

Brahmin Patriarchy and Dalit Feminist Rage in M.M. Vinodini's "The Parable of the Lost Daughter".

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Abstract

Caste continues to be a disabling material reality in India. It is perpetuated through 'private' formations like the 'family' as also through other more public "sites of sanskritization" (Rege, 333). Academia plays a foundational role in establishing and perpetuating caste structures. This is achieved through the teacher's disciplinary authority as well as the syllabi's disciplinary 'demands'. This paper attempts to examine how M.M. Vinodini's "The Parable of the Lost Daughter" claims for itself a space that has either been denied to Dalit writers or been usurped by non-Dalit 'progressive' writers. It reminds the reader how caste violence has not abated in a globalized world but has mutated into a treacherous social praxis. The paper also engages with the crucial connection between caste and gender. The paper examines whether the violence of the Brahmin father and the son-in-law towards women of other castes *and* of their own sparks a feminist continuum or if caste trumps any real or imagined solidarity between victims of Brahmin patriarchy.

Keywords: *Ambedkar, academia, caste, Dalit, Dronacharya, Eklavya, sanskritization.*

It is ironical that the most empowering advice to Suvarthavani, a young Dalit woman in M.M. Vinodini's story, "The Parable of the Lost Daughter" comes from the Brahmin brother-in-law of her Brahmin friend, Gayatri: "They (Brahmin women) are too orthodox. We cannot change them. But you are free. You don't need to carry those burdens. You can enjoy life freely" (Vinodini 174). The unsolicited advice is proffered to break down Suvarthavani's resistance to his sexual overtures, himself a married man with a child.

Suvarthavani, a young Dalit woman, after a life of abject poverty is shown working hard towards a life of relative economic possibilities, if not prosperity. A professional requirement

brings her to the city of Hyderabad where the family of a much loved, old classmate, Gayatri, resides. Given that she had always looked upon the Brahmin classmate, Gayatri, as a dear friend and whose father is famous for his anti-caste writings, Suvarthavani assumes a ready welcome to their house and their hearts. The story tracks the one week that Suvarthavani spends in the Brahmin household that does not refuse her entry but also does not extend her the warmth and the hospitality one assumes from old associations. The week in the household awakens Suvarthavani to the family's deep seated, caste based rejection and dislike for her—something she had failed to or refused to acknowledge earlier.

The paper proposes to examine how M.M. Vinodini's story stages the awakening of Dalit, feminist consciousness through the character of Suvarthavani. The first part of the paper will examine how the school, the academia, the savarna family, or what Sharmila Rege calls "sites of sanskritization" (333), effect the dehumanization of Dalits and the erasure of their concerns. The paper will examine how 'modern', 'secular' spaces like the class room are, in reality, constituted through hegemonic savarna demands. Here I also briefly refer to the archetypal classroom crafted by Omprakash Valmiki in *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*. The second part of the paper will examine how caste operates not just by oppressing Dalit men and women but also by structurally manipulating savarna women into accepting their own degraded position within the family. It achieves this by offering them a spurious notional sense of caste security, even as it deprives them of a potentially richer solidarity with women from other castes.

It would be futile to separate the strands of Suvarthavani's victimhood as a Dalit and as a woman, since the two axes together create a very specific kind of vulnerability. However, for the sake of theoretical convenience let us begin by examining how caste comes to be a prison house for not just Suvarthavani but for her family and her entire community. Paladasu, her father, is 'dirty and unkempt all the time' from his arduous and ill paying rickshaw pulling. Her mother, Krupamma's "fingernails [are] filled with the ash she used to scrub vessels in different houses" (Vinodini 166). These are essential jobs which the caste Hindus need performed every day, many times a day. But these tasks are not looked upon as 'noble' or 'intellectual'. Caste ensures certain kinds of work are declared 'impure', which then can be paid less and valued less. This underpaid, undervalued labor is enforced on certain communities through coercive communal practices and reinforced through shastric pronouncements found in texts like *Manusmriti*. Certain jobs continue to be performed by and associated with certain castes even today— sanitation, skinning with the Dalits and temple work, cooking with the upper castes. The recent uproar by the savarna students (clearly at the behest of their savarna parents) regarding the appointment of a Dalit worker to cook children's mid day meals bears testimony to the continuation of work being linked to caste. Yogesh Kumar reporting for *The Wire* writes:

On November 25, Sunita, a Dalit woman, secured a job as *Bhojan Mata*, a cook, at a local government school in Sukhidhang village of the Champawat district, Uttarakhand. Even though the monthly salary paid to her is a meagre Rs 3,000 a month, the job promised her a steady income to support her two children and an ailing, unemployed husband. But Sunita's nightmare started soon after she cooked a meal at the school on December 14, as scores of students belonging to 'upper castes' simply refused to eat the food prepared by her because she is a Dalit.¹

It is shameful that the administration felt that 'counselling' the savarna children and their parents was the only way to resolve the logjam. The offending savarna students should instead have been denied their share of mid day rations for all times to come to pre-empt such unconstitutional misconduct. It is also obvious that all positions of power continue being

practically hijacked by the Brahmin-Kshatriya-Vaishya conglomerate. That we, as a nation, ensure this "division of laborers" is evident in the way the doctors and the nurses were deified during the Corona crisis while the sanitation staff's equal, if not more valuable contribution, was given short shrift. How could the hospitals have functioned without the medical waste and the diseased corpses being cleared up routinely and incessantly? Ambedkar was clear that under the guise of dividing labor, the caste system was dividing the laborers:

Civilized society undoubtedly needs division of labour. But in no civilized society is division of labour accompanied by this unnatural division of labourers into watertight compartments. The caste system is not merely a division of labourers- which is quite different from division of labour- it is a hierarchy in which the divisions of labourers are graded one above the other. (*Annihilation* 233-34)

And so, with a myopia cultivated through scriptures and economic praxis, we continue to speciously divide work between 'mind' work and 'body' work. Suvarthavani's fascination with Piratla Subramaniam's (Gayatri's father) highly paid 'intellectual' labor and her disgust for her father's ill paid 'physical' one is the expected, calculated effect of this cycle of differential valuation of labor that has been kept rolling for centuries. Uma Chakravarti observes:

Thus the essence of caste also is that laboring bodies be reproduced in order that they can be subordinated to maintain the upper caste in their purity. All the injunctions of dharma are predicated upon the laboring lower castes and their subordination and the reproduction of the laboring being *as well as* the reproduction of that person's subordination. (14)

Conversion to other religions is undertaken by the oppressed in the hope that they will be able to escape the persecution that their castes bring to their lives. However Suvarthavani continues to be treated as a 'harijan' even after her conversion to Christianity. Historically projects like Arya Samaj's *shuddhikaran* mission to reconvert the converted have in effect ensured that one is constantly being watched and that one cannot really leave one's caste behind for good. A popular ditty by the indie singer Justh would romantically have you believe otherwise. In the song Justh croons, "Mera naam bhi le ja, mera kaam bhi le ja/mera Ram bhi le ja, mera Shyam bhi le ja. // . . . meri jaat bhi le ja, aukaat bhi le ja. // . . . karde mujhe azaad!" (Take away my name, take away my work, /Take away my Ram, take away my Shyam. // Take away my caste, take away my worth / . . . O render me free"; my trans.).

The mere assumption that he *can* un-caste himself and step into some divine Oneness un.masks the caste privilege of the artist. In India it is more possible to (although it is getting increasingly tougher) to change one's religion and one's sex than one's caste. One is not merely born into the Hindu religion. One is rather born into a particular, inescapable caste.

Besides the obvious double oppression that Suvarthavani experiences as a Dalit and as a woman, she also has to negotiate, what Maya Pandit terms, "double alienation" (xviii). It is the loss of political and emotional community that archetypal characters like Suvarthavani experience as they move away from their own caste in the false hope of escaping the stigma attached to it while continuing to remain unwelcomed in the new social class. Suvarthavani's parents and their home are visibly poor. Suvarthavani by contrast comes across as economically less abject. When the story opens she is already working part time in Ambedkar Open University and is also doing her research. While her hard working parents have ensured her basic survival, Suvarthavani's school sets her off on a more individual, and perhaps also a typical, journey.

When the new constitution was adopted in 1949, untouchability was legally abolished and schools were expected to throw open their gates to children from all castes and communities. However Dalit writings repeatedly reveal how the schools became, what Sharmila Rege calls, feudal "sites of sanskritization" (333). The political hope that Phule and

Ambedkar had invested in education is belied by what passes for education in our schools. Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* records the humiliation that Dalit children have to routinely suffer in independent India's class rooms:

The headmaster had pounced on my neck. The pressure of his fingers was increasing. As the wolf grabs a lamb by the neck, he dragged me out of the class and threw me on the ground. He screamed: "Go sweep the whole playground ... Otherwise I will shove chillies up your arse and throw you out of the school. (5)

Valmiki also reveals how caste is preserved not just through the daily harassment of Dalit students but also through teaching and perpetuating Brahmanical values ensconced in the syllabus. Upper caste milestones and achievements are celebrated and normativized. That they were almost always achieved by exploiting or shutting out the Dalits is never mentioned. In *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, the teacher, in a typically Dronacharayan tradition, attends only to the needs of his upper caste students:

"How come we were never mentioned in any epic? Why didn't an epic poet ever write a line on our lives?" The whole class stared at me. . . . Master Saheb screamed, "Darkest *Kaliyug* has descended upon us so that an untouchable is daring to talk back." (23)

The Dronacharya- Eklavya story should appal ones sense of justice and equity. What we choose to celebrate instead is Eklavya's misplaced guru-bhakti. Eklavya, a potential threat to the Kshatriya- Brahmin hegemony, is rendered defenceless with the loss of his thumb. His eagerness to pay the guru, even when he owes him nothing, is precisely the impact that the caste system intends to produce. It is apt that the child narrator's father in *Joothan* chooses to use the title not as a mark of reverence but as a slur: "Who is that teacher, that progeny of Dronacharya, who forces my son to sweep" (Valmiki 6)? It is ironic that even after the enforcement of Right to Education Act, the Dronacharya Award continues to be conferred and received with undiminished sanctity. Also, wouldn't an Eklavya award be more befitting to honor a student's unwavering commitment than an Arjuna award?

The dominant castes' values and culture are so ubiquitous that they seem like the only possible, correct way of life. Little surprise then that Suvarthavani disciplines herself into liking all things Sanskrit- from classical music to Sanskrit tomes, "that no one ever bothered to even glance at" (Vinodini 168). Her love for Gayatri's parents is an extension of her fascination with Brahminical values. They are everything that her own parents historically have not been allowed to be, i.e. educated, rich and tidy: "She hated the fact that her own parents looked nothing like Gayatri's parents. She began to dislike the way they spoke, their habits, their work, everything annoyed her now" (Vinodini 170). She wears the red thread on her wrist, distances herself from *jootha* (which is not even the same as *joothan*), starts bunking church in a bid to gain approval and acceptance. When Frantz Fanon famously concludes that what the black man wants, is to be a white man, he hits at the root of an entire geneology of complexes that a black person is forced to live with.³ To want to be white is not an individual desire but a historically produced, collective desire for survival and dignity. Suvarthavani's desire to de-caste herself is no different.

Suvarthavani's hope of acceptance is fuelled by the shiftiness and deviousness of how caste operates. It is not simply a set of ossified rules. It is a cleverly morphing virus. It allows her entry into a 'modern' Brahmin home but without allowing her the courtesies of a guest. It allows Piratla Subramaniam the intellectual returns of ranting about the need to rescue Dalit girls, while also permitting him to use caste as a slur against his wife. Caste allows the brother-in-law the material benefits of marrying into a Brahmin house while also permitting him to sip coffee with a Dalit girl in the hope of sexually abusing her. Untouchability does

not meddle with the pleasures of raping a Dalit girl. Arundhati Roy observes, "Love is polluting. Rape is pure" (25). When Gayatri takes Suvarthavani into a Hindu temple and puts a bottu on her forehead, it is not to demolish the caste difference between them but only to conceal it. The Brahmanical belief in the impurity of the Dalits, as well as women's menstrual blood, is never questioned. For all her friendly love, Gayatri is quick to declare at her sister's ceremony, "I shouldn't touch your feet, Vani. Brahmins shouldn't touch the feet of harijans" (Vinodini 170). Words like 'Harijan' were never intended to extend political equality to the Dalits. They were meant to give a godly gloss to the atrocious caste reality of India. Divine munificence is often offered when political rights are denied. Ambedkar was suspicious of the Temple Entry Bill that was tabled at the Central Legislative Assembly in 1933. He presciently knew that, much like the national leaders' call for inter dining, it was merely another assimilative tactic. These gestures were intended to get the oppressed castes to fall in line with the struggle for India's independence instead of fighting for their own equality and dignity vis-à-vis the upper castes. It is important to remember moreover that caste is not merely a set of social habits. It is a material reality which ensures some flourish, even as many starve away to death. Arundhati Roy notes succinctly:

The practice of untouchability, cruel as it was- the broom tied to the waist, the pot hung around the neck- was the performative, ritualistic end of the practice of caste. The real violence of caste was the denial of *entitlement*: to land, to wealth, to knowledge, to equal opportunity. (98)

It can be asserted with absolute certitude that Suvarthavani's parents, like their parents and grandparents before them, could not have seen a day of comfort and rest in their lives. The material reality of caste needs material antidotes. However the widespread protests of the 1990s, against the implementation of the Mandal Commission's recommendation to extend reservation to the Other Backward Classes, testify to independent India's deep resentment against Dalits getting a life of opportunity and respect. Given the fact that the Roster system was introduced in the 1970s, the school in which Suvarthavani studies must have had Dalit teachers too. The story unfortunately makes no mention of how they negotiated the Brahminical set up of the school. What kind of impact did their presence have on Dalit students? Were they too quietly assimilated into the Dronacharyan ideology? Or could they raise, "the modern Dalit Eklavya [who] can no longer be tricked into self-mutilation" (Mukherjee xxxiv).

In Dalit writings the academia is implicated as one of the most devoted upholders of savarna values. The Shambuka story in *Ramayana* testifies that the Brahmin-Kshatriya solidarity has a long history. Shambuka, a Sudra, is killed by King Ram since his *tapasya* has led to the untimely death of a Brahmin boy. With Shambuka's murder the Brahmin boy is revived and the sanctity of Ram rajya restored.⁴ The syllabus owning castes even today ensure that Dalit voices are kept out of the national self understanding through specious arguments about disciplinary needs.⁵ Hence upper caste writers espousing pity for the Dalits are reverentially included while Dalit writers are not considered 'literary' or 'universal' enough. All too conveniently Dalit rage is viewed as anti-national for not joining the chorus of celebrating India's glory. Even their choice of words is often objected to. Dalit writings indicate a new epistemology for which the language of the 'upper' castes is clearly inadequate. Inability or unwillingness to engage with Dalit writings is also justified by rejecting them as not 'modern' enough. To talk of 'village squabbles' in a globalized world is deemed irrelevant. India and Indian needs are assumed to be best represented in a language that the world understands, instead of the language that the country's poor protest in. Hence India's post colonial woes continue to be debated flamboyantly in English at international forums while Dalit writings are passed over as vernacular mumblings. Piratla Subramaniam's books about Dalit women, in need of rescue by upper caste men, is a typical epistemological

colonization. It is another matter that Vinodini's 'story' frames his 'books' and rightly claims for itself the right to self representation. Subramaniam can no more claim to speak for the Dalits than Gandhi could at the Round Table Conference in 1932.⁶

Ultimately the Dalit voice will take charge of its own representation, like it does by the end of the story when Suvarthavani declares, "I haven't forgotten. I am a Christian girl. I am a dalit girl" (Vinodini 177). In a single stroke, Suvarthavani claims herself as an individual outside the Hindu fold ('Christian girl') but as a part of a larger political group ('dalit girl'). 'Dalit', unlike the patronizing caste based term 'harijan', is a political consciousness and identity. The Dalit Panthers' Manifesto defines Dalits as "all those who are exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion." The Panthers' Manifesto claimed that "while Hindu feudalism may have spawned caste inequality, its extension by the modern Indian state had created oppression a hundred times more ruthless" ("Dalit Panthers Manifesto"). Her initial joy at being called a 'lovely' Harijan girl is gradually transformed into a political Dalit consciousness which requires no 'upper' caste validation.

Interestingly her awakening as a Dalit is intertwined with her feminist horror at Piratla's abuse of Kameswaramma, his Brahmin wife: "You rotten old whore, why was the bolt not fitted on the main gate? Did you sleep with those bastards that you let them off with only half the work done! You mala bitch...you madiga bitch... you act just like those low caste bitches. You've picked up all their habits... you Christian bitch..." (Vinodini 176).

Suvarthavani witnesses this violence of a Brahmin man on his Brahmin wife some hours after suffering the emotional, sexual violence of their Brahmin son-in-law. Even as the son-in-law assumes her sexual availability as a Christian girl, the father-in-law assumes the sexual culpability of his Brahmin wife. Uma Chakravati notes astutely:

Kaliyuga ...the ultimate brahmanical vision of a dystopia when the normative structure is upturned, is typically a time when women and the lower castes do not perform their duties and there is the dreaded mixing of castes.... In the brahmanical texts it is clear that upper caste woman is the object of 'moral panic'. . . . It was necessary, therefore, to secure the upper caste woman's compliance to this situation which came to be ensured through the production of consent- through the powerful ideology of *pativrata* and *stridharma* on the one hand, and the application of coercion by male kinsmen and/or by the king or state on the other. (64-5)

Despite a night of horrendous abuse, Kameswaramma, is calm and ready to enforce the edicts of her caste the next day: "Girl, you seem to have forgotten your bottu" (Vinodini 177). She refuses to see that her own caste is her real prison. Unlike Suvarthavani's mother who labors in the homes of other Brahwomen,⁷ but is an economic contributor to the home economy for whatever little it is worth, Kameswaramma's identity is completely derivative. Her acceptance of her husband's abuse stems partially from her economic dependence on him. The upper caste woman is caged under the guise of being protected. Suvarthavani is asked, by the son-in-law, to loosen herself from the 'burden' of patriarchal demands and render herself a 'loose' woman. Her relative freedom as a Christian woman must be put in the service of the Brahmin male. On the other hand, strict surveillance of women within Brahmin homes shall continue unabated. Kameswaramma's privileges, as the woman of a Brahmin household, hinge on how well she enforces the duplicitous caste morality on others as is enforced on her by the men of the house. And hence the victim of Brahmin patriarchy ends up choosing to become its agent.

Conclusions

Kameswaramma seems incapable or unwilling to confront the abjectness of her situation. However her utter powerlessness as a Brahmin wife is qualified by her relative power over women, and men, of other subordinate castes. And therein lies the fracture that Indian feminism has lived with. Savarna feminism has been vocal about the needs of savarna women- equal opportunity and equal pay, bodily and reproductive autonomy, countering the violence inherent in patrilineal, patrilocal and patriarchal marriages etc. It has fought and won some battles for equality for the savarna women. However what is equally disheartening is its own blind spot towards the violence that savarna women continue to be complicit in towards men and women of subordinate castes. Even the tortuous and stalled journey of the Women's Reservation Bill (Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam) has reminded us that savarna women are just as reluctant to share power with Dalit women as men are of sharing it with women.

It is interesting that while 'upper' caste feminism has been fairly blind to the needs of Dalit women, Dalit thinkers like Phule and Ambedkar could see how caste was maintained through the policing of women. Maya Pandit notes that the, "first strike in India was organized by Phule who got the barbers in Pune to declare that they would not shave the heads of Brahmin widows" (xxii-xxiii). Ambedkar too was clear that women were the 'gateway' to caste and that their entire being was yoked in the service of maintaining castes. He observed as early as 1916:

[W]hether regarded as ends or as means, *Sati*, *enforced widowhood* and *girl marriage* are customs that were primarily intended to solve the problem of the *surplus man* and *surplus woman* in a caste and to maintain its endogamy. Strict endogamy could not be preserved without these customs, while caste without endogamy is a fake. ("Castes in India" 93)

It is important to note that each of the three inhuman customs- sati, enforced widowhood and girl marriage- were prescribed for Brahmin women by Brahmin men. All the three practices were meant to safeguard the 'purity' of the Brahmin womb at the cost of the Brahmin woman. Suvarthavani's journey lies in fighting back what Ambedkar calls, "the infection of imitation" (Castes 100) and in understanding what most in her own caste already know- that much like her menstrual blood there is nothing impure or defiling about her. It is Brahmin patriarchal socialisation that enslaves all Dalit people and all Brahmin women and does not permit savarna women to cross over to alliances of immense strength and potential.

Notes

¹ For full article see At Uttarakhand School, Students Refuse to Eat Mid-Day Meals Cooked by Dalit Woman - The Wire. Accessed 14 May2026.

² For full song see CHOR LYRICS – Justh | Meri Jeet Bhi Leja | iLyricsHub. Accessed 15 May2026.

³ Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) is compulsory reading for the psycho-sexual trauma that racism produced on the blacks.

⁴ For a detailed version of the story see Uma Chakravarti's *Gendering Caste-Through a Feminist Lens*. (pp 17-18)

⁵ In 2021, Bama and Sukirtharani were excised from the Delhi University's English Hons. syllabus despite dissent from several quarters.

⁶ Ambedkar felt he was a more representative voice of the Depressed Castes. Gandhi, however, insisted that he represented the whole of India. For a detailed account of the Round Table Conference and the Gandhi-Ambedkar debate see "A Note on the Poona Pact" by S. Anand in *Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition*. (359-76)

⁷ I came across this apt coinage of how caste and gender concerns intersect in a poem by Meena Kandaswamy:

Since reservation in education/ is a calamitous emergency,/ brahwoman medicos press their point./ Moving over to 24-hour news channels/ health divas empty out the hospitals. ("Emergency." *Ms Militancy*. Delhi: Navayana, 2010)

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