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RESILIENT NARRATIVES: EXPLORING GOGU SHYAMALA'S PORTRAITS OF DALIT WOMEN IN FATHER MAY BE AN ELEPHANT AND MOTHER ONLY A SMALL BASKET, BUT

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ABSTRACT

Gogu Shyamala is a well-known Dalit writer and social activist from Andhra Pradesh, and her anthology of short stories entitled *Father may be an Elephant and Mother only a Small Basket*. Shyamala explores themes of resilience, identity, and social injustice. Each story is a poignant reflection of the daily struggles, cultural richness, and indomitable spirit of these women, highlighting their strength in the face of systemic oppression. The collection not only provides a voice to marginalized communities but also challenges the reader to confront the realities of caste and gender discrimination in contemporary India.

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INTRODUCTION

Gogu Shyamala's collection of short stories titled "Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But.." was published in 2012. The collection comprises twelve stories translated by different translators. These stories are significant as they explore the intricate cultural fabric of the Indian subcontinent, particularly focusing on the challenges faced by productive women in subaltern communities over thousands of years. The title, originating from a Telugu saying, underscores the value of a humble mother over a powerful father figure.

The stories shed light on the struggles of women from the Madiga community, who primarily engage in productive labor such as cleaning and cattle rearing in villages. The narratives depict the relentless hardships endured by women, both within the domestic sphere and in the face of caste-based discrimination. Despite these obstacles, the women portrayed in the stories exhibit remarkable courage and resilience for the sake of their families and communities.

Half of the stories center on the challenges faced by women as mothers, navigating patriarchal and caste-based barriers. The other half focus on the experiences of children under the care of these women, showcasing their resilience and intuition. Shyamala's storytelling is often bold, engaging, and infused with the rustic charm of rural life.

The depiction of women and their endurance in the face of social oppression and domestic challenges is unparalleled. Despite the hostile social environment, the love and dedication of these women towards their children transcend all limits, elevating them to a revered status in modern times. Shyamala's portrayal of women in these stories dignifies their humanity and underscores their role as noble beings.

The oppression of women has persisted from ancient times to the modern era, as they have encountered numerous challenges both within and outside the home. Despite facing obstacles, women have been instrumental in managing family affairs, agricultural work, and productivity, surpassing biological limitations. Even during industrialization, women played a vital role in production, often risking their lives and matching their male counterparts in courage. Despite their tireless efforts in both domestic and social spheres, women are still denied equal freedom to men. Attributes such as chastity, sacrifice, tolerance, and gracefulness have been imposed on women, reducing them to mere producers of children or economic goods. Ironically, these natural traits have contributed to women's subjugation over time in the process of cultural development. Throughout history, social constructs in India have suppressed women's natural freedom, order, and space. From ancient times until the late 19th century, women's

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existence was marked by a lack of freedom, happiness, and personal growth.

In the late 19th century, reform movements and cultural revivals sparked discussions about women's rights and their struggles. "Women's Progress" became a central topic in various agendas, with intellectuals examining issues such as women's health, bodies, and productivity. Women were often seen as culturally marginalized, positioned at the lowest rung of the social hierarchy. Over time, reformist and revivalist movements emerged, advocating for women's freedom and liberation despite facing resistance from entrenched social structures.

In the post-independence period, the optimistic outlook for women's progress was overshadowed by the jubilant mood of the nation, leading to the neglect of women's agendas. However, feminist ideologies that originated in Europe during the 1960s gradually spread worldwide, challenging traditional social and cultural norms. By the late 1970s, a clear divide had formed between proponents of women's rights and those adhering to traditional societal patterns.

From the perspective of the subaltern woman writer, all women within the community are revered as goddesses and are perceived as powerful beings. These goddesses can withstand male domination and serve as role models for others in the community. In Shyamala's stories, the female protagonists are portrayed as capable, if not all-powerful, and are able to challenge the rigid and insensitive male dominance. Shyamala's narratives diverge from the conventional tales of oppression and suffering often associated with subaltern writing, as her protagonist's progress from subjugation to sovereignty.

The protagonist, Baidla Saayamma, faces a significant threat from the dominant mainstream culture, particularly the upper caste, in the short story "But Why Shouldn't the Baidla Woman Ask for Her Land?" Her parents and grandparents also experienced similar threats from powerful forces. Given that land ownership is a central issue in caste conflicts, Saayamma recognizes the exploitation faced by productive castes and boldly rebels against feudalistic powers, striking fear into the hearts of the caste elites. She emerges as an empowered woman, understanding the strength of her productive culture and challenging the oppressive traditions upheld by the landlords. Addressing the landlord, Saayamma demands fair compensation for her labor instead of meager wages, suggesting that he should instead offer his daughter as a joint for soothsaying during festivals. She punctuates her defiance by pounding her fist on the table in front of the landlord.

Fear plays a prominent role within the cultural norms of productive classes, manifesting in both domestic and social spheres within subaltern communities. Often, the head of the family, typically the father, wields authority and resorts to violence at the slightest provocation, with other family members becoming victims of his temper. Despite this, it doesn't imply a lack of love from the father towards his family members; rather, his love is influenced by societal constructs, particularly those related to upper caste domination and manipulation.

In the first story of the collection, Ellamma, a mother of thirteen children, is depicted as a resilient figure akin to an earth goddess. She is revered within her community for her warmth and fertility, receiving offerings from relatives during significant life events. However, despite the respect she commands within her community, Ellamma faces antagonism from the upper caste members, who derogatorily address her as "Elli," stripping away her identity.

In his work "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus," Louis Althusser argues that ideological state apparatuses, such as religious and educational institutions, propagate the ideologies of the ruling elite, leading subjects to believe that obedience to authority and acceptance of dominant ideologies are in their own best interest. This creates a system where dissent is perceived as self-harm. In the context of religion, society is inundated with ideologies perpetuated by the dominant few. In Dalit literature, characters often resort to the notion of fate, attributing their suffering to past karma or imagined consequences of past actions, which serves to justify their obedience to caste stigma and socio-economic exploitation.

Sayamma's life in the story "But Why Shouldn't the Baidla Woman Ask for Her Land?" exemplifies the concept of fate as she is bound to the practice of being a jogini, dedicated to the village deity. Despite her protests, Sayamma cannot escape her fate and becomes a jogini, subjected to reliance on upper caste alms and vulnerable to sexual exploitation. This oppression affects her physically, spiritually, and socially.

In another story, "Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But...", Balappa's wife is a victim of domestic violence. Despite shouldering the responsibility of caring for her family in her husband's absence, she eagerly welcomes him home, preparing food and attending to his needs. Yet, she still suffers abuse at his hands when she attempts to question or resist his behavior.

The oppression and marginalization experienced by the female characters in Gogu Shyamala's short stories are vividly depicted. Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that "One is not born woman, but rather becomes one" can be extended to the plight of Dalit women, for whom caste is not a choice but an inherent destiny. Their marginalized status is not a matter of choice but a predetermined reality due to the caste system.

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