

The Double-Edged Sword of Support: Analyzing the Impact of Family and Institutional Backing on Women's Resistance to Discriminations

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes two short stories: 'Double-Edged knife' written by K N Malleswari and 'MPTC Renukellu' by Joopaka Subhadra. These narratives portray women's struggles against gender and caste discrimination in educational and professional environments. The protagonists, Mahita in 'Double-Edged knife' and Renukellu in 'MPTC Renukellu', embody resilience and determination while fighting against unfair treatment. Through a comparative analysis of these narratives, this paper analyzes and highlights the importance of family and institutional support in shaping women's experiences of discrimination.

Keywords: Caste & gender discrimination, resilience, family, institution, support.

Discrimination has been a pervasive and deeply entrenched issue in India for centuries, continuing to persist in various forms shaping the lives of the marginalized communities. Particularly, women face multiple forms of discrimination. In this patriarchal and caste driven society, Dalit women bear a 'double burden' facing simultaneous oppression based on their gender and caste. While many women are forced into silence, enduring these injustices as an accepted fate, others demonstrate remarkable courage and resilience by resisting discrimination.

Since everyone has the intrinsic right to enjoy life to the fullest, women from marginalized communities must be given the freedom to do so without fear of prejudice. It is socially essential to be freed from systemic prejudice. However, obtaining this freedom and dignity cannot be accomplished in isolation; it requires constant support from both institutional bodies and the family.

This paper analyses the short stories 'Double-Edged Knife' penned by K N Malleswari and 'MPTC Renukellu' written by Joopaka Subbadra are among the short story collection of 'Telugu – The Best Stories of Our Times' edited by Volga and Translated by Alladi Uma and M Sridhar. By comparing the experiences of the protagonists, Mahita – a college student with strong family backing and Renukellu – a working woman with no support facing total isolation, this paper examines how the presence and absence of such support alters a woman's ability to confront oppression. Ultimately, this paper seeks to address a critical question: why does discrimination persist even when the families are aware of the issues and institutions are governed by formal rules?

The protagonists in the short stories, Mahita in 'Double-Edged Knife' and Renukellu in 'MPTC Renukellu' are educated women from lower castes, yet their backgrounds create vastly different paths of resistance. Mahita is a degree college student who is brought up by well-educated parents belonging to a lower caste (SC). Mahita represents the "new generation" of the Dalit middle class, where the parents have experienced discrimination. Renukellu, on the other hand, is a working woman

in politics who has had to survive on her own since she was a child: married off after the fifth grade and widowed shortly after the birth of her child.

Both protagonists come from marginalized castes and have pursued education, yet their academic levels differ: Mahita is a university degree student, while Renukellu studied until the 5th standard. Despite this difference, both face the intersection of gender and caste discrimination. But their education and upbringing shape how they face these challenges. Their stories show that education is not just about literacy; it is about empowering women to question and dismantle the structures of oppression.

Mahita is an undergraduate student whose parents are both educated and employed—her mother is a teacher and her father is a government employee. Even though they belong to a lower caste, her parents raised her to face the world with dignity. This upbringing is reflected in Mahita's own words:

“Your up-bringing and values will always stay with me.” (*Double-Edged knife* , Pg.166)

“I am a girl. You have raised me without allowing me to develop an inferiority complex by never saying “You can do this, you cannot do that.” That has given me self-confidence.”
(*Double-Edged knife* , Pg.166)

For marginalized people, education provides individuality, identity, and self-confidence, allowing them to reject the indignities of the caste system. Their education and courage made them question the authorities when they faced discrimination.

Mahita's resilience is tested at her government-aided college. The first instance of harassment involves a student named Karthik, who sits too close to her and uses a vulgar, informal tone (*yente*). Mahita does not stay silent; she immediately challenges his behavior:

“Karthik, Get up!... Did I call you yera? Then why are you calling me yenta? Fashion? I don't like it. Don't speak to me like that... Sitting too close and trying to snuggle up is no friendship either. You can stand normally and talk to me.” (*Double-Edged knife* , Pg.167)

Mahita also confronts her teacher. In one instance, a teacher attempts to belittle a student by publicly asking about her caste. Mahita confronts him directly:

“Why are you asking all this, sir?” (*Double-Edged knife* , Pg.169)

Not knowing how to respond, the teacher claims he is only asking for scholarship details. When he then asks Mahita about her own caste, she answers with confidence:

“Yes, sir I am SC, but my father is a government servant. I am not eligible for scholarship.”
(*Double-Edged knife* , Pg.170)

As the organizer for the college Anniversary Day, Mahita faces both gender and caste-based insults. A student named Bharath pressures her to dance to a song she finds far too vulgar. To Mahita, the lyrics are offensive because they suggest that a girl will accept anyone as a boyfriend. When she refuses to perform such a song in front of the parents and the audience, Bharath degrades all the female students, saying:

“What's wrong? Isn't it true? If the cost of the bike and the weight of the wallet are acceptable, you girls will accept any boy, isn't it? (*Double-Edged knife* , Pg.172)

He then specifically targets her caste, implying that Dalit families have no moral standards:

“The forward-caste kids are scared of their parents, but what is the objection among you SCs? Why would there be restrictions for you?” (*Double-Edged knife*, Pg.172)

Deeply hurt but refusing to remain silent, Mahita takes her grievance to the principal, filing a formal complaint against Bharath’s abusive language.

Just like Mahita, Renukellu also questions the injustice she faces. During a general body meeting, many MPTCs are shouting and making demands. The Mandal President, Lingaiah, asks everyone to sit down and speak one by one. However, when Renukellu speaks, he loses his temper and shouts only at her.

“Renukellu! Are you the only one here? Do you alone have a mouth? Do you alone have problems? Don’t act smart.” (*MPTC Renukellu*, Pg.215)

She boldly questions him:

“Lingaiah! When so many others are creating a commotion, you reply respectfully. But as soon as I speak, you put me down—is that fair?” (*MPTC Renukellu*, Pg.215)

She also reminds him that they are equals:

“You may be the President, but do not think of me as just a woman. I am equal to you.” (*MPTC Renukellu*, Pg.216)

Renukellu does not stop there. She goes to the police station to file a complaint about his verbal abuse. Even when people from other castes attack and destroy her house, she refuses to be silenced and reported them as well.

Both Mahita and Renukellu challenge the authorities and take it to the ones who can take action on the abusers. Their education and up-bringing help them to recognize the unequal treatment and speak out against the unjust treatment towards them.

But this fight cannot be fought alone; they need support. Mahita does not fight her battles alone; she has the unwavering support of her family. Her father was always protective, carefully choosing her schools to ensure she never faces discrimination. However, for the first time, Mahita makes her own decision to go to a government-aided college. Her father is worried that she will face people from different regions, backgrounds, and perspectives. He explains everything to her, but her decision is so strong that he could not stop her.

When the incident with Karthik occurs, Mahita’s father overhears the intense discussion in her room. Fearing if there could be a problem, he goes inside, only to find his daughter confronting Karthik with courage. He feels a sense of relief and leaves the room with a proud heart. However, when he shares this with his wife, she is filled with concern, asking, “Why get involved in all these problems?”

The challenges continue in the classroom. When a teacher asks about caste in front of everyone, Mahita replies with confidence. Yet, a single gesture from Karthik wounds her deeply. When she identifies herself as SC, Karthik gives a sarcastic smile and makes an obscene gesture, pointing his thumb downward. The hurt is visible; her face loses its brightness. Noticing her pain, her father encourages her, saying,

“Don’t hesitate to discuss any problems you have, whether in college or outside.” (*Double-Edged knife*, Pg.170)

While organizing the Anniversary Day, Mahita faces further gender and caste discrimination from a student named Bharath. She takes formal action by submitting a written complaint to the Principal, demanding a public apology. However, the institution fails her. From outside the office, she overhears the Principal speaking rudely about her community, calling the situation a "thorn in the flesh" and telling Bharath to simply apologize personally to avoid a scene.

“Even so, who wants to have anything to do with these people these days?... These days are not like the past! Why did you ask her to be the organizer? It’s become a thorn in the flesh. Now go. You’ll have to apologize to her personally. If not, if you object, then you’ll need to do it publicly... no choice.” (*Double-Edged knife*, Pg.173)

It becomes very difficult for Mahita to tolerate these words. She goes home with a heavy heart and shares with her father what has happened at the college. Her father replies sadly,

“I didn’t show you how to be careful about caste matters.” (*Double-Edged knife*, Pg.170)

Encouraged by her father’s life, she replies,

“Having a father who was a victim of caste discrimination, but who still had a good education, a good job, and self-confidence—why should I cry?” (*Double-Edged knife*, Pg.175)

The story ends with supportive words from her parents: “Mahita, your father and I are by your side whenever you need our help. You must follow what you believe in.” (*Double-Edged knife*, Pg.175)

Even when the institution fails to give the right support, the moral support from her family makes her stand strong. Along with family support, she also has peer support. When standing against Bharath, other students from the lower caste stand by with her. This support from both family and peers helps her stay firm.

The situation is entirely different for Renukellu. Unlike Mahita, she has no one to support or stand by her; her fight is completely solitary. During the general body meeting, the Mandal President, Lingaiah, verbally abuses her,

“Shook her with his words as if he was shaking a tree.” (*MPTC Renukellu*, Pg.216)

However, not a single person speaks up for her. Instead, the officials attending the meeting seem to enjoy the verbal duel between Lingaiah and Renukellu.

“...When no one tried to prevent him, Renukellu, unable to do anything, came out crying.” (*MPTC Renukellu*, Pg.217)

Even the Vice Sarpanch, Mohan Reddy, who is from her own village, felt an inward joy seeing her humiliated. Ironically, her abuser, Lingaiah, belongs to the same caste as her. Hoping the law will straighten him out, she went to the police station to file a complaint. However, the Sub-Inspector mocks her, sarcastically asking if there is any man who can actually make her cry. Despite the mockery, she submits her written complaint and leaves.

“Having gone to the police station on her own and filed a written complaint made her feel as if she had the strength of an elephant, which gave her a lot of self-confidence.” (*MPTC Renukellu*, Pg.220)

However, this confidence is soon shattered. Mohan Reddy, Lingaiah, and the Sub-Inspector have colluded against her. Devastated to see no action taken and realizing how vengeful they are, like snakes. Renukellu reaches a breaking point. Unable to bear the pain, she attempts suicide by drinking pesticides. Neighbours save her, but the police file a case against her for attempting suicide.

While she is already suffering, another tragedy strikes. Mohan Reddy, who resents Renukellu's role as a representative, hates seeing people visit her house for help and doesn't like her attending all the meetings, plans an ambush. He uses people from other castes to attack and completely destroy her home. She is even falsely accused of prostitution. With no one to turn to, she cries out

“May the caste elder rot, for he is on their side! With whom can I share my woes? Which god will help me?” (*MPTC Renukellu*, Pg.223)

She pleads with the police for protection once more, but receives no help. Instead, they arrest her for her suicide attempt to put her in jail. By the end of the story, all she could do is curse and threaten her abusers.

The stories of these two women show how the presence or absence of support from family, peers, and institutions completely changes the experience of facing discrimination. On one hand, Mahita—though hurt—stays strong because she had her educated parents behind her. On the other hand, Renukellu, with no support from her family, peers, or the legal system, is left devastated.

CONCLUSION

The contrasting journeys of Mahita and Renukellu show how support or the lack of support shape the lives of women fighting against gender and caste-based discrimination. Both women were brave enough to challenge discrimination, but their outcomes are different based on the help they received. Mahita's resilience is rooted in familial and peer support. Even when her college institution fails to give justice, the moral support from her educated parents and the unity of her peers allows her to stand firm. In contrast, Renukellu's story displays the devastating impact of isolation. The police, local leaders and her caste elders make her battle intolerable. Without a single person to stand by her side, her quest for justice turns into a battle for survival. Her experience serves as a grave reminder that when institutions and society abandon a victim, even the strongest individual can be pushed to the brink.

To conclude, these narratives illustrate that while education empowers women to identify unequal treatment, it is the collective support of family, friends, and fair institutions that truly enables them to overcome it.

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