerance, and courage in thwarting the attempts of the upper caste forces to protect her culture and wade through the life's journey.

Feminism has remained a focal point for the contemporary subaltern women writers. Individual identity and challenging the traditional social construction are the main themes in their writings. They call upon the dalit women to recognize their inherent powers and lead an authentic and matriarchal ways of life. The protagonist Ellamma in 'Ellamma is Distressed' rises

to the proud position of owning twenty acres of land with grit and courage, wading through many obstacles caused by the upper caste village administrative mechanism. With her sheer intelligence and courage of conviction she wins over them and remains a source of inspiration for the entire community of the subalterns. The way she rebuts the upper caste machinations and the way she walks tall like a towering personality in the village inspires the readers and implies the mind of the writer that the domination and control of the upper caste forces on the village structure is artificial and it could be dismantled easily by the power of the woman. Ellamma maintains the same level of authenticity in her voice either in domestic matters or in social issues. Even the village landlord toes her line at times and raises no voice of dissent against her decisions. She changes the cultural paradigm.

Ellamma is a mother of thirteen children and her femininity does not bear an iota of weariness. At the same time Ellamma is like earth goddess: 'She is open and affectionate in her speech. People say of her: "Ellamma's warmth is like that of the earth itself. That is why she could cultivate twenty acres of land and give birth to many children. Her house is a fertile place, bursting with children; both the house and the granary are overflowing with them." 'Everyone in the village believes that the gift of fortune lies in Ellamma's hands, her feet and her words. Even people from the next village say the same thing. No upper caste woman has this gift. When a girl comes of age or gets married, her relatives call Ellamma and fill her lap with grain and fruit. 'While the intra-community cultural moorings respect her and see in her a goddess the social existence in the larger community is antagonistic to her. The upper caste persons call her "Elli", a singular form of address, denouncing her identity.

It is with awe and amazement that the reader finds the fine delineation of these women characters constructing resistance against oppressive cultures. Their relentless struggles cause consternation in the domineering forces and provide a fillip and a ray of hope to the subjugated sections of the society.

**Notes and references**

- [1]. Madiga: About four percent of this community lives in Telangana, who have been waging an identity struggle for the last twenty years for a better democratic space.
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  - [7]. Keri: street or lane
  - [8]. Tangedu flowers: yellow colored flowers of a shrub that is widely grown in Telangana
  - [9]. Garg, Mridula. *Intervention of Women's Writing in Making of Literature: Indian Literature*. No.276: July/August 2013, Vol.LVII No.4 (p. 181)
  - [10]. Chindu: folk form of chanting hymns to village deities in subaltern communities.
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