

Dalit Consciousness and Identity through Folk Tradition and Oral Narratives in Gogu Shyamala's Literary Works

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ABSTRACT

Gogu Shyamala is a Telugu Dalit female writer, activist, poet, critic, and ardent follower of the Ambekarite movement. She is inspired and motivated by Dr B. R. Ambedkar's thoughts, ideology, and philosophy. Dalit literature is an emerging literary trend in modern Indian literature. It was initiated by Marathi Dalit writers in the mid-20th century. It started in Maharashtra and soon spread to the rest of the regional languages in India. Marginal literature has used folk tradition and oral narratives to represent Dalit oppression, sufferings, and issues, especially Dalit women's issues. Folk songs are the hallmark of Dalit consciousness in literature, and Oral narratives are the best examples of the continuation of Dalit thoughts, expressions and feelings to future generations. Gogu Shyamala has been using folk and oral forms to depict Dalit oppression by the dominant society. The research paper focuses on four works by Gogu Shyamala *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket But...*, *Takaki Wins Again*, *Jambava's Lineage*, and *The Village Tank's Lament*. While narrating these stories, she has explored how Dalits have been humiliated, insulted, and degraded by caste-based society's norms. Dominant society's literature did not consider Dalit issues. Therefore, this study emphasises that oral and folk forms are not merely devices to explore Dalit oppression but also a continuation of Dalit history.

Keywords: Folk Tradition, Oral Narratives, Dalit Consciousness, Dalit Voice, and Women's Issues.

INTRODUCTION

Gogu Shyamala draws the attention of the modern reader through conscious illustrations of Dalit oppression. She is a Dalit poetess, activist, and creative writer in Telugu, and has produced literary works in the genre of novels, novellas, short stories, articles and poems. She is influenced by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's thoughts and philosophy, which are rendered through literary works. Her early life was full of hurdles and problems; she faced critical situations, and her parents were the vetti (unpaid forced labour) labourers. Gogu Shyamala's thoughts are narrated through folk songs and oral narratives. Folk songs or music is diverse because of India's enormous cultural and traditional diversity, which is sung in various regional languages and dialects throughout the length and breadth of this great nation and exported to different parts of the world owing to migration.

She has used oral narrative techniques as a medium to continue Dalits' views in literature. An oral narrative is a story passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation. It is used to convey history, culture and values through spoken tales such as myths, legends and fables, which engage audiences and preserve collective memory across generations. Gogu Shyamala used oral and folk forms as a tool to express Dalit folk tradition and oral narrative; such works are *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But...* This work discusses Dalit folk songs, art, craft, and their beliefs in tradition. *The Takaki Wins Again* is an example of Myths in folk tradition. *Jambava's Lineage* is a story, an example of oral literature that orally describes Jambava's beliefs and practices. *The Village Tank's Lament* is a folk story of lamentation. It reveals how Dalit's neglected and rejected by the upper-caste society. The story expresses Dalit consciousness, needs and pains through 'Tank'. Dalit consciousness is traced and developed through folk and oral traditions. 'Tataki' and 'Jambava' characters are examples of myths presented in the oral traditions. Marginalised history is silenced by mainstream literature, but folk and oral forms bring life to it, which is passed down from generation to generations. Oral forms of literature undergo alteration due to the formation of regional stories; therefore, they may change from generation to generation or from place to place. This paper has meticulously analysed marginalised communities' folk songs, oral narratives, and Dalit consciousness in the works of Gogu Shyamala.

Folk songs are the songs of common people and depicts the history of daily routine. Dalit folk songs are organised and produced effortlessly during labour in the field or festivals, where they can express pain, protest, or hope. *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But...* is an example of the narration of folk songs in Dalit narratives. Dalits have expressed social or personal pains and sorrowful moments through folk songs, uses as a medium to express happy or joyful moment, sorrowfulness, sadness, and hard times in Dalits live. Dalit folk songs are interesting and curious; some of them are melodious and mournful. Most of the songs render the darker side of Dalit life, for example, Pandugala Sayanna's folk song in this story.

“Orori Sayanna, oh Panduga Sayanna!
 Paalamuricedigas’
 Carts of rice are going,
 twelve puttis of rice are going,
 Going to Tandur!
 Don’t let go: even if you lose your life,
 Don’t let go, Sayanna,
 Kin Kin Kin...,
 Kottapeta market,
 on your head a blanket.
 Sayalu, you run,
 I run, Sayalu.” (Shamala 14).

Dalits have expertise in generating folk songs on any topics and, as well as other skilful labour in embroidery; for example, in this story, the craft and embroidery of skill of Balapa’s wife, who belongs to the Madiga community, are known as Kulla or Kunch is in the Telangana region. Dalits are socially marginalised, and their skills are not noticed and neglected, but their skills are highly competitive.

“My mother is just brilliant at stitching Kunchi! That’s why our neighbour Ningampalli Sayavva would say in praise of my mother, “Her fingers spin like tops... she is the fastest at stitching kunch is”(Shamala 16).

Takaki Wins Again is a story depicts as a mythological and oral form of narrative written by Gogu Shyamala. ‘Takaki’ is the name of a character in the sub-stories of the Ramayan. The story is an example of the treatment of Dalit women by the dominant communities; they have practised to use derogative words to insult Dalit women. This oral narrative meticulously describes Dalit women’s humiliation and exploitation in the caste-dominated society. If you study the history of Dalits, you will find that Dalit women have been victimised by multiple oppressions such as caste, gender, race, and class. The comprehensive study of the story reveals that Dalit women’s resistance against caste dominance and patriarchal norms, which are forcefully enforced on Dalits, especially Dalit children and women. ‘Tataki’ is portrayed as the central character and young protagonist of the story, who is helping her family by doing hard labour of watering groundnut fields, which is her ancestor’s agricultural land. Her hard work is not tolerated by Karnam, who is a prominent landlord in their village and belongs to the upper caste society. The climax of the story reveals that Takaki’s defiant act of kicking a landlord symbolises a break from generational subjugation and a reclaiming of power.

‘Takaki’ is not the real name of the character, but it is derogatorily called to ‘Balamma’ by dominated caste landlord Karnam. For example, in this story

“Takaki! You bloody witch! You are a small girl, are you? What makes you come here like a man and water the groundnut field? In our houses, girl 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” (Shamala 97).

“Myths are the trace of Dalit narrative oral stories like Tataki; she is also called Tataka. It is the character from the Hindu epic Ramayana. She is a minor character and the wife of Sunda and the mother of Marica; she was cursed by Viswamitra. As the curse, she would harass and attack sages performing yajnas (poojas) in the forest. Ultimately both of them were slain by Rama and Lakshmana on the behest of their teacher, Viswamitra” (Naman d932).

Jambava’s Lineage story is an example of the oral form of Dalit narrative written by Gogu Shyamala. Jambava’s story represents the oral form that narrates Dalit history and tradition. For example, in this story, Ellamma tells the story of Jambavathatha and his philosophy as part of the oral narration of Dalit ancestors’ history.

“We need to think a little deeply about everything, my Child! We should not get upset over these things or take them to heart. We must carry on the responsibility handed down to us by our Jambavathatha” (Shyamala 79).

Jambava is the ancestor of the Madiga community. It is a short story that explores the pains and problems of Madiga and the sub caste people. These marginalised people have to surrender to the dominant upper-caste people in all aspects. This story was narrated to Ellamma, Cina Ellamma and Saraiah. Dalit people suffered from many problems, while Dalit women faced double oppressions due to caste and gender.

This story depicts how Dalit women have to survive intersectional oppression in society. “Ellamma said, ‘For the sake of the labouring singing people, we have cherished and upheld grandfather Jambava’s heritage. We do not consider the Brahman as superior to us. That is why in the Jambavapuram the brahman are criticized so much. How did the Reddy and velama behave? Asked Saraiah. They generally follow the brahman, behaving as though they were their tails! (Shyamala 83).

The Village Tank's Lament is a folk story of lamentation, Dalit consciousness, and oral narrative tradition, in which the Tank laments before the granddaughter, 'Madiga Ellamma'. Upper-caste people used the Tank to increase their wealth, improve their property, and earn money. When the Tank was filled with water, everyone has use of it; people washed their clothes, children played in the water, and women and men took a bath using Tank water. Forest animals and villagers quenched their thirst from it. The Tank satisfied everyone who lived around it. However, when the Tank became empty, no one cared for it anymore. The Tank laments for the sake of the Sabbanda caste people. Upper-caste people benefit from the Tanks and grow wealthy, but they neglect the Tanks when it dries up. In contrast, the Sabbanda people, who are also marginalised, care for the Tanks but do not own land to utilise the water, and as a result, they remain poor. They are forced to work under upper-caste people for daily wages.

'Tank' laments such as 'Those who care for me don't have land below me. If they do have land, these are not irrigated by the tank. They can only cultivate their lands when it rains. At other times, they have to work as wage labourers in the big field. They are vetti (day labour) people, aren't they? They can live only if they work. They belong to the Sabbanda castes' (Shyamala 108).

Gogu Shyamala wrote this short story to express the lamentation of marginalised people in a caste-dominated society. Tank's lamentation symbolises the Dalits' struggle to survive in a caste-dominated society. The dominant castes have their own land to do agriculture. They will cultivate to improve their wealth and social status. Dalits don't have a single acre of land to develop their property. Even if they have land; they are not good for cultivation; they don't have proper irrigation facilities. Thus, this story powerfully portrays the lamentation of marginalised communities in a caste-based society.

CONCLUSION

However, Upper-caste narratives have never given space to Dalit history; they have been neglecting Dalits in their narratives. There was no space for the Dalits' views in upper caste-dominated-ancient literature. Dalit writers have used oral narratives, myths, and folk tradition or music to rebuild a past that represents Dalits lived experiences, sufferings and struggles. For example, Bama and Namdeo Dhasal have used folk songs and oral narrative techniques to trace the existence of Dalit communities against caste oppression. Dalit narratives often illustrate Dalits' struggle and fight for their rightful place in history. Dalit's history existed in oral narrative stories and folk traditional songs. Ravidas and Chokhamela, who are Bhakti movement poets, infused their poetry with folk elements and inculcated Dalits' struggle, pain, and problems in their poetry. Contemporary Dalit writers have been continuing this tradition to preserve Dalit history for future generation. Arjun Dangle, Omprakash Valmiki, Daya Pawar, and Sharan kumar Limbale incorporated folk tradition and oral narrative forms in their writings to emphasise themes of justice, dignity, and resistance. Gogu Shyamala is one of the prominent Dalit writers to represent Dalit folk tradition and oral narrative forms in Dalit literature.

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