

THE AGONY OF A DALIT CHRISTIAN WOMEN

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Abstract

The research engages in a critical examination of the character of Suvarthavani in “The Parable of the Lost Daughter,” a short story by M.M Vinodini. Ashamed of her identity as a Dalit Christian girl, Suvarthavani adopts a rather contemptuous attitude towards her own community and attempts to fashion a new ‘privileged’ self by mimicking the mannerisms of the upper caste. Her gradual realization of the hypocrisy of the upper caste and their contempt for people of her community makes her accept her folly and enables her to respect her own community and culture. By pointing out her denial and eventual acceptance of the basic aspects of her life and identity, the paper argues that liberation from social constraints of caste (and gender) can never be achieved by an internalized sense of the supposed superiority of the upper caste. Such liberation involves not just educational or financial empowerment but also an ability to free oneself from the mental shackles of power binaries and hierarchical arrangements and an acceptance of one’s own self. An individual or a community can never be delivered from oppression in the presence of an unchallenged socially conditioned and internalized power structure within themselves. Subsequently ‘freedom of mind’ becomes as significant as the external factors that contribute to this liberation and empowerment.

Keywords: Agony, marginalized, caste, gender, Dalit, patriarchal, self, identity

Introduction

The literary terrain in the contemporary times has been marked by marginalized voices and subaltern narratives that can no longer be ignored or overlooked. Frequent debates on human rights, rising prominence of theory and post-colonial literature, interrogation of existing power binaries, acceptance of mini-narratives and multiplicities in perspectives, and the willingness to experiment in literature are some of the factors that served to create a foundational base for the birth of stories of the marginalized in literature. Marginalized literature is at once an expression of social reality and a testimony of the brutalities faced by such communities, the passionate outburst of experiences hidden and voices silenced for a long time.

Denied of their rightful status and respect in the social sphere, the marginalized sections forcefully let their voices be heard and narratives known through the literary medium.

Literature and the power of the written word lend them a voice so far denied and their stories become powerful weapons in their battle against social discrimination. Experiences of violence and injustice, pain and trauma, find their due space in such texts. As Narayan, who is often described as the first tribal novelist of Kerala, opines in his author's note to the highly acclaimed novel *Kocharethi* (1998), "The marginalized have a life of their own and their writing reflects their perception of life" (vii). The rise of subaltern stories not only brought their so far hidden lives to the literary arena, it also challenged the dominant position held by the colonial white mainstream voice in literature.

Dalit literature, which emerged in the 1960s, occupies a distinct position in Indian literature. Dalit literature, according to Sharankumar Limbale, is that literature which "artistically portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule and poverty endured by Dalits" (qtd. in Rakesh 1). Perhaps the nature of Dalit literature is best outlined by the Dalit feminist writer, Bama in an interview with Jaydeep Sarangi.

According to her:

It is the literature of oppressed people, telling about their pains, agonies, disappointments, defeats, humiliations, oppressions and depressions. It also speaks about their vibrant culture, dreams, values, convictions and their struggle for annihilation of caste in order to build a casteless society. It reveals their resistant and rebellious character, their strength and stamina to live amidst all odds and their resilient nature to love life and live it happily. It brings out their inborn tendency to celebrate life and to fight against the caste-ridden society by breaking through this inhuman system without breaking themselves. It liberates them and gives them their identity. It heals them and strengthens them to fight for their rights.

N. Krishna murthy and Susie Tharu see Dalit literature as "a social movement invested in the battle against injustice and driven by the hope of freedom..." (7). Works such as Laxman Gaikwad's *Uchalya* (1998), Bama's *Karukku* (2001), Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (2003), Sharankumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi* (2007), and Vasant Moon's *Growing up Untouchable in India* (2007) shed light on the pitiable conditions of their life and their lamentable position in the social fringes despite years of independence and freedom. Representing the lives of the Dalits, it is an "attempt to articulate unheard, unspoken voices" and the "fight of the subjugated victims of society for liberty, honor, security and freedom from coercions from the authoritative rudiments of the society" (Kejiya and Tokala 401).

Instead of following the rules of an already established grand literary canon or creating artistic masterpieces that may stand the test of time, the foremost and ultimate aim of such writings is social change. While a total ignorance of the growing corpus of Dalit texts is certainly impossible, there have been efforts to marginalize them in the literary sphere, perhaps an attempt to duplicate their social marginalization. While many have accepted the

revolutionary strain and the rawness of reality depicted in Dalit literary texts, there are an equal number of contestations and debates regarding the aesthetic quality and literary value of such texts. B.Krsihnappa, the founder- president of the Dalit Sangharasha Samiti, replies to such debates as he points out, “When the purpose is to provoke people against injustice, there is no scope for old aesthetic pleasures or artistic creativity or, indeed abstruse similes and metaphors. Dalit literature is not the literature of those whose stomachs are full” (Krishnappa 109).

Dalit Women's Writing

With feminism having expanded and branched out into feminisms, it has taken up issues of diverse sections of women, grappling with the question of gender in different spaces, contexts and intersectional borders. The Dalit experience cannot be grasped completely without taking into consideration the experiences of the Dalit women. However the experiences of Dalit women were for a long time ignored by the caste-ridden patriarchal society. Sharmila Rege in her article titled “A Dalit Feminist Standpoint” talks of the “masculinization” and “savarisation of womanhood, leading to a classical exclusion of Dalit womanhood” (qtd. in Kejiya and Tokala 398). The emergence of autobiographies and other literary works by Dalit women and the rise of Dalit feminism has granted them a new visibility and a bold voice in the literary and social spheres. Dalit women, through their works, narrated their experiences and interrogated the conflation of gender roles and caste issues that push them to a doubly marginalized position. Talking about the status of women in the Indian society, Raj Kumar, in his Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Gender, Identity, says, “Unfortunately the caste system operates with gender oppression subtly and surely.

That's why if the higher caste/class women themselves subject to gender oppression, the women come from less privileged sections such as Dalits and adivasis are doubly vulnerable” (qtd. in Rajesh 16-17). When Dalit women writers such as Bama, Urmila Pawar, P. Sivakami. Shantabai Kamble, Kumud Pawade, Gogu Shyamala. Challapalli Swaroopa Rani, Madduri Vijayasri and M. M. Vinodini took to writing; the result was a collection of narratives that sketched the predicament of Dalit women in a society which works on the norms of class, caste and gender. These texts are powerful voices that speak to the readers of the Dalit woman trapped in a multi-layered and multi-stranded oppressive web of hierarchy, weighed down by gender and caste. These are heart-wrenching tales of oppression, violence, struggle, endurance, and above all the determination to rise despite the socially imposed shackles of gender and caste.

M. M. Vinodini, the author of “The Parable of the Lost Daughter”, is a scholar and a Dalit feminist writer who hails from Andhra Pradesh. Born into a family of Dalit Christians, her writings emphasize feminist aspects in the Dalit context. An Assistant Professor at Yogi Vemana University, her works usually focus on the everyday lives of Dalit women. For M.M. Vinodini, “awareness about identity consciousness alone will not bind all women together as every woman has multiple identities and she gets discriminated on the basis of these counts”

(qtd. in Kidwai). She further elaborates, “feminist concerns take on a totally different color in the Dalit context as they are concerned not with the issues of gender, desire, realization of the individual self and sexual freedom but are very particular about the issues of hate and pollution that perpetuate a sort of ‘self-contempt’ among Dalit women” (qtd. in Jyotirmai and Ramesh 146).

Suvarthavani’s Journey Towards the Self “The Parable of the Lost Daughter” written in Telugu and translated by Uma Bhrugubanda, revolves around Suvarthavani, an intelligent, academically bright and a beautiful Dalit Christian girl. Suvarthavani is the daughter of Paladasu, who works as a carpenter during the daytime and as a rickshaw puller at night. Despite their poverty and bitter existence, the couple struggle hard to educate her as they “wanted their daughter to have a life that was unlike theirs.

They wanted her to be happy and respected, and they believed that education alone helped a person achieve these” (Vinodini 167). As Suvarthavani completes post-graduation from a college in Rajahmundry and befriends a Brahmin girl, Gayatri, she gets impressed by the latter’s upper caste life. She consequently develops a fondness for her friend’s upper caste ways characterized by a simultaneous dislike and rejection of her own community and practices. Being pretty, educated and intelligent, she sees her caste as the only detrimental aspect in her life. Hence Suvarthavani’s growing fondness for Gayatri’s Brahmin family is accompanied by a rising contempt for her own family and community. She tries to distance herself from her ‘Christian Dalit self’ and attempts to adorn the ‘brahmanical mask’ considering it to be a signifier of elegance, respect and status. Her Dalit existence shames her as much as she admires the ways of her friend’s Brahmin household. Similar to the “the colored woman who endeavors to ‘whiten the black race’ Vani longs for ‘sanctification’ of all Dalits” (Jyotirmai and Ramesh 146).

Like the colonized self who accepts and internalizes his own inferiority and the superiority of the colonizer and attempts to be like the latter, Suvarthavani becomes the “Fanonian black woman” ...with a “brahmanical mask” (Jyotirmai and Ramesh 146) and an archetype of the oppressed woman who looks up to and yearns to be like her elite sisters of the higher castes. She dresses up and talks like the upper caste. As she comes (or at least as she thinks) closer to her friend’s upper caste family, she sheds off parts of her Dalit existence and identity. Just like she drops the ‘Suvartha’ from her name and abbreviates it to Vani or S. Vani, she attempts to estrange herself from her very roots of existence. She forces herself to develop a taste for Sanskrit, classical literature and poetry, all of which she considers are markers of elegance and sophistication. She fusses about aspects of touch, purity and cleanliness at home and gives up eating meat.

She also develops other habits like “bunking church, wearing a red thread around her wrist like many Hindus do, and wearing a bottu whenever she visited Gayatri’s house” (168).

Not only does she pay extra attention to her appearance, manners and language, she also insists and expects the same from the members of her family. The comparison she draws between her lacklustre family and life, and the supposedly elegant life led by Gayatri's family makes her come closer to the latter and estrange herself from her own dearest ones.

When Suvarthavani has to attend a spot valuation at a university in Hyderabad, she decides to stay with Gayatri's parents who recently shifted there. Although Gayatri settled abroad following her marriage, Suvarthavani feels that she still enjoys the same freedom in her the house. She fails to notice the discomfort and contempt in Gayatri's parents' attitude towards her and thinks of them as her own family. It is during her week- long stay with her friend's family that she finally sees their real colours. From this point, the story binds together feminist and Dalit concerns, taking on the question of a woman's status and position in a male dominated society, particularly emphasizing the status of a Dalit woman in a caste- ridden male dominated society. Although the story primarily revolves around the central character, Suvarthavani, and caste issues, it also highlights the secondary position faced by women in the society, regardless of caste or class.

This is reflected through the attitude and behaviour of the men in the story towards women and also through certain customs such as the menstrual taboo. Menstruating women are often considered 'impure' and are required to follow certain practices during their menstruating days. During Suvarthavani's stay at Gayatri's house in Hyderabad, she is worried about whether she might menstruate. To put it in simpler terms, she is worried about the beliefs and practices followed by Gayatri's Brahmin family in relation to menstruation. She wonders about whether or not to tell Gayatri's mother or sister about her menstruation and how to dispose the used pads if she hides her menstruating status from them. Most importantly, she is anxious about the kind of practices followed by the menstruating women in their family. "Would she also have to sit separately in that small space near the bathroom without touching the rest of the, like Gayatri's sister did recently? Would she have to wash her won plate and glass and leave it here too?"(172-73). The story also hints that menstrual taboo is higher among the upper castes as such concerns do not really matter in Suvarthavani's own house.

The position accorded to women in a patriarchal space, particularly the position of the Dalit woman is best exemplified through two significant characters in the tale- Mr. Piratla Subramaniam and Gayatri's brother-in-law. During her stay at Gayatri's place, Suvarthavani is disturbed by the attitude of Gayatri's brother-in-law. One day as she is on her way back home, he offers her a lift, deliberately aiming at the potholes and applying brakes unnecessarily.

He takes her to a café and expresses his opinion on the sexual and moral codes of Dalit Christian girls and talks about his "friendly" (174) relations with several of them. His thoughts about using Dalit women for sexual pleasure and his cheap remarks on the women of her

community shock her. Brother-in law's remarks remind the readers of a line from M.M Vinodini's story "Mariya" - "No one practices untouchability when it comes to sex" (qtd. in Kote). One can also trace parallels to the "'hegemonic power' that the white man assumes to sleep with his black female slaves with that of the brahmin man's 'ideological hegemony' that stereotypes Dalit women as being careless in morality and chastity" (Jyotirmai and Ramesh 147). She realizes that despite his external gentlemanly appearance and claims of being a respectable Brahmin, he is every bit a male chauvinist who has no respect for women, particularly for those from the lower castes.

Gayatri's father, Subramaniam is a writer who has authored numerous books, the subjects of which are "oppressed castes, exploited classes, the poor and the needy, lonely women [and] prostitutes" (172).

As a writer, he espouses rather progressive and modern views and his narratives often feature handsome young men from upper castes marrying women from the lower castes or class. One naturally expects Subramaniam to be a progressive minded writer with a remarkable sense of social equality and a creative artist with enough of broad-mindedness to accept those on the fringes of the social sphere. His willingness to take up even prostitutes as subjects of his literary creations creates an impressive mark in the minds of the readers. However the reality of his attitude towards women is far from what he depicts in his writings. This is clearly seen in his attitude towards his wife, Kameswaramma. During her week- long stay at Gayatri's house, Suvarthavani observes that Subramaniam is "always nagging his wife or scolding someone or the other loudly over the phone" (172). But the depth of his patriarchal dominance and caste prejudices are blatantly exposed when Suvarthavani hears him shouting at his wife when he returns home at night and sees that Kameswaramma has missed out one bolt when the carpenter came home to repair the bolts.

His abusive language sums up his attitude towards women and the low castes. The hypocrisy and double standards of Subramaniam as a writer who voiced the concerns of the voiceless through his artistic creations is laid bare as Suvarthavani realizes that "there was nothing in common between the lofty words spoken by the protagonists of those books [authored by him] and the abuses he used just now" (177). In fact she realizes that his abuses are aimed not only at his wife, but also at the lower caste communities in the society. She understands that "it was not just his wife that he abused. He had abused her too! He abused her cast, her religion, and the women of her community and the men of her community" (177).

In fact Mr. Piratala Subramaniam has nothing but utter contempt for the women in his life and for the lower castes. He is merely one of those high caste writers and intellectuals who accept modernity and social equality in the open but hold on to such beliefs behind the closed doors.

The attitude of these two men also reveal the dominant patriarchal strains in the gender relations in family and society- the man who abuses a woman for her follies linking it to her supposedly sexually fallen nature and woman being considered as a man's sexual property. Their words and attitude also cement and perpetuate gender hierarchy and caste prejudices.

Hence Gayatri's father who abuses his wife as a woman with loose morals and her brother-in-law who thinks of lower caste women as objects of sexual pleasure are both representatives of a typical patriarchal mindset. This is no surprise since "for much of recorded history women were the property of men, with their value as property measured largely by their sexual "purity"(Whisnant 2017). Subramaniam's attitude also reveals the male tendency to link a woman's mistakes and character to her (supposed/imagined/real) sexual nature. When he discovers that his wife forgot to ask the carpenter to repair the bolt on the main gate, he immediately abuses her claiming her to be a sexually fallen woman. Perhaps it is significant to note that while he writes of prostitutes in his stories (probably espousing their cause), he considers his own wife as a "rotten old whore" (176) for a slight mistake.

Brother-in-law's remarks on the lower caste women and Subramaniam's contempt for them (as revealed through his abusive language) shocks Suvarthavani and the truth finally dawns on her. While the former sees Dalit Christian girls as readily available sexual objects, the latter merely uses them to create literary pieces that talk of social equality and progress. She now thinks of all those experiences which she earlier overlooked as insignificant aspects in the way they dealt with her. She remembers how she does not object when Gayatri applies a bottu on her face before taking her home or when she refuses to apply turmeric on Suvarthavani's feet during a ceremony pointing out that "brahmins shouldn't touch the feet of harijans" (170). She recollects the remarks made by people surprised at her beauty and caste, and comments such as "are there such lovely girls among the harijans!" (169). She ponders upon her foolish attempts to adorn a façade of upper caste mannerisms and her inability to recognize the hypocrisy of Gayatri's family.

She began to think of the number of times he was humiliated and insulted because of her caste. She thought of the time Gayatri placed a bottu on her forehead without even asking her. She thought of the time when Gayatri avoided drubbing turmeric on her feet alone in that large gathering of women. It didn't matter that she was her friend. She was a harijan and therefore untouchable. Why did ever think that their customs and their language were respectable? Why could she not respect her own language and culture? (176)

When Suvarthavani bids farewell to Gayatri's parents while leaving for the university on the final day of her stay, she purposefully avoids her bottu, something that she always wore when she was at Gayatri's house. When Kameswaramma reminds her that she has forgotten her

bottu, she replies, “No, Mother. I haven’t forgotten. I am a Christian girl. I am a Dalit girl” (177).

Saying so, she walks out of the house. As she leaves the place without her bottu and wearing her little Jesus pendant (which she had earlier hidden), she also sheds behind her mask of upper caste respect and accepts her own true self- her identity as a Dalit Christian woman. She accepts her religion, her caste and her ‘self’ as a girl with her own dignity and respect. She comes to terms with the roots of her existence. She no longer wishes to hide her real self behind a make-believe façade and is now confident and happy of whom she is. She leaves behind pretensions and worries and steps into a world of freedom and liberation- liberation from social notions of caste and gender and her expectations of rising to meet them, a liberation that comes only when one accepts what or who one really is. She frees herself from the shackles she had put upon herself and embraces that part of her identity that she had been ashamed of for so long. Not allowing herself to be a victim of brother-in-law’s sexual whims or Subramaniam’s disdain for her caste, she thus finally emerges as a strong woman ready to lead her life on her own terms. Hence Suvarthavani returns to her roots, her family, community and identity just as the prodigal son in the Gospel who repents and returns to his father.

Conclusion

“The Parable of the Lost Daughter” by M.M. Vinodini highlights several issues related to caste and gender. It however takes a detour from the usually depicted representation of Dalit women as doubly marginalized victims and presents a well-educated and empowered girl being a prisoner in her self-constructed power maze. It outlines Suvarthavani’s “huge leaps to move as far as she could from them [her family and community] to reach the other side” (Vinodini 169), her gradual realization of the hypocrisy of the upper castes and her own foolishness to be like them, and her final decision to ‘come back’ to her identity as a Dalit Christian woman. It charts the journey of an educated, intelligent and beautiful girl who initially perceives her caste and religion as shameful, but eventually comes to terms with it. The self-introspective journey that she undertakes reminds the readers of the significance of ‘mental’ or ‘inner’ liberation, an aspect that is as important as the external aspects such as education and employment.

True liberation in terms of caste or gender constraints can never be achieved if one believes in lopsided power binaries. At times, an internalized sense of supposed inferiority affects one’s self-esteem and proves to be a great hurdle for those in the lower rungs of the social ladder. In framing the narrative of Suvarthavani, the writer points out the futility of creating a mimicked self, negating one’s real identity. Such attempts only lead to internal conflicts and dilemmas. Suvarthavani’s mistake does not lie in innocently aping Gayatri’s upper caste family; it lies in the superiority she associates with them and the power equation she constructs in her mind placing her own community in the secondary position. While she has almost all other desirable qualities such as intelligence, beauty, education, employment etc., it is her mental imprisonment to caste binaries that prevents her from accepting her real self and

being happy. While Fanon's colonized puts on the white mask on his black skin, Suvarthavani puts on the upper caste garment on her Dalit self. But her liberation and independence lies in the fact that she is able to shed off this mask before it's too late. In her, the readers come across a girl who accepts her true identity and discovers her 'self'. Thus in a society where caste notions and patriarchy strut as norms, she emerges as a woman bold enough to break free of the mental shackles of caste and gender.

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