

Resilient Motherhoods of Intersectionality: (A Comparative Study of the Portrayal of Dalit and African American Mother Characters)

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ABSTRACT:

*This paper presents a comparative analysis of oppression in Gogu Shyamala's *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, but...* and "Braveheart Badeyya" alongside Terry Mc Millan's *Mama*, illuminating parallels in marginalized motherhood, caste and racial discrimination, subversive resilience across Dalit and African American literatures.*

*McMillan's *Mama* chronicles Mildred Peacock, a resilient Black single mother navigating 1980s urban America amid financial woes, fractured relationships, and personal reinvention. Her humour and tenacity capture Black womanhood's everyday triumphs and tribulations.*

Shyamala's stories, rooted in rural Telangana's Madiga community, expose caste discrimination, patriarchal oppression, and youthful defiance. The title story invokes a folk proverb underscoring mother's vital role despite patriarchal dismissal of its importance. "Braveheart Badeyya" depicts a boy crafting slippers for his thorn-wounded mother, subverting untouchability through tender rebellion.

This study compares African American and Dalit narratives, where impoverished mothers embody profound strength. Mc Millan probes U.S. race and class dynamics; Shyamala confronts Indian caste and gender hierarchies. Both amplify silenced voices, Mc Millan via vibrant humour, Shyamala through stark prose.

Family dynamics and children's perspectives unveil universal truths, fostering solidarity across struggles. These texts transform personal testimonies into indictments of injustice, advocating collective resistance for equity and liberation. By bridging transatlantic oppressions, they reveal shared human aspirations amid diverse contexts.

Keywords: *Marginalized motherhood, Racial discrimination, Injustice, Dalit, Untouchability and patriarchal oppression.*

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This paper offers a comparative study of oppression in *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, but...* and "Braveheart Badeyya" by Gogu Shyamala alongside *Mama* by Terry McMillan. It explores shared concerns such as marginalized motherhood, caste- and race-based discrimination, and forms of everyday resistance, highlighting how Dalit and African American literatures articulate parallel experiences of oppression while foregrounding women's resilience and agency.

Mama by Terry McMillan presents the character of Mildred Peacock as a compelling representation of African American maternal endurance. Her life is shaped by the intersecting pressures of poverty, racial discrimination, and gender inequality in the fictional town of Point Haven, Michigan. As a single mother responsible for raising five daughters—Angel, Freda, Bootsey, Money, and Doll. Mildred confronts the dual burdens of economic hardship and marital betrayal. Her husband, Crook, fails to fulfil his familial responsibilities, leaving her to manage both caregiving and financial survival. Rather than succumbing to these adversities, Mildred transforms them into sources of strength, thereby reflecting the broader struggles of African American women to sustain dignity, identity, and resilience within oppressive social structures. "Black women were equal to their men in oppression... they were subjected to a special oppression as women." (Davis)

Although Point Haven is geographically removed from the Jim Crow South, it nonetheless mirrors the socio-economic instability and racial vulnerability experienced by many working-class African American families in twentieth-century America. Within this environment, opportunities remain limited, and systemic inequalities persist. Mildred's persistent efforts to secure stability for her daughters transform her household into a site of both struggle and perseverance. Her home becomes a symbolic space where hardship and hope coexist, shaped by financial insecurity yet sustained through emotional strength and communal interdependence. In this

sense, the domestic sphere functions not merely as a site of confinement but also as a locality of resistance, where Mildred cultivates resilience and self-respect despite structural constraints. “I respect myself and insist upon it from everybody.” (Angelou)

Mildred’s marriage to Crook exemplifies emotional neglect and patriarchal failure. His name, Crook itself suggests moral unreliability, and his actions reinforce this characterization. As an absent and irresponsible partner, he abandons his role as provider, forcing Mildred to shoulder the entire burden of raising their children. His presence paradoxically destabilizes the household rather than offering security. Through this portrayal, McMillan critiques conventional ideals of marriage, challenging the notion that matrimony necessarily provides emotional fulfilment or economic stability. Instead, the novel exposes marriage as a site of imbalance and disappointment. Nevertheless, Mildred resists being defined by her husband’s shortcomings; she reclaims agency by redefining herself beyond the limitations imposed by both her marriage and societal expectations.

Motherhood emerges as the central axis of Mildred’s identity, offering both purpose and resilience amid personal disillusionment. Each of her daughters reflects different dimensions of her maternal influence: Angel internalizes the tensions within the household, Freda exhibits emotional sensitivity, Bootsey expresses rebellion, and Doll represents innocence and hope. Through her relentless labour, careful management of scarce resources, and emotional endurance, Mildred transforms motherhood into an active form of resistance. Her maternal responsibility extends beyond biological care, becoming a means through which she confronts and challenges the socio-economic and racial constraints that shape her life.

Economic hardship is a defining aspect of Mildred’s experience. Crook’s negligence compels her to depend on welfare and limited financial resources, all while navigating a social environment that stigmatizes African American families. McMillan challenges these stereotypes by portraying Mildred as resourceful and strategic rather than passive or dependent. Her careful budgeting and sacrifices demonstrate a deliberate effort to sustain her family within restrictive conditions. In this way, the novel critiques dominant narratives that misrepresent marginalized communities, instead highlighting the resilience and ingenuity required for survival.

The emotional toll of Mildred’s circumstances is significant. She experiences recurring feelings of isolation, frustration, and exhaustion as she navigates the challenges of single parenthood. However, these hardships also contribute to her personal growth. Over time, she develops a stronger sense of independence and self-worth, gradually detaching her identity from her husband’s presence or approval. This transformation is gradual and hard-won, emerging through continuous struggle and reflection. McMillan’s portrayal avoids reducing Mildred to either an idealized figure or a passive victim; instead, she is presented as a complex and evolving individual whose strength arises from confronting adversity.

Mildred’s approach to parenting reflects a careful balance between discipline and compassion. She emphasizes respect, responsibility, and perseverance, while also providing emotional support and encouragement. Recognizing the structural barriers her daughters are likely to encounter, she prioritizes education and self-respect as tools for future advancement. Despite material scarcity, she creates a nurturing environment in which her children feel valued and secure. Through this depiction, motherhood is represented not simply as a biological role but as a sustained exercise in emotional and moral guidance.

The novel also explores shifting gender roles within working-class communities. Crook’s failure to fulfil the traditional role of provider necessitates Mildred’s assumption of both economic and domestic responsibilities. In doing so, she challenges conventional gender expectations and demonstrates the adaptability of women in marginalized contexts. Her transition from dependency to self-reliance underscores the potential for empowerment within oppressive conditions.

Mildred must also contend with societal judgment and stigma. Her family is often viewed through reductive stereotypes associated with poverty and welfare. However, she resists internalizing these perceptions, maintaining her commitment to her children and her own dignity. This resistance reflects the broader struggle of African American women to navigate and challenge systemic prejudice.

Mildred Peacock’s unsuccessful marriages illustrate her ongoing pursuit of security within a life marked by economic hardship and neglect. Each relationship deteriorates due to the irresponsibility and unreliability of her partners, compelling her to assume full responsibility for raising her children independently. Confronted with acute financial instability and a lack of viable employment opportunities, Mildred resorts to prostitution as a strategy for survival. While this decision reflects the extremity of her circumstances, it also demonstrates her unwavering commitment to ensuring her children’s well-being, thereby exposing both the severity of her social conditions and the intensity of her maternal sacrifice.

A crucial aspect of Mildred’s journey is her movement toward self-realization. She ultimately recognizes that her sense of worth cannot depend on external validation, particularly from her husband. By affirming her own strength and independence, she reclaims control over her life and her children’s future. This process of self-definition marks a significant turning point, emphasizing the importance of autonomy in overcoming structural limitations.

Ultimately, Mildred's life carries symbolic significance beyond her individual experience. She represents the resilience of African American mothers who navigate the intersecting forces of race, class, and gender inequality. Through her story, McMillan highlights the endurance, strength, and determination required to sustain family and identity within an unequal society. The central contention of this paper is the claim that this novel, *Mama*, bears striking similarities with the Telugu anthology of short stories *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket But...* written by Gogu Shyamala.

Gogu Shyamala was born in 1969 in Peddemul village in RangaReddy district (now part of Telangana). Her parents are agricultural workers. She was also the leader of a vetti (unpaid labour) team that worked for the local landlord. She has stated that her brother Ramachandra was forced into agricultural labour, but she was the only one of her three siblings who obtained higher education. Financial constraints initially prevented her from enrolling in college; however, she eventually obtained a Bachelor of Arts from the Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University. Around that time, she became an activist with the Communist Party of India (Marxist–Leninist), but insists that she never let the politics overshadow her education.

Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, but... by Gogu Shyamala occupies an important place in contemporary Indian Dalit literature due to its sustained engagement with subaltern realities and women lived experiences. Consisting of twelve stories translated by different translators, the volume presents a nuanced and multi-layered depiction of marginalized rural communities. It brings into focus the everyday struggles, resilience, and agency of working-class Dalit women, while simultaneously tracing generational continuities within oppressed caste groups. Rooted in oral narrative traditions, the stories illuminate how caste, gender, and economic deprivation intersect to shape the contours of everyday life of Dalit communities.

The particular story under consideration provides a vivid representation of rural existence through the lens of a young narrator. It captures the rhythms of childhood, labour, and familial relationships within a marginalized setting. The narrative opens with children playing outside the village boundaries, absorbed in traditional games such as chedugudu and hide-and-seek. Their indifference to the onset of rain creates a fleeting sense of joy that momentarily obscures the harshness of their living conditions. However, this atmosphere of carefree play is gradually overshadowed by the narrator's mounting anxiety as she awaits her mother's return from agricultural labour in the paddy fields. While other villagers begin to return home, her mother's continued absence intensifies her sense of unease.

The spatial arrangement of the village subtly reveals entrenched caste hierarchies. The road branching near the shared drinking water source for Mala and Madiga communities leads to segregated residential areas, reflecting the petrified presence of caste-based divisions in everyday life. When the mother eventually returns amid heavy rainfall, her response is not one of reassurance but of reprimand. She scolds the young narrator for neglecting domestic responsibilities, particularly the care of her younger sibling. This interaction underscores the early imposition of gendered expectations on young girls within such socio-cultural contexts.

The younger brother's expression of hunger prompts the mother to distribute tender green gram carried in her basket, carefully setting aside a portion for the elder son. This act reflects her role in managing scarce resources with precision and foresight. Upon entering the house, she encounters the familiar smell of dampness caused by rainwater seeping through the leaking roof. The placement of vessels to collect dripping water illustrates the fragile material conditions of their dwelling. This repetitive act of managing leakage becomes symbolic of the cyclical and persistent nature of poverty. The absence of the father, due to his incarceration who is typically expected to repair the roof, further results in the family's vulnerability.

Concern soon shifts to the elder son, who has not returned from grazing cattle in the forest. His delayed arrival during the storm heightens the family's anxiety. The grandmother, Sangavva, enters at this moment, offering leftover food and reinforcing the importance of intergenerational support within the household. When the elder son finally returns, drenched and exhausted, his frustration reflects the burdens of his responsibilities. His account of guarding cattle that stray into the fields of a dominant caste landlord highlights exploitative agrarian relations. His inability to eat due to sudden rainfall further underscores the precariousness of their existence. The mother attempts to comfort him by expressing hope for improved circumstances once their debts are cleared, hinting at the broader economic pressures shaping their lives. As Sangavva lights the stove, the family gathers around it for warmth, creating a moment of collective solidarity. The sharing of simple food signifies both scarcity and emotional cohesion, that is the hallmark of Dalit families.

The narrative then introduces the father's absence as a consequence of injustice. The mother explains that he was falsely implicated and deceived by members of the dominant caste, reflecting systemic oppression. His eventual release and return mark a moment of emotional reunion, particularly for the children. Acts such as preparing fresh jowar rotte and expressing concern for his well-being reinforce the significance of food and care as expressions of familial bonding. Mother explains everything to her elder son that their hard work, devoted labour and respect towards the Patel, always goes unrecognised.

We devote our labour to the Patel and we have always guarantee that we will get paid for our labour, but we have never demanded an account of our wages. Can we be thieves? We know how to work hard,

not how to steal. They know all this, and yet they blame us. He [the father] was scared of being beaten to death, so he has gone god knows where. Shameless bastards. The elders didn't say for nothing that frogs have no tails and the Kapu have no morals. Your father will give his life but not his pride. (Shyamala 19-20)

The arrival of a neighbour, Sayavva, expands the narrative into a communal dimension. She acknowledges the efforts of the women in sustaining the household and encourages the father to rebuild his life through labour. This interaction highlights the role of community networks in offering moral support.

The narrative subsequently shifts to the economic activities undertaken by women. The mother and Sayavva collect neem fruits from the forest and sell them to a local trader, demonstrating women's critical contribution to household survival. Their earnings are used to purchase essential provisions, reflecting subsistence-level living. The mother's contemplation of famine, personified as a looming threat, underscores the constant uncertainty tied to rainfall and agricultural dependency.

A brief moment of abundance emerges when the family prepares meat curry. This rare occasion of adequate nourishment generates a sense of fulfilment and joy, particularly among the children. The sensory richness of the meal contrasts sharply with their usual deprivation. However, this sense of contentment is abruptly disrupted by the father's demand for money to buy toddy. When the mother explains that their limited funds have been spent on necessities, he responds with physical violence. This episode exposes the persistence of patriarchal authority and domestic abuse within the household. The children's fear and silence indicate how such violence is normalized. The intervention of neighbouring women, who call out to stop the assault, suggests a limited yet significant form of communal resistance. Dalit women face double oppression in the same caste by their men because this is male dominated society.

"Dalit women are doubly oppressed—first by caste and then by patriarchy within their own communities" (Guru 254).

Sangavva's subsequent reprimand of her son foregrounds the mother's sacrifices and reinforces the moral authority of elder women, even within patriarchal constraints. The narrative concludes with the news of the elder daughter's premature childbirth in the fields. Although both mother and child are safe, the situation necessitates adherence to customary practices, requiring the mother's presence. Sangavva's reaction reflects a mixture of concern and insistence on familial duty. Nimgampalli Sayavva comes and says, "[w]hat is the use of saying all this now? The new mother needs her mother to wash her soiled clothes. Did the elders say in vain that 'an elephant-like father may go, but the small basket-like mother should stay'?" (Shyamala 26)

Overall, the story offers a complex and layered portrayal of subaltern life shaped by intersecting structures of caste, gender, and economic exploitation. Through its detailed depiction of everyday experiences, it foregrounds women's labour and resilience while critically engaging with systemic inequalities and domestic power relations. It also emphasises the indispensable role of the mother in Dalit households, notwithstanding the stereotypical views about the centrality of the father.

"Braveheart Badeyya", another short story from the same anthology by Gogu Shyamala offers a powerful representation of life in a Madiga gudem, where seasonal unemployment and economic instability significantly influence everyday existence. During the summer, the decline in agricultural activity restricts access to wage labour, placing the community in a precarious situation. In response to this recurring hardship, nearly all forty households turn to forest-based work, collecting tangedu branches that are later processed for subsistence and modest income. This collective practice reflects both the adaptive strategies of the community and the limited resources that compel reliance on such labour.

Within this socio-economic context, the narrative foregrounds the lives of Enkayya and his wife Ellamma, whose daily routines are structured around shared labour and familial interdependence. After returning from the forest with heavy loads, they are served a simple meal of rice and pulusu by their daughter Sammakka, emphasizing the modest nature of their sustenance. During this moment, Enkayya's inquiry about his son Badeyya signals the boy's importance within both the family and the broader community, signify the presence of patriarchy even in Dalit households.

Badeyya occupies a unique position in the gudem due to his access to education, a rare opportunity among his peers. As the only school-going child, he is distinguished socially, and this distinction is reflected in the multiple names he is given—Muthaiah, Mysayya, and Badeyya, each signifying different relational and emotional identities. His educational engagement symbolizes a potential pathway toward social mobility, even as it situates him within structures of exclusion.

In addition to his academic pursuits, Badeyya demonstrates creativity by repurposing animal bones, remnants of his father's occupation of removing carcasses into toys. His construction of a miniature bullock cart exemplifies both ingenuity and resourcefulness. These objects facilitate forms of play that replicate agricultural labour, as children simulate tasks such as sowing and transporting materials. Such activities illustrate how occupational roles are internalized from an early age, reinforcing the cyclical nature of labour within

marginalized communities. It also shows how these Dalit lives are inextricably embedded in the agricultural society, despite the ongoing marginalization.

Despite his abilities, Badeyya's schooling experience is marked by caste-based discrimination. His teacher enforces spatial segregation by making him sit at the back of the classroom, reflecting entrenched practices of untouchability. The school teacher makes Badeyya sit at the back of the class room because of his lower caste:

But at school the teacher made Badeyya sit at the back of the classroom, on the floor. He thought that he would pollute the other students. Badeyya would listen to the teacher intently, do the homework without fail, and recite the lessons the next day. But because he was from the madiga caste, his place never moved from the back bench to the front. (Shyamala 43)

This exclusion subjects him to humiliation, yet he continues to perform well academically, completing tasks diligently and reciting lessons with commitment. His perseverance highlights both his individual resilience and the systemic barriers faced by marginalized students.

Parallel to this, Enkayya prepares for his work at a roadside adda, where he engages in leatherwork using tools such as needles, thread, and processed leather. Ellamma, meanwhile, continues processing the tangedu branches, extracting usable fibres. These simultaneous activities reflect the gendered division of labour within the household, as well as the sustained effort required for survival. The children's play similarly mirrors adult responsibilities, although their attempts at cultivation fail due to environmental constraints, underscoring the limitations imposed by their surroundings.

A crucial turning point arises when Ellamma asks Badeyya to accompany her to gather firewood, despite the approaching night. Her vulnerability, particularly due to night blindness, adds another dimension to her hardship. During their work, they encounter Ramreddy Dora, a dominant caste landlord, prompting Ellamma to remove her slippers in adherence to oppressive social norms. This act demonstrates the internalization of caste hierarchies that regulate bodily conduct and reinforce subordination.

While walking barefoot across thorny terrain, Ellamma injures her foot, intensifying her suffering. Badeyya responds with care, applying a traditional remedy and assisting her return home. The situation worsens when her slippers are lost, leaving her further exposed. Ellamma's reflections reveal the psychological consequences of caste oppression, as she articulates a sense of dehumanization and compares her condition to that of an animal. Her

explanation to Badeyya underscores the pervasive fear of retaliation that enforces compliance with caste norms.

As Ellamma gets pain, tells it to her son that she remembers Ramreddy Dora as Yama because she has removed her slippers when he appears. Now she does not have slippers to walk. she thinks that her life is like a dog:

As madiga, it is our work to make slippers. Your father makes slippers for all the small and big castes in the village. Our slippers shield their feet from mud, stones, thorns, twigs, poisonous creatures and everything else. Even they go to the moon they wear our slippers, don't they? I am born in the caste that makes slippers for everybody, but my own feet are left bare. (Shyamala 45-46)

Deeply affected by his mother's pain, Badeyya resolves to act. Drawing upon the skills associated with his father's trade, he secretly gathers materials and crafts a pair of slippers for her. Working late into the night, he carefully measures, cuts, and stitches the leather to create a durable product. This act is both practical and symbolic, representing his attempt to restore dignity and protect his mother from further harm.

The following morning, as Enkayya prepares to leave, he expresses concern for Ellamma's condition and offers his own slippers. At this moment, Badeyya presents the pair he has made, revealing his effort with quiet pride. The gesture elicits an emotional response from both parents, who recognize the care and determination embodied in his action. Ellamma's decision to share this moment with others in the community reflects her sense of pride and the significance of her son's initiative.

In conclusion, the narrative foregrounds themes of resilience, creativity, and resistance within a framework of systemic marginalization. Through its detailed portrayal of everyday struggles, it emphasizes how individual agency, even within oppressive social structures, can challenge inequality and affirm human dignity.

Both *Mama* by Terry McMillan and the story "Braveheart Badeyya" from *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, but...* by Gogu Shyamala reveal striking thematic parallels, particularly in their portrayal of motherhood as a central force of endurance and cohesion within marginalized families. In both narratives, maternal figures assume the primary responsibility for sustaining the household, emerging as the key sources of emotional strength and practical stability.

In *Mama*, Mildred Peacock is compelled to undertake full responsibility for her children due to the negligence and unreliability of her husband. Similarly, in *Father may be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, but...* mother is positioned as the central pillar of the family, as the father's alcoholism and indifference render him incapable of fulfilling his familial duties. In both cases, the absence or failure of the male figure

necessitates the mother's transformation into both caregiver and provider, thereby destabilizing and rewriting the traditional patriarchal roles.

In *Mama*, Mildred makes difficult, and at times contentious, choices in her efforts to secure a stable future for her children. Similarly, in the narratives of Gogu Shyamala, Dalit women exhibit strength through collective labour, adaptability, and sustained perseverance. Although their actions may not always assume an explicitly political form, their resilience is evident in their continued determination to endure and assert control over their lives despite persistent adversity.

Moreover, both maternal figures confront deeply embedded systems of structural oppression. Mildred's experiences are shaped by the intersecting forces of racism, gender inequality, and economic deprivation within the African American context. Her strategies of survival include reliance on limited welfare resources, emotional resilience, and a continuous process of self-reflection. In contrast, Ellamma navigates the rigid hierarchies of caste oppression and patriarchal control in rural India, where her everyday existence is marked by social exclusion and material hardship. Despite these differing contexts, both women demonstrate a persistent resistance to the constraints imposed upon them.

A comparative reading of *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, but...* by Gogu Shyamala and *Mama* by Terry McMillan reveals notable thematic convergences despite their distinct socio-cultural contexts. Both texts foreground marginalized communities and examine the lived realities of women who assume primary responsibility for sustaining their families under conditions of structural constraint. While Shyamala's narrative is rooted in the specificities of Dalit experience in India and McMillan's novel engages with African American life in the United States, each work articulates a shared emphasis on endurance, agency, and forms of resistance that emerge from everyday struggle.

A further point of convergence lies in their commitment to preserving identity and dignity for the next generation. Mildred endeavours to instil a sense of self-worth and cultural pride in her children, resisting the dehumanizing effects of racial discrimination. Likewise, Ellamma refuses to internalize the inferiority imposed by caste hierarchies, asserting her Dalit identity even in the face of upper-caste domination, represented by figures such as the Ramreddy Dora.

Thus, while both texts are situated within distinct socio-cultural frameworks, they converge in their critique of patriarchal authority and systemic inequality. In each narrative, motherhood becomes a powerful site of resistance, through which women negotiate oppression, sustain familial integrity, and assert a transformative vision of resilience and identity, serving as a source of inspiration for the ending protest against the double oppression based on caste and gender inequalities.

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