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A detailed still-life composition featuring a quill pen as the central element. The quill is positioned diagonally, with its tip resting on a scroll of aged parchment. The scroll is secured with a red wax seal and a red ribbon. In the background, a lit candle in a brass holder casts a warm glow. In the foreground, a glass inkwell with a quill inside sits on a wooden surface, alongside a red wax seal and a small wooden object. The overall scene evokes a sense of traditional scholarship and research.

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**Consciousness-Raising in *Thirst***

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**Abstract**

In keeping with the clarion call of drama/theatre scholar and critic Tutun Mukherjee who urges the necessity of attending to regional literatures to comprehend missing women's voices, aspirations and experiences in India, this paper undertakes a close reading of *Thirst* translated from the telugu original *Daaham* by the well-known feminist social worker and activist Vinodini. *Daaham* was originally written as a street play for raising public consciousness. As it shall be illustrated, *Thirst* delineates the lived realities of caste hierarchies for the Dalits in rural India and depicts the power of collective action.

**Key Words:** Caste, Consciousness-Raising, Dalit, Vinodini.

**Introduction:** Urging the necessity of attending to regional literatures to comprehend missing women's voices, aspirations and experiences in India, drama/theatre scholar and critic Tutun Mukherjee's *Staging Resistance: Plays by Women in Translation* (2006) offers a significant intervention by highlighting the work of eighteen regional women playwrights<sup>1</sup>. This paper undertakes a close reading of *Thirst* translated<sup>2</sup> from the telugu original *Daaham* by the well-known feminist social worker and activist Vinodini who writes poetry, plays and short stories. Originally written as a street play, *Daaham* was intended to raise audience consciousness with regards to the day-to-day atrocities faced by the Dalit communities who continue to suffer the lack of basic civic amenities<sup>3</sup>. Notwithstanding the constitutional remedies for the removal of untouchability, *Thirst* portrays a poignant picture of the caste atrocities faced by the downtrodden sections in rural India. As it shall be demonstrated, *Thirst* proffers a

critique of the oppression faced by the Dalits, more specifically the Dalit women and calls for collective action; thereby raising consciousness. Before, a brief outline of the plot will be useful.

**Plot:**

Scene I begins in a thatched hut of Tata, a Mala elder and depicts the hypocritical attitudes of the Reddy community. Ganga goes to feed breast-milk to Pedda Reddy's grandson; in contrast her mother-in-law Souramma waits for a pitcher of water and faces abuse at the hands of Reddy women. Scene II takes place in the open space outside Saouramma's hut. Pedda Mala chides her for putting the rope on the well and for abusing the Reddy women. Souramma articulates the violence she experienced at the hands of the Reddy women. Scene III revolves around Pedda and Chinna Reddy who impose a hefty fine on Souramma's husband Narsaiah for transgressing caste limitations failing which they threaten to parade Souramma naked. In

Scene IV, Souramma's family, four young men, Pedda Mala and the caste elders recall the atrocities they had faced in the past. In contrast to the resigned attitude of the elders, the younger generation protests and calls for collective action. In Scene V, the Mala community gathers in the village assembly and presents a united front. Reminding Pedda Reddy, that the Mala community had dug the well, they reclaim their right to put a fifth pulley and in a climatic resolution, Ganga refuses to feed Pedda Reddy's grandson till a public apology is offered to Souramma.

#### **Gender and Caste in *Thirst*:**

Before beginning with the analysis it is useful to bear in mind that a distinguishing feature of Dalit literature is its depiction of its ideological commitment to the elaboration of social conditions of Dalits and documentation of "the violence, oppression and structural inequality engendered by casteism"(Gajrawala, 2013:1). Moreover, they reinforce Ambedkar's "radical program of education and rights-based advocacy for the lower castes- within a framework of accusation (against the oppressors) and revelation (of the conditions of Dalit life)" (Zelliot qtd in Gajrawala, 2013:2). In a similar vein, Vasantha Kannabiran and Kalpana Kannabiran call for a redefinition of gendered spaces and an understanding of the links between "caste and gender as twin mediators of oppression from the outset"(1991:2131).

In the light of the above, Scene 1 underscores the hypocrisy of the upper caste Reddy community and Souramma's social discrimination due to her Dalit origins.

Ironically pitting together the life-giving images of breast-milk in private and the denial of water in public, the expository scene serves to highlight the horrifying practice of untouchability in rural areas. The reader/audience is forced to confront the private-public dichotomies of the Reddys. *Thirst* is located in Tata's hut where he is seen weaving a rope and he informs his grandson Dasu that his mother left in the morning to fetch water and will return only at midday and that Ganga Vadina (sister-in-law) goes to nurse Pedda Reddy's grandson everyday. The scene engages reader/audience attention and prepares them for discerning the dominated-dominant power relations between the oppressed (Mala) and oppressor (Reddy) communities emphasized through Dasu's use of images of the calf and tiger, "We've nothing to feed the calf in our own home but the tiger in the neighbourhood must be fed!"(Sc 1, 492) Souramma's painful wait in the hot sun and her failure to get a pitcher of water evokes sympathy for her deprivation and her testimony evokes anger at the violence meted out by the Reddy women and their complicity in perpetuating caste hierarchies. In private, Ganga's breast milk is life-giving; in contrast, in public, Souramma's touching the well water is considered polluting. It is clear that caste solidarity overrides feminist solidarity proving Vinodini's insight, "Feminism made me overlook the fact that there was a problem worse than patriarchy: caste" and that "the issues here are not of attraction desire and so on, but of hate, of being detested, spat upon"(qtd in Tharu and Satyanarayana)<sup>4</sup>.

Through Souramma's first-hand account, Mala women's experiences of caste-based oppression is made clear. Calling her oppressors as "bitches", she names Pedda Reddy's younger brother's wife and sees through her oppressor's class based arrogance, "she is so proud, as if this village is her father's property"(Sc 1, 493). Accusing the Reddy women of being indifferent to her request for pouring a pitcher of water forcing her to go upto the well, she recounts her abuse i.e. Dalit women's persecution. Hinting at the beginning of Souramma's consciousness, *Thirst* brings home the message that her defiance should be seen as a rightful protest against deprivation of civic rights i.e. denial of access to water. It is through the third generation i.e. her son Dasu's agitated reactions – tying of head-cloth, taking the staff from the corner and articulating the suppressed anger of the community – that Vinodini begins her subversive reworking.

As the Kannibirans note "to articulate a grievance indicates a degree of political awareness of a wrong which the absolute exercise of power does not permit"(1991:2131). What is strikingly rendered visible is the different albeit everyday forms of violence experienced by the Mala community as Vinodini takes pains to demonstrate that the method, perpetrator and agenda differ. Vinodini depicts the internalization of casteist discrimination by the first generation Tata's shocked reactions to what he considers Souramma's insolence and unquestioning acceptance of Souramma's ill-treatment. Pedda Mala, an elderly Dalit, rebukes her and the second-generation Narasaiah, echoes the self-

imposed prejudice, "If there's no water, we'd have lived drinking urine"; in contrast, Dasu dismisses it as nonsense. (Scene 2, 495) Through Souramma, Vinodini reveals Mala women's day-to-day harassment by upper castes deploying the images of vultures and carcass as Souramma counter-accuses, "... Even if people are dying of thirst, you won't give a drop of water, so you are the pigs, I said. That's all. They jumped on me, pushed my chest, and threw me down. They beat me, kicked me ... pulled me by my hair ... broke my pitcher and said go and cry wherever you want"(Sc2, 495). Souramma defies the practice of restricted access to water by voicing her grievance and her encounter with the Reddy women emphasizes that women of different castes experience gender differently- the reactions of the upper class and upper caste women depict their complicity with the graded inequities in caste hierarchies. Tata's memories of the community's defeat and Souramma's preventing Dasu till his *nayana* (father) arrived show the acceptance of their subjugation. Tata's use of "the idiom of the thorn and the plaintain leaf" exposes their helplessness as he rebukes Narasaiah, "What more trouble do you want to bring by going there wearing chappals?"(Sc 2, 496)

Depicting the mediation of gendered spaces, at first the violent encounter between the women is resolved not through women's negotiations but their men, echoing Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan's insight about women being sites of conflicts<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, Vinodini portrays Mala women as participating in the unmasking of patriarchal notions of masculinity. As the

Kannabirans enumerate, the manhood of a caste is defined by the degree of control men exercise over women and women's passivity and humiliating women becomes a means of undermining the manhood of the other castes. The Mala community's patriarchal mentality is visible in Pedda Mala who begs forgiveness for Souramma's indiscretion and rebukes Narasaiah in public:

PEDDA MALA You are incapable of controlling your wife. Why have you taken birth as a male? (Spits). Thoo. Shameless fellow, motherfucker! Will you die if you have no water one day? I've noticed it's only your wife who cannot wait at the well for water even for a day. This should happen to you for having married that kind of a wife. Now fall at Reddy's feet ... and ask for forgiveness"(Sc 3, 497).

That her Dalit origins become a cause for the appropriation of her body is seen in the obliteration of the difference between human beings and animals when Pedda Reddy uses animal imagery to demean Souramma. His enforcement of social order under the pretext of maintaining village customs reflects his awareness of the weakening of the power of the upper castes. His status quo threatened, he insults Souramma by equating her as pig and retaliates by appropriating her body to teach a lesson to Malas and prevent them from over-stepping caste boundaries. Claiming that Souramma would think of the upper castes as 'a bunch of eunuchs' if no action was taken, he threatens to call the village court, ironically pronounces a 'small punishment' of ten thousand rupees and warns of further retaliation,

PEDDA REDDY ... If you don't pay – near the same big well your wife will be unclothed her head will be shaved, and she will be paraded naked around the village. Think about it. (Sc 3, 498)

The threat resonates with the shameful oppression of Bhanwari Devi in Rajashtan. As feminists maintain the mere threat of gendered violence against Dalit women shows as to how the upper castes can silence an entire community. Souramma's Mala origins subject her to impending psychological and sexual violence at the hands of the upper castes. In Pedda Reddy's warning to parade her naked, he is making a statement on her easy availability as a public woman and commenting on her character and her caste for, as the Kannabirans pinpoint, women are viewed as "bearers of tradition and protectors of the honour of the caste"; thereby undermining the manhood of Mala men who would be taunted for failing to safeguard their women. (1991:2132).

In private, Pedda Mala voices his disgust with caste-based cruelties and Chinnenkati recalls that Dasu's Chinnayana (father's brother) was destroyed for his outspoken nature. When Dasu demands to know the details, Tata grieves the loss of his son and his wife thirty years back. Chinnenkati informs that with water scarcity, upper caste women came out of their houses with pitchers forcing Pedda Reddy's father Subba Reddy to come to Mallapalli. His sitting on the Dalit cots and proposing the digging of a well was an honour for the Malas, who "never dreamt of drinking water with them from the same well"(Sc 4, 500).

Vinodini's revisionary act begins with rendering visible the psychological

subjugation of the Mala community - deprivation, heavy penalties and killings – exposing the methods used by the upper castes. In tune with the insight that “when caste politics are portrayed as an ideological conflict to be worked out between men, women play a central role” in raising Dalit consciousness (Gajrawala, 2013”89), Vinodini portrays the female characters offering a subaltern feminist critique by exposing caste as gendered. Pushpamma adds that the foresighted Chinnayana had insisted on the fifth pulley. Punamma reveals that the upper caste people had slipped away and the Malas had dug till they found water. When Rosammava put a rope and the log broke, the Brahmins interpreted it as an inauspicious sign and warned that Mother Gangamma “would disappear into the depths” turning the village into “a desert”(Sc 4, 500-501). Seeing through their deception, Chinnayana had threatened to close the well; the next day his body was found hanging from a tree. Rosammava abused the villagers for their cowardice and accused Subba Reddy of the crime but her legs were broken. These two incidents served to instill fear among the Dalits.

Dasu’s lamentations are an apt summation of their caste-based persecution, “Beating us if we talk back, hanging us from the tree if we ask for justice what kind of a life is this? We can’t go up to the well. We can’t put the rope into the well that we have ourselves dug. We can’t go to the temple. We can’t tie the head-cloth. We can’t wear shoes”(Sc 4, 502). Raju appreciates Souramma’s resistance and Dasu critiques his community for being blind and mute. Pedda Mala draws inspiration from Raju’s words that

organizations would help them in procuring justice. Adopting the principles of non-cooperation, the Malas stage collective resistance by failing to report for field and cotton seed work; Ganga too stays away from the Reddy household.

In the assembly, questioning village traditions, Dasu refuses to pay the penalty and insists that his mother should get justice. Pedda Reddy declares Souramma’s protest as a transgression and legitimates upper caste violence and Chinna Reddy reminds them of old stories but Dasu fearlessly counters, “Killing and hanging people from the trees ... those days are gone” and threatens, “If it comes to action, we do it every day, don’t we, digging, cutting”(Sc 5, 507). When Pedda Reddy tries to argue vainly that Gangamma would go dry if the untouchables drew water, it is here that Vinodini employs women’s voices to critique their caste and gender subjugation. Pushpamma retorts that they had dug the well. Punamma adds that the high caste people could only break coconuts or pour turmeric and vermilion and could neither use a crowbar nor dig a basket of mud. Spiritedly interrogating their deceitfulness, she pinpoints that when pitchers fell or when the well had to be dug deeper or when unmarried girls committed suicides and the entire well water had to be drawn out, it was their community which came forward and sarcastically observes that the well did not dry up then. When a woman from the Reddy household comes to summon Ganga, it is her husband and Souramma who refuse on Ganga’s behalf. When Venkata Reddy accuses them of being inhumane, Prasad



asks if Reddy had shown concern for little Dalit babies dying of thirst for years.

Stressing Dalit women's double oppression, Vinodini hints at the evolution of women's consciousness. Pushpamma reveals that their husbands beat them up on returning with empty pitchers. Asked how they survived, Souramma's reply is shocking – a ten-mile walk for “dirty water from puddles – the bathing water for dogs, pigs and cattle”; Punamma debunks the justification of water-scarcity and mocks that the upper castes used water to clean their bottoms, to bathe and to water their courtyards and accuses them of indifference. (Sc 5, 509-510) The climatic resolution occurs when Pedda Reddy's daughter-in-law Yashodamma reaches the assembly with her child albeit Ganga is strategically silent to Yashodhara's maternal pleas. Venkata Reddy rebukes their revengeful attitude and assures a satisfactory resolution, but Pedda Mala too is resolute. When Pedda Reddy agrees and Chinna Reddy asks Pedda Mala to save his child, it is through Ganga, who is given very little stage space, that Vinodini depicts the empowering consciousness of the Mala community. Ganga stands her ground, “for beating my mother-in-law, for breaking her pitcher, for abusing our whole caste as pigs ... you admit your mistake. If you admit your mistake, I will feed the child”(Sc 5,

511). When they refuse to accept Pedda Reddy's apology, Pedda Reddy's sister-in-law comes forward and offers a public apology.

**Concluding Remarks:** As already pointed out, for the educated urban middle-class audience, translations into English help in understanding the resilience of caste in rural areas. In other words, the keynote of *Thirst* lies in its recuperation of missing Mala women's experiences and documentation of the everyday forms of oppression faced by them. It is seen that the play depicts the evolving consciousness of Dalit women who are depicted as spirited and intelligent in their questioning of feudal traditions and staging of collective resistance.

Emphasizing the links between caste and women, *Thirst* depicts the differences in the way gender is experienced by women of Reddy and Mala Communities; thereby illustrating the failure of feminism in the context of caste. In a restatement, the play portrays emerging women's consciousness through Souramma, Pushpamma, Punamma and Ganga. *Thirst* confronts the audiences with the gendering of public spaces and gendering of caste and aids in consciousness raising. It brings home the message of collective action and empowers those who are still not treated as citizens and face casteist discrimination.

#### Notes:

1. The play has been translated from Telugu into English by Sunitha Rani.
2. For details, see Mukherjee's *Staging Resistance: Plays by Women in Translation* (2006).
3. See Tharu and Satyanarayana.
4. Bharathi Thummapudi observes that Vinodini is “Essentially a Dalit Christian woman writer” who is satisfied “only after writing about Dalit Christians”(2008:183).
5. For details refer to Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan. *Real and Imagined Women*(1993).

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