

Patriarchy and Subordination of Women in David Davidar's *The House of Blue Mangoes*

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Abstract

Patriarchy, which has always been considered to be the greatest impediment to women's advancement and development, is based on the basic principle of men always in control of women. It imposes itself on every aspect of women from birth to death. When she is born, she is the possession of her father. When she gets married she loses everything she owns to her husband and she herself becomes his possession. David Davidar in his *The House of Blue Mangoes* highlights these patriarchal features which subordinate women in the rural Indian society, through the story of the lives of women in the Dorai family. The story also focuses on the plight of the women in the Dorai household who at no point are allowed to assert any sort of independence or identity of their own. Should at any point they do so unwittingly, they are smacked and shown their place. Through them Davidar also goes to great lengths to detail the unlucky lot of Indian women.

Key Words: Patriarchy, domination, submission, modesty, identity

Patriarchy has always been considered to be the prime obstacle to women's advancement and development. Despite various distinctions in levels of domination the basic principles remain the same, that is, men are always in control. Only the underlying features of this control may differ from case to case. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize the structure, which keeps women dominated and subordinate, and to discern the system in which it works. Even in the twenty first century, whenever women go ahead by their merit, patriarchy there creates obstacles for women to go forward in society. That is because patriarchal institutions and social traditions are responsible for the inferior or secondary status of women. Patriarchy

gives absolute superiority to men while at the same time limiting the rights of women. It commands domination both in public and private spheres. Many feminists use the term patriarchy to describe the power relationship between men and women. Walby defines patriarchy as "...a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women ...the use of the term social structures is important here, since it clearly implies rejection both of biological determinism, and the notion that every individual man is in a dominant position and every woman is in a subordinate one". (1992, 20).

For patriarchy, the family, as a social institution, is a brewery for patriarchal

practices by instilling into the young minds to accept sexually differentiated roles in society. It undervalues the work of housewives who are the providing and nurturing class, where the husbands are the expropriating class. When a woman gets married she loses everything she owns to her husband and she herself becomes his possession. In fact, it is no wonder that women were thought so little of when Darwin the most renowned scientist in the fields of the theory of evolution in the 19th century came forth with the conclusion that men were more developed part of humankind. (Weitz, 2003). The woman in the earlier days was only considered to be one of her master's properties. Like an animal she was supposed to show submission and obedience which was the hallmark of a good wife. (Weitz, 2003) In the Indian culture, right from a tender age, the socialization process differentiated the girl child from the boy child. Indian males were trained to view themselves as breadwinners and heads of households whilst females are taught to be obedient and submissive housewives. According to Charvet, the cause of such differentiation and discrimination is the fact that society views women as sexual beings and not as human beings (1982). McDowell and Pringle (1992) further states that, women are not only constantly defined in relation to men, but are defined as dependent and subordinate to them as well. As a result, women are trained from early age to acquire those qualities, which prepare them into a relationship of dependence on men. These qualities include modesty, gentleness, passivity, subordination and striving to please men in every way.

David Davidar in his *The House of Blue Mangoes* highlights these patriarchal

features which subordinate women in the rural Indian society. The story covers three generations of Dorai men who live in the southern village of Chevathar, their egos and the inescapable conflicts between father and son that tragically play out each generation, from Solomon to Daniel to Kannan. The story also focuses on the plight of the women in the Dorai household who at no point are allowed to assert any sort of independence or identity of their own. Should at any point they do so unwittingly, they are smacked and shown their place. Through them Davidar also goes to great lengths to detail the unlucky lot of Indian women.

The story begins with the incident of how two innocent girls become victims of caste war and are cruelly used by men to lure the rival fraction into action. The young girls had followed all dictums of patriarchy: 'Two girls, one thirteen and soon to be married, the other a year younger, are on their way to the fair. They are dressed in their best clothes, the older girl in a violet half-sari, jasmine in her well-oiled and plaited hair, her cousin in a garish pink skirt. Their foreheads are adorned with sandalwood paste, *vibhuti* and *kumkuman* from the Amman temple where they worshipped before day fall.' (THOBM, 4) As seen above, they were dressed modestly, as per the norms of patriarchy. Yet they were picked by malicious men, as targets, to create unrest within the community. The elder girl was raped just to increase the antagonism between the two warring communities; Andavars and Vedhars. Little thought was given to what would be the fate of a young girl who had been raped. It did not matter to the men that once she has been 'used' she becomes a discard of society. It was left to the girl

to take her own life as she was now a 'damaged' piece, who would be of no use to any man, and thus will have no place in society. To add on to the burden, society had ostracized her for being 'damaged' whilst the male culprits who raped her went about without a label. 'The circumstances of their birth and the evolution of their separate lives gave the men and women of Chevathar village sharply differing perspective on the rape of Valli. While the men grew robust in their hate and mistrust of each other, and obsessed about the larger consequences of the tragedy, the women identified with the girl's trauma and were reminded once more of the misfortune of being born a woman. (THOBM, 36-37) No fingers were pointed at the men, but every finger was pointed to the hapless girl. She was accused of being born under a bad star, to her paying for sins committed in a past life. 'We can only hope that her suffering is eased quickly,' (THOBM, 40) the village woman had commented, fully aware that the 'suffering to be eased' was nothing but death, which remains as the only recourse for the hapless girl.

One of the strong women characters in the novel is, Charity Dorai, a beautiful woman, who was fair in world where women had a dusky complexion. She was married at the age of thirteen to the *thalaivar*, Solomon. She was a good cook and an excellent housekeeper. Every day, Charity was up before first light, bathed, prayed and then took over the kitchen in the Dorai household where members in the household would be twenty or more at any given day. She was also famous for her fish biryani which became the signature dish for any festival in the Dorai family. She ran the household in harmony with the

other female members; Kamalambal, her widowed sister-in-law and Kaveri her brother-in-law's wife, without ever creating any attrition between them. She served her husband just as he wished without ever questioning or opining her needs. In other words, she was the perfect wife as described by patriarchy.

But Charity was also a sharp woman, who was well aware of the limitation a woman had, in this strong patriarchal household. She lived in complete subjugation of her husband. "She had learned, over two decades ago, that her job was to keep the household running smoothly, that she had no part to play in the affairs of the village. (THOBM, 38) She had learned the hard way, her place in his life. He was the *thalaivar* of the village, but she had no right to voice her thoughts or opinions to him in any matter. "If she had any doubts, an incident that occurred when she first arrived in Chevathar had removed them. The wives of two sharecroppers had asked her to mediate in a land dispute and she had promised to talk to her husband. She had broached the subject when she was serving the evening meal and Solomon had hit her for only the second time in their marriage. Shocked and fearful, she had agreed never to interfere in matters that did not concern her. (THOBM, 38) Charity had unwittingly stepped into the men's domain when she tried to intervene in the problem of the sharecroppers. She was immediately shown her place, which is to run the household for the men. All matters of the society were to be handled by men, and a woman has no place beyond the threshold of the house.

Her daughter-in-law, Lily too learned things the hard way. Lily was brought up in her father's house in Ceylonese tea

district which had been far from traditional. Growing up in a combination of European and Sinhala influence, she had a liberate upbringing. As a result, she had been unprepared for some the things she had to contend with in the Dorai household. One day she had wandered into the front room where Daniel and Jacob were taking tea with some visiting male relatives. Spotting an empty space next to Daniel, she had sat down. The conversation had grown strained and had shortly ceased altogether. Daniel had glared at her, and instinctively she realized she'd committed some terrible faux pas. Then she had seen Charity beckoning to her and gratefully left the room'. "Do not try to change things around you, that's almost impossible." 'Change yourself as much as you can. That's easier. And as you change, good things will follow.'(THOBM, 195) A woman's domain is beyond the front walls of the household. She cannot be seen by other male members of the society. She should adjust her life within the walls of the household. Mingling with any male members other than her husband, brother of father was considered as unacceptable behaviour of a good wife.

Davidar, to highlight the subjective position of women in this rural area, in one exquisitely crafted scene, effectively portrays the acute pain and anxiety Charity feels for her daughter on her wedding day - 'In Chevathar, the birth of a son was greeted with the kuruvai – 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'. (THOBM, 35-36) And, tongue-in-cheek, he comments, "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 Parameswara – to rid the world of an evil they could not handle themselves." (THOBM, 31)

The complete disregard for the identity of women is unveiled through the tantrums the men throw while selecting their bride. It is very subtly brought out through the worries of Charity as she planned the feast for her daughter's engagement. She recalled how '...three weeks ago, the marriage of Savitri's daughter had been called off because the payasam at the engagement ceremony hadn't been sweet enough. Her friend had been devastated, "My daughter's value in the marriage market has plummeted. Maybe she is destined to be unmarried for the rest of her days. What sin have I committed to suffer such a fate?" she had wailed.(THOBM, 152) So Charity's mind went into an overdrive – not only would she need to oversee the preparation of the payasam at Rachel's engagement ceremony personally, she would need to have back-up plans ready if for some reason the

dessert didn't pass muster. Perhaps she could offer a gold chain of extra thickness to the bridegroom, maybe more dowry, although she would have little to fall back on one the marriage expenses were met.' (THOBM, 152) Davidar, through the thoughts of Charity, draws attention to the most evil custom, dowry, practiced in our society. It is this custom that makes parents of girl child feel that they have cursed. The moment a girl is born, the only thought that rages in the mind of the parents is the dowry that they would have to give at her wedding.

According to Judith Lorber, 'The main point about gender inequality is that it is not an individual matter, but is deeply ingrained in the structure of societies. Gender inequality is built into the organization of marriage and families, work and the economy, politics, religions, the arts and other cultural productions, and the very language we speak'. (1997) Davidar narrates the history of caste violence, and traces how high caste men objectify women from lower class to wreak havoc on any uprising in their men in society. He begins the narration by delving into the history of caste wars, where women were disrobed in public just to show caste men their position and warn them of rising above it. 'The violence had been brewing for some time. Non-Brahmin caste groups like the Andavars and Nadars, who had acquired wealth and economic clout, demanded enhanced social and religious standing. Those above them in the caste hierarchy were determined to resist their aspirations...One of the social customs to be challenged was dress: hitherto tradition had ordained 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 went bare-breasted before the Pallans, the Pallans before the Nairs and so on until the Nambudiri Brahmins, who deferred only to their deities...At the urging of the missionaries, Andavar and Nadar women began to cover their breasts. This, unsurprisingly, threw the upper castes, especially the men, into a frenzy of insecurity and frustration. Andavar and Nadar women who clothed themselves were abused in public, even beaten. Finally, unable to bear the torment, the middle-ranking castes went too far. "We have a divine right to gaze upon your filthy breasts and you should be flattered that we do so. They are ours to enjoy. Whatever benefits your new faith bestows upon you, this is not one of them," declared a landlord in Travancore in 1858, tears rolling down his cheeks, as he wrenched the blouse off a pretty Andavar woman who had recently converted to Christianity. (THOBM, 19) In order to show the class their place in the hierarchy of society, it was the women who were targeted and abused. The caste men were shown their place by disgracing and humiliating their women. The high caste men were well aware that women would bear their humiliation in muteness, silently waiting for the men who should be protecting them to revolt against the action against them.

Male violence is seen as the root cause of the appropriation of women's sexuality and bodies. Sexual practice is seen to be socially constructed around male notions of desire, not women's. Further, sexuality is seen as a major site of male domination over women through which men impose their notions of femininity on women. Male violence against women is

considered to be part of a system of controlling women. (Walby, 1990). It has been argued time and again by all feminists that patriarchy is very hard to eradicate because its root -- the belief that women are different and inferior -- is deeply embedded in most men's consciousness. One solution to this lopsided view of gender is by forming nonhierarchical, supportive, woman-only

spaces where women can think and act and create free of constant sexist put-downs, sexual harassment, and the threat of rape and violence. Until patriarchy embroiders the ideas of parity and equivalence of women into its section in society, the struggle for women to find an equal position with and identity of their own, in an egalitarian society, will continue to be a dream far-fetched.

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