

*FATHER MAY BE AN ELEPHANT AND
MOTHER ONLY A SMALL BASKET BUT...*
BY GOGU SHYAMALA



Classroom Notes for
BA English, Semester VI
ENGL3025: Dalit Literature

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A note on these notes...

- Do you think this PPT can replace an actual classroom, where you gossip with your friends and peacefully sleep during by my long-winded antics?
- **Of course, not.**
- Do you think this PPT can replace the texts prescribed in your syllabus?
- **Of course, not. Then what are these notes worth?**
- These notes are just to excite your curiosity for the ideas discussed. To reap most benefits of the notes, read the texts first.
- By the time, you must have noticed there are two inks used here. It's an interactive PPT. The black ink is for me and the red is yours. Pause and think when the **red ink** appears. Wow end-rhyme.



Gogu Shyamala as an author...

- Gogu Shyamala is an Indian author of short fiction, biographies, and editor of several anthologies.
- Born in a family of agricultural laborers of madiga community in 1969 in Peddemul Village of Ranga Reddy district in Telengana (earlier Andhra Pradesh), she became the only one in her family to receive higher education. (Nitin B.)
- Active in student politics (earlier for hostel mess and food rights) of Left orientation, she gained a firm footing later in Ambedkerite movement as she realised caste issues permeate and transgress class struggles.
- She obtained BA in Sociology from BR Ambedkar Open University.
- She currently serves as a Senior Fellow at Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies in Hyderabad.



Her works

- Shyamala is one of the prominent Telegu writers and her prolific works have been translated into various Indian languages including English.
- Her major works are:
 - *Telegu: Enugantha Tandri Kanna Ekula Buttantaa Talli Nayam (English: Father may be an elephant and mother only a small basket, but...)*
 - *Editor: Telegu: Nallappoddu: Dalitha Streela Sahithyam 1921-2002 (English: Black Dawn: Dalit Women's Writings, 1921-2002)*
 - *Telegu: Nallaregatisallu: Madiga adiga Upakulala Aadolla Kathalu (Furrows in Black Soil: The stories of Madiga and Madiga subcaste women)*
 - *Biography of T N Sadalakshmi titled in Telegu as Nene Balaani, T.N. Sadalakshmi Bathuku Katha (The last place for a Dalit woman: The Life of T N Sadalakshmi)*



Father may be an elephant and mother only a small basket, but...

- First of all, it's interesting that the short story has such a long title which makes it a curious paratextual element for the story.
- The title in small caps except the first letter makes it appear as a sentence.
- The last word in the title 'but' signifies a contradiction to the sentence it follows.
- The 3 dots at the end (...) give an impression of a story to be continued, it gives an impression of something left unsaid.
- The metaphor of elephant and basket for father and mother seem to be contextually specific as well as signifiers of gender roles.
- The three dots usually referred as “ellipsis” signify the omission of an idea that is to be understood by the readers or an audience. Where else did we find ellipsis? What about the plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter?



Plot

- You must read the text first to begin a discussion of the plot, the arrangement of the story by the author.
- The plot is linear, straight-forward and follows the law of causality, i.e. each action leads to the forthcoming action and so on.
- The story begins with the children playing chedugudu (**kabadi**) and hide-and-seek on an afternoon outside the village.
- The rain-soaked mother of the narrator brings home green grams which she distributes to her children.
- The advent of the absent father is discussed with aspirational overtones.
- At the end of the story, the father arrives to the pleasant surprise of the family members. The arrival of the father does not necessarily lead to the desired results.



Narrator

- The tale is told in first-person narrative. **In such a technique, the narrator is one of the characters of the story, not an omniscient third-person observer.**
- The narrator is reliable and tells the story from her own perspective. In many Dalit narratives, the autobiographical element is accentuated by the first person narrator who resembles the persona of the actual author,
- **Is the narrator the author herself?**
- Shyamala writes, “My book is entirely based on my experiences - things that I have seen, heard or felt. I do add a few elements here and there to brighten up the book, but the writing is largely from experience.” (Nitin B.)
- Even though the tale describes a familial event, the description from the perspective of a child adds a colourful and non-ideological hue to an apparently political content.



Intersectionality of Victimhood

- At one layer, the story describes the caste-based oppression resulting in the absconding of the child's father as he was falsely accused of thievery by an upper-caste landlord.

The mother says:

“They knew the truth but blamed your father [...] Can we be thieves? We know how to work hard, not how to steal [...] He was scared of being beaten to death, so he has gone god knows where.” (Shyamala 19-20)

- At another layer, when the father works as a wage labourer in town, he is taken into custody by the police.

“With the wages of his labour, he bought a spade and a crowbar, but a police raid took place in the town. The police took place my father as he was waiting for work and charged him a fine.” (Shyamala 21)

- While the father flees to avoid persecution for a crime he didn't commit owing to the caste-based structure of the village, he was persecuted for another offence he didn't commit in the town owing to the problems of unorganised labour. What bad luck!



Intersectionality of Victimhood...

- In yet another layer, when the father returns to the village after the real thief was caught, he abuses and assaults his wife publicly because she couldn't provide him money for drinking toddy. The grandmother says:

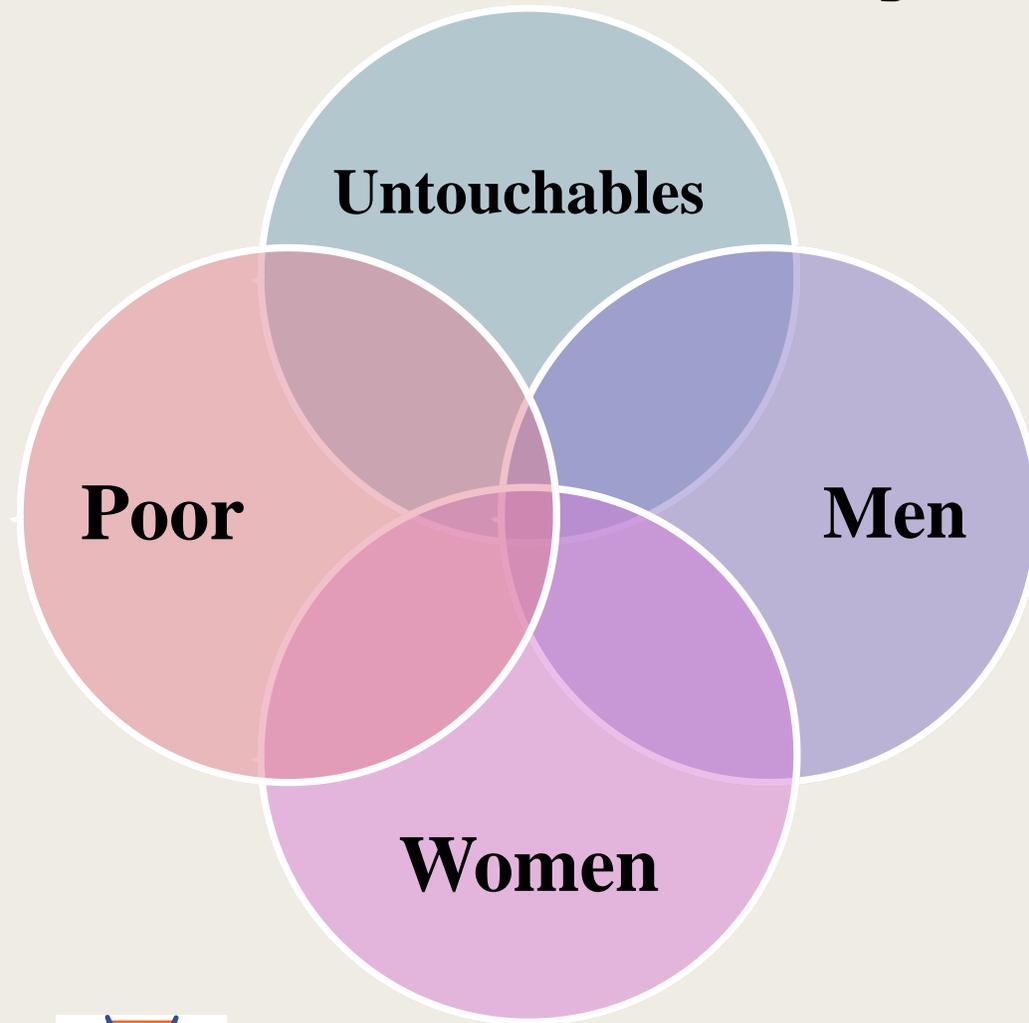
“Not even three days since you came back and you have started beating her up you asshole. [...] If you have the balls go show this anger to the people who called you a thief. When you left us to wander around the country, she looked after your children and me.” (Shyamala 24-25)

- The depiction of a unique state of victimhood of a Dalit female was an astounding element in her story. Shyamala, in her depiction of a domestic incident, was unaware of this dynamics in her own story.

“Shyamala was later amused when she a critic's comment that the conclusion highlighted a dalit woman's oppression. She felt it was completely unintentional as she did not mean to show her father in poor light.” (K. Lalita.)



Intersectionality of Victimhood...



In the context of this story, a poor untouchable woman would find herself in the intersection of victimhood as she is liable to be dominated by a) the male members of her family, b) the upper caste men and women as well as c) affluent people of both gender.

Can you find your own situation as an intersection of various societal factors, distributing privileges as well as deprivations at a global level?



Human Elements in the story

- Shyamala's stories show a human element that penetrates and goes beyond political and ideological rhetoric.
- Set in a village of Madiga community, the stories reflect the childhood joys of looking at the rainbow, the glee of embracing the lost father, singing Pandugala Sayanna's songs, hiding under the mother's kunchi and so on.
- Shyamala writes:

“There are two types of Dalit narratives that you will read and hear about. Either the person is a hero who fought all odds, or a victim. With my writing, I try to present them as normal people like everyone else, to try and battle the mainstream stereotype.” (Nitin B.)
- Find other such elements in the story and imagine such moments of pleasure and pain in your own life.



Symbolism

- The story presents some potent symbols that signify various elements worthy of our attention.
 - *The basket carried by the mother becomes a symbol of the mother. Does it stand for the all-encompassing nature of the maternal affection? What else does it stand for?*
 - *The Kunchi (a garment made of old clothes to protect the head) seems to show the artistic side of the mother as well as her craftsmanship. What else does it stand for?*
 - *The elephant symbolises the wandering father. Why?*
 - *What other symbols can you find in the story? The delicious savoury chicken curry so meticulously prepared by the mother to celebrate the advent of the father also seems to be signifier of something. What do you think?*



Little Story

- In the story under discussion, the narrator doesn't only discuss the events described in the plot. Rather, the story unfolds like a vignette of a bitter-sweet life that has its own tradition.
- The songs sung by children, the games played by them and the community tasks completed by them take us to a world of their own.
- Describing Shyamala's works, K Lalita writes:

“Shyamala's stories seem to inaugurate a new genre of little stories that speak of in feminist scholar Susie Tharu's words, the world of the little subaltern traditions, as against that of the great traditions.” ((251)

Do you think you could document the events in your life with such finesse? Why don't you try once?



Questions for you...

Read the text to find answer to these questions. You can send the answer to my WhatsApp number. The first ten people who answer all the questions correctly will receive a chocolate each when the university reopens. 😊 😊 😊

1. The title of the story refers to a statement made by one of the characters. Who is that character?
2. Who jumped with joy when she/he found all seven colours of the rainbow that blossomed in the sky?
3. How many siblings has the narrator of the story?
4. What is the profession of the eldest brother of the narrator?
5. How did the father pay the fine to the police to be released from custody?
6. Who has given birth to a child prematurely in the neighbouring village?



References

- Nitin B and Gogu Shyamala. “For Gogu Shyamala, being Dalit and woman is survival, beyond victimhood and outside of it” Interview published as a part of *Dalit History Month* in *The News Minute*. Date: 09 April, 2016
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- Shyamala, Gogu. *Father may be an elephant and mother only a small basket, but....* New Delhi, Navayana, 2012.
- Lalita, K. “Lines that cut to the very gut”. In *Gugu Shyamala’s Father may be an elephant and mother only a small basket, but....* New Delhi, Navayana, 2012.



“The little fellow didn’t seem to need a reason to keep laughing”

Laugh like the little fellow in Shyamala’s story.

The days will pass better... 😊

