

Marginalized Women in David Davidar's *The House of Blue Mangoes*

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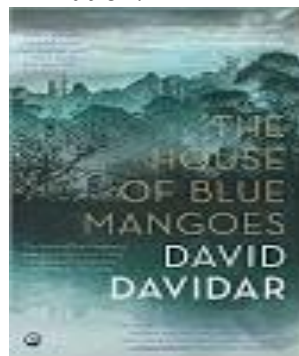
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Abstract

The South Indian women in 19th and 20th centuries had to go through the bitter experiences of discrimination and marginalization. This marginalization was the outcome of various factors like political, socio-economic, ideological, etc. The gender division of labour led to the confinement of women's position as house wife only. It was of course unpaid labour and of lower social status and it led women to dependency on men. Traditional ideological concept of purity and impurity also led to woman marginalization. For example, women were considered as impure during menstruation and child birth. Moreover, political factors also were there to marginalize women. Denial of political values like liberty, equality and justice resulted in the marginalization of women. David Davidar's novel *The House of Blue Mangoes* gives a vivid picture of the situation. The semi-historical novel is a mirror held against the social scenario of the Indian society's second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. This article enquires into the various areas of marginalization of women based on the novel. Caste system and religious taboos have never allowed women to come out of their inferior position. Those women who raised their voice for their dignity and identity are brutally isolated and suppressed by men and also by the orthodox women around them.

Key Words: Marginalized Women, Helplessness, Rape, Breast Wars, Physical Abuse, Caste System and Discrimination.



1. Introduction

The status of women in ancient India was quite high and esteemed. They got equal opportunity with men to grow socially, intellectually and morally. They were given freedom to choose their own path in the life and select their life partner. They also got good education before marriage as well as military training for their own safety. However, their status in Indian society got deteriorated in the middle ages.

The condition of women in the Indian society especially in the middle age was so bad and inferior practically. In the scriptures and in theory, women were given high position but in practice, they were considered as slaves of men. Women were prohibited to take part in many domestic, social as well as external matters. They were forced to live under the influence of parents before marriage whereas under the influence of husbands after marriage. The position of women became worse in the Mughal time. Women were forced to follow the rules of *sati pratha*, *parda pratha*, and other bad practices against women. During the British rule, also there was not much betterment in the status of women.

2. Helplessness as a Synonym of Woman

The novel starts with an unfortunate incident of the brutal rape of a low caste girl. Valli, aged thirteen, soon to be married and the other a year younger girl, Parvathi on their way to the fair were attacked and Valli was brutally raped. Later Valli's father goes to Solomon, the *thalaivar* (leader) of Chevathar village and complains. When Solomon asks him about the current situation of Valli, he says: "She does not eat or speak, thrashes around like a goat whose head has been cut off, and her eyes, in her eyes there is something that I have never seen in all my life. After this, it would be better if she was dead, perhaps that way she will be able to cope with it..." (*The House of Blue Mangoes* 29) Such was the pathetic situation, a marginalized woman had to go through.

Meanwhile, an inscription was found on the granite near the place where the incident took place: "Remember the 1859 breast wars. If low caste dogs do not know their place, their wives and sisters will soon remind them" (32). Such horrible was the situation at that time. Neither the family members were able to react properly, nor the authority was ready to take action against the culprits. Even her family members and neighbours were not in a position to react to the unfortunate event or even to say a word of protest. They just accepted the situation considering that it was the fate of the poor girl. Valli experienced total helplessness. Low caste women were not considered as human beings but as mere objects of pleasure for the high caste men.

3. Breast Wars or Breast-Cloth Controversy and Woman Marginalization

Caste discrimination was very vibrant in the 19th century in South India. During this period tens of thousands of non-Brahmins, especially those near the bottom, accepted Christianity as the missionaries preached that all men were created equal in the eyes of God. One of the social customs to be challenged was dress. The tradition had ordered that the various members of the caste tree should bare their breasts as a sign of deference and subservience to those who perched higher in the

branches. Accordingly, the untouchables had to be bare-breasted before the *Pallans*, the *Pallans* before the *Nairs*, and so on until the Nambudiri Brahmins. But the Christian missionaries encouraged the *Andavar* and *Nadar* women to cover their breasts. This, unsurprisingly, threw the upper castes, especially the men, into frenzy of insecurity and frustration. *Andavar* and *Nadar* women who clothed themselves were abused in public, even beaten. The middle-ranking castes went too far and said: “We have a divine right to gaze upon your filthy breasts. They are ours to enjoy” (33). They even started to wrench the upper cloth of lower caste women, even in public.

Things were led even to mob violence. Hundreds of men gathered near Nagercoil and attacked the Christian *Andavars* there, burning and looting and stripping breast-cloths and bodies from the women. At last, the British Government had to intervene by prohibiting the stripping of low caste women. It is significant that the author gives a reference of an incident happened in Travancore where the *sudras* went around tearing the blouses of women of another *sudra* sub-caste, saying they were controverting the custom (109). So, the women had to suffer pain and humiliation even from the men of their own caste.

4. A Girl Child Meant nothing but Sorrow

David Davidar gives a vivid description of the wretched situation in Chevathar, South India where the birth of girl child was not at all welcomed. At the same time, the birth of a boy child was greeted with *kulavai* – a long-drawn-out call ululating from the throats of aunts and sisters. It sounded like a dirge but was in fact an expression of overwhelming joy. Blessed was the mother of a son. Blessed was the family into which a son was born. He would extend the family line, bring in dowry and good luck and attract the blessings of the Gods. A girl, on the other hand, was greeted with downcast faces. A girl meant nothing but sorrow. One more unproductive mouth to feed and heavy expense for the family – dowry, marriage costs, the endless demands of in-laws who had done her parents a favour by taking her off their hands. Many despondent mothers quickly extinguished the life of the luckless baby, especially if she had arrived at the tail end of a succession of daughters – by smothering her, feeding her the poisonous sap of the calotropis plant or the roots of the Valli shrub, or encouraging her to ingest sharp-edged husks of rice grain which could fatally puncture the alimentary tract of an infant. If she was allowed to live, the girl was never allowed to forget that through her the family was paying for its sins in past births. “All this in a land where the highest deity was Devi, the Mother Goddess, created by the commingling of the essence of the great Hindu trinity – Brahma, Narayana and Parameshwara – to rid the world of an evil they could not handle themselves” (51).

5. Woman should be Prepared to be Beaten by her Husband

Every woman in Chevathar quickly learned her place in life, no matter how exalted her position. When Charity, the wife of Solomon, first arrived in the Big House as a young bride, she was shocked when her husband hit her for not bringing him his coffee at exactly the right temperature. Tearfully she had returned to the kitchen. When she told her mother-in-law about the incident, Thangammal had

wiped away her tears with her sari pallu, and told her something she had never forgotten:

In these parts, my daughter, a woman must be prepared to be beaten by her husband. If he's a good man he won't beat you too much, and not without reason. We put up with it. It's the way things are. When you are newly married, you are beaten for not bringing enough dowry, when you give birth to your children, you are beaten for not producing a male heir, or if you have already given him a son, for not producing only sons. And then, when you have produced enough children, you are beaten for losing your looks and your youth. (52)

The dignity of the women sometimes was less than that of animals. They were severely punished for nonsensical reasons.

6. The Concept of Fate and Woman

The readers could see various gossips which are spreading regarding the tragic fate of Valli who was brutally raped. It was whispered that the girl who had been attacked had a fatal flaw in her birth horoscope as well as in her menstrual horoscope and the dreaded *mula natchattiram*, the 19th *nakshatra* or "lunar mansion" in Vedic astrology, would explain her misfortune. It explains that most of the women having *mula natchattiram* do not have a satisfactory married life. Death of husband or divorce might cause them separation. Most of them face a lot of problems from their husbands and children.

After a while it was reported that it was not the *mula natchattiram* that had led to the girl's downfall, but the even more feared *naga dosham*. A few women claimed to have seen a large cobra-shaped discoloration near the girl's groin, the mark signifying that an invisible snake lurked in the girl's genitalia to cause the death of the first man to have sex with her. It was said that her parents had concealed the information for fear that the girl would never get married. It was also spread that misfortune had visited the family because of a curse directed at the girl's father by his brother-in-law who lived two villages away for defaulting on a loan.

Most of the people believed that everything is predestined. Fortunes as well as sufferings are there due to the fate. Charity, the wife of Solomon, the *thalaivar* makes a visit to the house of Valli to console her and her mother. A woman makes a comment there:

'There's nothing to be done. What has happened has happened, no one can alter her fate. We can only hope that her suffering is eased quickly. The girl was born under a bad star. She was paying for sins committed in a past life. Things would be better for her in the next life.' The only way before the suffering women left is to accept the fate. There was good and evil, and both were necessary to keep the world in balance, Charity consoles herself. (56)

Valli hanged herself two days after the attack. Each one of the women in the village really experienced afresh the deep sadness of being born a woman. They were sorry that the girl had taken her life and they prayed that in her next birth she would be born with a luckier alignment of planets. In a way, the suicide of the girl gave a kind of relief to the family as well as the entire village. The author comments: "In a land where everyday realities were harsh, what did the death of a tenant farmer's daughter signify!" (59).

7. Caste System and Women

In the novel, a definition of caste system is given by Mr. Cook the British Sub-collector: "One miserable set of natives trying to keep another miserable set of natives down by cooking up all sorts of fantastic rules which are then conveniently attributed to one of their millions of Gods" (110). But suffering was always there with the woman whichever the caste she belongs to be. Still it varies, the lower the caste, the greater will be the suffering of the woman. The higher caste women had only to cope up with the tortures of the high caste men. But the low caste women had to suffer from both the men of the high caste as well as the low caste. It is a sort of double marginalization which they experience in their life.

8. Women Considered as Inferior Objects

David Davidar brings into limelight the way how women are made use of by men for their own motives. Men never considered woman as a human being with dignity. There arrived Abel Circus, a European-owned show in Meenakshikoil. In the advertisement board, a woman is presented with sexy look with minimum dress. In the same way, in the show, women are employed just to attract the male audience (172). It is presented that the only aim of the woman in her life is to make her man happy. The marriage preparations of Solomon's daughter Rachel was going on. The groom's mother asks Rachel: "Will you be able to make my son happy, daughter?" She replies: "Yes, mami, I'll make him happy. There will be no other aim in my life" (180).

In the second part of the novel, Doraipuram, the readers find Aaron, the second son of Solomon in search of his imaginary love Jayanthi. In his dream, he reaches at a whore house where he finds Jayanthi in every girl he meets. Here also women are considered as just an object for sexual satisfaction for men. When Aaron wakes up from his dream, he confronts with the real life before him. There also the situation of women is not different. He meets a young woman suckling her baby looked at him hopefully and asked: "Looking for love, aiyah? It's cheap here, eight annas an hour" (207). She had to sell herself just for eight annas to feed her child.

Women were not allowed not even to talk to the male visitors in their own house. One day Lily, Daniel's wife, had wandered into the front room where Daniel was taking tea with some visiting male relatives. Seeing an empty seat near her husband, she came and sat there to talk with them. The moment she sat there, the conversation grew strained and shortly ceased altogether. Immediately she was called to the kitchen by her mother-in-law and she warned her: "no married woman

should disgrace her husband and her family by doing what you have just done – casually consorting with men, even if they are relatives” (227).

9. Conclusion

In this way, *The House of Blue Mangoes* is a mirror held against the 19th and 20th century society of South India. It brings into light the discrimination and humiliation the low caste women had to suffer. The isolated voices of protest were mercilessly suppressed by the male dominated society. Still, a hope of a better future is also seen in the novel. Characters like Helen, Kannan’s wife and Lily, Daniel’s wife, are examples of women who thirst for freedom. Both of them have a background of western formation. During childhood, they enjoyed some sort of equality with men. But after marriage, especially Lily, was forced to tune herself with the male dominated Dorai family. Helen tries to uphold her freedom and dignity as a modern woman. But both of them had to go through a lot of struggles in their new life situations. Davidar’s novel undoubtedly gives a vivid picture of women marginalization in the past couple of centuries.

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