

Gendered Trauma in *The Starved* by Mangalu Charan Biswal

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*In Feminist Theories for Dramatic Criticism, Gayle Austin (Austin, 1990) describes the use of presence and absence of female characters as tools to critique the social discourse communicated through theatre. The act of reading with the context of the presence and absence of female characters in plays reveals the power discrepancy and resultant correlation between characters. This reading of presence and absence in the masculine world constructed by the male author is interlinked with the hegemony practiced in the society where the plays are set in. This paper is a study of the Odissi writer Mangalu Charan Biswal's play *The Starved* to critique the role played by gender in defining trauma caused by poverty for Dalit characters from Bajnia community of Orrisa. The paper studies the absence and presence; silence and invisibility of female characters in this play to reveal the discursive bias which allows marginalization of female trauma in Dalit theatre.*

Keywords: Gender, Caste, Dalit Theatre, Feminism, Trauma

Introduction

Economist, jurist, social reformer and Dalit activist Dr. B. R. Ambedkar defined untouchability as –

... the notion of defilement, pollution, contamination and the ways and means of getting rid of that defilement. It is a case of permanent hereditary stain which nothing can cleanse. (Ambedkar, 2008)

This practice segregates the Untouchable communities from the society structured on caste-based order and defines their entire existence as the other to the caste-based society. This practice is a result of the social institution of the caste system that attributes occupation, social standing, class, spiritual (ritualistic) purity, social privileges etc. to individuals at birth according to the *Jati* or caste they are born into. Only people born into a particular caste community are accorded membership in the caste and therefore caste identity is hereditary. This limits the social mobility among castes, binding their moral responsibilities to the caste group. The caste groups are structured in a hegemonical order, based on the divisions dictated by the social institution of *Varna Vyavastha*; which divided the Hindu social fold into 4 sections – Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. These divisions decided the hierarchical distribution of privileges, lifestyle, class and social mobility of the individuals and assigned functions to different communities which were a part of the social structure. The lower a community was in the hierarchy the lower were the privileges and social mobility of its members. The lowest of the *Jatis* were of the *Shudra Varna*, with the least privileges and ostracized from participating in sacred social norms. Individuals falling outside this social structure were social outcasts, with whom any interaction was undesirable and punishable by law. These outcasts were *Achoot* or Untouchables, whose mere existence was considered polluting. (Pruthi, 2004)

The *Jati-Pratha* justified the unequal distribution of privileges with the concept of *Karma* which implies that a person's actions decide his/her fate. It is also implied that at death a person carries the effects of his actions to the next life. Therefore, the birth of an individual into the *Shudra* or the *Achoot* community is the punishment for his/her sins of past life. These sins are seen as pollution of souls, which in turn decide varying degrees of privileges a person is born into. This pollution of soul manifested physically as laws restricting intermingling

of castes through marriage, friendships and trade for individuals within the *Varna Vyavastha*. By that understanding the *Brahmin* were to be considered spiritually pure and entitled to the privileges they are born into. But the outliers – *Achoot* existed as the binary opposition to this system (Kumar, 2017).

The *Achoot* or the untouchables partook in occupations such as sweepers, manual scavengers, watchmen, farm laborers, gardeners, rearers of animals such as pigs, and curers of hides, and folk artists. Their interaction with objects that are ritualistically considered polluting was used to validate physical and social segregation (Ambedkar, 2008). They lived in segregated spaces on the outskirts of residential settlements, serving the needs of the caste communities. In farms they were hired peasants with no rights over the harvest (Chaudhary & Swamy, 2020) and in urban areas they usually built temporary settlements linked with their labor (Thatra, 2022). The religious sanctions over their profession also meant the devaluation of their services. The hegemony was such that the individuals from these communities had no say in the decision of the fiscal value of their services and commodities (Mandloi, 2019). This situation bound these communities to poverty and impoverishment, and a perpetual state of submission to the upper castes. As a result of extreme poverty, these communities lack resources for healthcare, childcare, and maternal care, with the prevalence of hunger and diseases caused by malnutrition. This affected their overall quality of life. The lack of social mobility, extreme poverty, social segregation, inequality, discrimination, and low quality of life foments negative social perceptions of oneself causing psychological trauma to the individuals of the untouchable communities (Klest, 2012).

Women in these communities face the double jeopardy of caste and patriarchy as oppressive institutions. Alongside the hegemony of caste, the patriarchal structure of Indian society force women to be subservient to men of their community. The Vedic treatises on caste system like the *Manusmriti* defined gender roles dividing social responsibility among men and women from various castes. The role of women in these treatises was solely defined based off their familial relations to men.

*pita raksati kaumare bharta raksati yauvane |
raksanti sthavire putra na stri svatantryamarhati*

This quote from the *Manusmriti* states those women don't deserve freedom. It states that women live under the protection of their Fathers till they reach maturity, then find protection under their brother during youth, live under the protection of their husband after marriage and are protected by their sons in old age. Therefore marriage, maternity and childbirth are central to the identity of women according to the mandates of such religious codes. Their social-economic mobility was irrevocably interlinked with the social-economic mobility of men in their family. The *Manusmriti* especially restricts inter-caste alliances and marriages, with the woman adopting her husband's caste in marriage. Thus, Dalit woman experience oppression not just based on caste, but also at the hands of their own community. This makes the experience of trauma for Dalit women to be different from Dalit men.

This paper critiques the gendered treatment of trauma by Odissi writer Mangalu Charan Biswal in his play *The Starved*. The paper is a feminist reading of the play with the aims of analyzing the roles assigned to untouchable men and women in the play to understand their social positioning. It further analyses the presence and absence of female characters to understand the writers' use of female gender in the play. The paper aims to establish that the absence and nominal presence of female characters in this play reveal the marginalization of female trauma in Dalit discourse.

The play in five acts follows the events leading to the death of an untouchable folk artist Aentha, who along with his troupe made of four other untouchable men – Maharagu, Hadu, Gahadu, and Patlu customarily perform at religious events in the village of Sambalpur, Odisha. The troupe belongs to Bajnias or Ganda tribe of Odisha, who are hereditarily employed in performing devotional music during rituals and festivals (Satpathy, 2016). These folk artists use drums made from hides of animals – a marker of their untouchable identity. Set in newly independent India, the play introduces conflict with the effects of colonialism and modernism on post-colonial society. The traditionally

employed troupe of Bajnias find themselves unemployed because of the development of modern society, modern infrastructure and modern forms of entertainment in a period when the entire village suffers from the onslaught of famine. The community suffers from poverty, hunger, social discrimination, addiction and illiteracy. A young and educated researcher Asim reaches the village as a part of his research on the culture and life of folk-musician communities across India and the impoverishment in the lives of such folk artists due to caste discrimination. Asim falls in love with Kasturi, Aentha's sister during the period of his stay and promises to marry her after submitting his research. Aentha is diagnosed by tuberculosis and suffers from the lack of healthcare, hunger, and addiction. In the face of such adversities, Asim's promise to marry Kasturi becomes his only hope. This hope is shattered when the news of Aentha's failure in presenting the research to the government and subsequent arrest reaches him. Aentha mourns the news by playing a sad melody, putting all his strength into playing the *Madhuri* - his percussion. The intensity of his performance tires him, making him throw up blood and succumb to his illness. This paper aims to study the trauma of Aentha and his troupe of men in comparison to the women around them, the role of their tragedies, the actions, and the effect of their relations to men in the progression of the play.

The Trauma of Men versus the Trauma of Women

The play zones into the lives of seven men – Aentha, Maharagu, Hadu, Patlu, Gahadu, Dina and Asim. Aentha, Maharagu, Hadu, Patlu, and Gahadu form the five-member troupe that traditionally comprises only male members. The play only depicts and deals with the employment and financial struggles of these male characters. It is assumed that the women are unemployed or exist as helping hand. The play depicts the struggle of Dalit men to fulfill the responsibilities of being the breadwinner of the family. These men consider their music as an extended expression of their trauma. The instruments made from animal hide are simultaneously their identity, their oppressor, their employer, the source of their poverty and the source of their income at the same time. The caste identity of an individual makes the performance of a cultural act into a testament of the performer's

compliance with caste hegemony (Sherinian, 2017). Therefore, symbolism of the drum is especially poignant and reflective in the moments of suffering, tragedy and death -

The leaves fallen in water may or may not decay,
 But it decays the water.
 What is your fault, Oh, my precious dear.
 With pain your heart tears.
 The leaves fallen in water may or may not decay,
 But it decays the water.
 I didn't die,
 How could 'Yama' take you away?
 The leaves fallen in water may or may not decay,
 But it decays the water.
 People come and leave this world
 We commemorate with mithibhaat.
 The leaves fallen in water may or may not decay,
 But it decays the water.
 You were the gem of this village my dear
 The village reminisces about you;
 everyone misses you, Remembers you. (Biswal, 2023)

The song is a eulogy to the dead Dalit folk artist unlike the other songs that center on mythological characters and therefore are performed during festivals and rituals. This song does not have an assigned stage or occasion for performance. While other performances focus on legendary fictional characters that do not represent their caste experience, the eulogy to Aentha is a tribute to the artist and reflection on the community. This song embodies the trauma of the male artist through the remnants of his life – ironically mourning what he could not achieve. The male characters carry the tale of poverty and impoverishment through their experience of it. Patriarchal society mandates them to be the protectors and breadwinners of a family, failing which they are shamed and abused (Gupta et al., 2023). The failure of Aentha in protecting his family from hunger and destitution brings humiliation to Kasturi and his daughter Phula at the hands of the merchant Dina. His inability to protect them from this experience causes him to have low self-esteem, lose faith in the value of his

artistic skills, and blame himself for the plight of his womenfolk. Aentha hesitates from helping Asim's research on the Bajnia community because of this lack of self esteem –

We are frogs of the well. What will you achieve by taking us to the seas? Are we mentioned in any books or scripts? We are insignificant like the pebbles of the farm. What will you achieve by writing about us in your book? Why don't you take the assistance of big people? We small people can't be of much use for anyone. There is a common saying – 'sitting under a huge evergreen tree can at least give you shade, what can you get sitting under a bare tree?' (Biswal, 2023)

He blames his misfortunes on his own *Karma* or actions of his past lives for being born into an untouchable caste and fails to recognize how the practice of caste forces lower castes to internalize the negative perceptions of lower caste communities (Vasavi, 2006). He blames his *Karma* for his poverty, his illness, his hunger, and the death of his parents and his wife; whereby ignoring how the practice of caste mandated profession has kept him from progressing in life and perpetuated poverty across generations in his family. On the death of his parents and his wife, he assumes complete responsibility of his younger sister and his daughter – as their sole guardian and assuming multiple roles as the only family member. This becomes a constant source of worry for him, as he tries to cut down on his own comforts to accommodate their needs. Aentha is usually calm and reasonable in his demeanor, but intoxication causes him to be extremely violent towards the women in the family, only to cause him more guilt later. And yet alcohol, much like music, allows Aentha to free himself from the shackles of the social norms on one hand and perpetuates his poverty on the other (Neufeld et al., 2005). He uses alcohol to numb his sadness, cure his pains and bring him sleep. He also uses alcohol to cure his hunger, without realizing that alcoholic addiction is another perpetrator of his impoverishment.

Maharagu, the *Dhol* drummer, also uses music as his only respite from his loneliness and trauma caused by the death of his child. He is easily angered and cynical of his realities. The poverty

that took the child away from him now targets him as hunger, depression and work makes him look older than he is. In the face of all his tragedies he keeps playing the *Dhol* as a way of expressing his pain. Maharagu too fails to realize how his position as folk musician is used to perpetuate caste oppression on him. He considers *Dhol* to be his only possession and his identifier. He has no ambitions and no aims, making him reckless and reactionary. He too, like Aentha is severely addicted to alcohol. Hadu – a character that is more optimistic regrets not getting proper education or the environment for education. In the process of adjusting to his conditions and being optimistic, he has also bought into the idea of his destitution being the result of his *Karma* or actions of previous life. Only Gahadu and Patlu fully realize the inability of traditional folk music to be a stable source of income.

The play involves two females as active participants of the play – Aentha’s sister Kasturi and Daughter Phula. The playwright writes them superficially into the play – without giving them actual characteristics. Both these females are referred to in some relation to the men around them. The playwright uses these characters to give perspective into three characters Aentha, Dina, and Asim. The character of Kasturi is limited to being Aentha’s sister and this makes her sister to everyone else in the troupe. She is the character that forces Aentha to mature and balance responsibilities. He defines his time as a young adult with Kasturi in context, as his biggest achievement. He replaces his role as a husband with that of a father and shelves his emotions on the death of his wife. Kasturi’s unadorned body, ragged clothes, and impending marriage are shown to be the greatest shame and burden on Aentha. He subconsciously blames her for making his life hard.

Dear nuni Kasturi, my wife’s sister, my wife...

You scoundrel, keep gobbling food always and garrulous.

Wait... I will send you even, to the hell.

Hey Kasturi, Kas-Kas-and turi, Kass-turi.

You lanky girl, belligerent, dirty runny nose. (Biswal, 2023)

Thus, Kasturi becomes the outlet for negative emotions for Aentha, as he uses Kasturi and Phula to shelve his emotions, practice

authority and act his aggression (Bennett, 2007). The playwright uses Kasturi and Phula to elevate his character to the level of a protagonist, by making their lives and bodies the subject of discourse on Aentha's experience. Kasturi on the other hand is completely dependent on the men around her. She fears that in the absence of a guardian she would have no way to survive. She depends on both Aentha and Asim for mere survival. She is maternal in her character towards both Aentha and Phula. She constantly nags Aentha for the lack of money. She keeps him from drinking alcohol and limits herself to the management of the household and family. Her desire for clothes and jewelries is used to highlight Aentha's poverty. Kasturi suffers domestic violence at the hands of her brother while he is drunk and does her best to stop him from drinking. But her attempts to stop him from drinking are described as anger and temper by her brother. The treatment of her character in the context of domestic violence reflects the societal bias towards domestic violence towards women in underprivileged communities. It excuses the domestic violence committed by men from this community by crediting socio-economic situation as the cause of their aggression – turning the violence from a crime to the symptom of social discrimination. In the process, the victim's experience is washed out (Boonzaier & De La Rey, 2003).

Kasturi's experience of poverty as Dalit woman is framed to give context to Aentha's trauma. She echoes Aentha's internalization of caste discrimination –

We don't have a fortune dada, god chose us to be born into poverty. We need only a handful to eat and a piece of clothing, and we can't seem to muster even that. The mind is melancholic and the heart heavy. I feel like sitting in a corner of the house behind closed doors and cry my heart out. (Biswal, 2023)

Kasturi interacts with poverty in the context of the household kitchen, from where she voices the deficiencies of the household – its ability to feed and host. In this gendered context, her own experience of poverty is overshadowed by that of her brother. When she mourns the death of her brother, the only consolation that people around her provide is as replacements to Aentha – the breadwinner and protector

to her and her niece; belittling the familial bond shared between her and her brother. Her brother himself on finding out about his impending death, is quick to find his replacement in Asim as a husband for Kasturi. He objectifies her in the process of fulfilling his duties as a brother –

You don't know anything about me, learned babu. Kasturi is my only sister. My mother died after giving birth to her. I have raised her as my daughter. I will be relieved of this burden after I get her married and send her to her in-law's house. (Biswal, 2023)

The character of the daughter Phula is solely treated as the representative of burdens a girl child becomes on her family. She too functions as a reminder to Aentha that he is incapable as a breadwinner. Her childishness and innocence are treated antagonistically by the author to generate empathy for Aentha, with no space given to explore the crippling effects of poverty on her childhood. Phula too is a victim of her father's temper under the influence of alcohol. She as a child has limited understanding of her social handicaps and desires luxuries way beyond her financial scope. The writer writes these moments into the play to highlight Aentha's plight than to provide an understanding of childhood lived under poverty. This becomes crucial bias in the writing of the final scene, where after witnessing her father's death, a wailing Phula is taken aside to calm down. But once her father is taken to be cremated the child goes back to Kasturi asking for food. Here the writer uses Phula to emphasize the bleakness of death caused by poverty and portray how despite death the living must go on to calm hunger. The trauma caused to a child, who witnessed her father die on a day that promised her festivities is written out of the plot.

Presence and Absence of Women

Only two female characters are actively involved in the play – Phula and Kasturi – both existing only to take the story of the men in their family ahead. Apart from them two other female characters get mention in the play. Maharagu's and Vintner's wife are understood through the words and actions of the other male characters. Maharagu's wife is at the core of all conflicts in his life. His aggression, anger, recklessness, and addiction are his defense mechanisms to deal with her absence in his life. Her depression and silence make her

presence and absence equivalent to him. It is through him that the playwright presents the condition of maternal care and childcare in the play. Maharagu loses his child to lack of healthcare in the village and his own poverty. He loses his wife to depression brought on by the death of his child. Her absence is represented through the lack of self-care and management in Maharagu's character (Oliver, 1999).

Another unseen character is Vintner's wife – a character who antagonizes all the men in the troupe. As a woman selling liquor, she is frequently confronted by the request for cheap alcohol by aggressive and alcoholic men, who view her demands for proper compensation to be both an act of aggression and miserly (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008). Unlike the character of Dina to whom the men in the troupe have mortgaged all their belongings, there is no grace afforded to the Vintner's wife. Her demand for money is seen as greed, and Dina's demand for money is seen as reasonable. Her identity is entirely defined by her marriage to the Vintner and is never named. The writer too uses her as a way of representing the addiction and effects of addiction on the Bajnia men's character. As a woman managing on her husband's stead, engaged in a male dominated business – her character is solely reduced to the profanities men aim at her.

Conclusion

The playwright uses the female characters in the play as events that propel the protagonist's story and be the cause of male character development. The narrative bias surfaces through comparative reading of trauma faced by Bajnia men and women as written in the play. Phula and Kasturi are depicted as the source of Aentha's trauma, without acknowledging the trauma suffered by these female characters. The Dalit feminine narrative on trauma of caste is left to suffer at the expense of Dalit male narrative on trauma of caste, with no comment made of the effects of patriarchy on women. Patriarchy itself is reduced to merely being a feature of Dalit men, originating from the trauma of Dalit experience of caste. By assigning the origin of patriarchy in Dalit spaces to the trauma faced by Dalit men, the Dalit patriarchal tendencies are excused to a certain extent.

The unseen and unheard women in the play merely exist to serve as the cause for certain characteristics of the men in the play. They are nameless and are known by their relation to the men that surround them. Maharagu's wife represents his loneliness and the general lack of healthcare and hunger in Bajnia community. Vintner's wife represents the crassness of male characters resulting from alcoholic addiction in the five Bajnia men. The tokenistic presence of these women only serves to push the narrative forward without addressing the issues these women face or the problematic nature of the language used in representing them. Again, the Dalit feminine narratives are sidelined, and male narrative is presented as the primary narrative representing Dalit experience.

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