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A general analysis of dalit literature with the references to Bama's works

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Abstract

Bama's novels are basically based on caste and gender discrimination. They portray caste-discrimination practised in Christianity and Hinduism. Bama's works are seen as embodying Dalit feminism and are famed for celebrating the inner strength of the subaltern women. It is remarkable to note that "untouchability is one of the greatest evils our country has been facing from the time immemorial". The pathetic picture of the untouchables who are deprived of gaining knowledge has no right to go to the temple, no liberty to listen to the incantations of the Vedas or great Scriptures, deprived of the right of reading and studying the language Sanskrit, which is supposed to be the richest language of the world. So, one of the causes of the degeneration of Sanskrit language is untouchability and perhaps this is why many great personalities have given a scathing attack on the castiest mentality of India. But in spite of their best efforts and many Constitutional Provisions, untouchability is still seen somewhere in direct form and elsewhere in a subdued way. Dalit women are one of the most marginalized segments in the society.

Keywords: Dalit feminism, discrimination, untouchability, marginalization, caste prejudice

Introductions

The condition of Dalit women is more vulnerable than non-Dalit women. Dalit women are suffering from multi-disadvantages. This chapter deals with Dalit issues like daily threats of rape, sexual assaults, physical violence at the workplace, in public arena as well as violence at home. This chapter explores Bama's varied representations of Dalit women in Karukku, Sangati and Vanmam with a view to underline the interface between gender and caste significations in Dalit fiction. Bama's intervention in Dalit literary discourse in the early 1990s made a significant contribution in the arena of gender-caste intersections in the lives of Dalits. Her works foreground the twice cursed lives of Dalit women, oppressed on account of their caste as well as gender, at home and outside, by upper caste men and Dalit men, by the state machinery as well as the family. Bama's writing celebrates Dalit women's subversive strategies to overcome their oppression in this chapter.

Dalit women have very few possibilities of empowering themselves in a society that keeps them out of power, privilege and dignity of self that are granted, even if, to a limited extent, to women of other castes or class. Dalit women are burdened writer. Poverty and illiteracy in a society that looks at them with caste and gender prejudice. However, Dalit women exhibit enormous skill for survival and combat. They not only circumvent the restrictive code imposed upon them by upper castes or their own menfolk, but also even they challenge or subvert the same. Every aspect of their life is rendered into songs by the women. Singing is a strategy they adopt to break free from the fatigue of hard labour, to celebrate important milestones in a woman's life, to participate and mark their presence in social/religious functions where, by and large, they are kept away from the limelight. Their oral rendition of their life's sorrows and joys is a parallel literary history, undocumented in hegemonic literary, academic discourse. Their humour, their ability to laugh and tease even while leading a socially repressed' lifestyle bring out their innate strength, resilience and creativity. Dalit literature, literature about the Dalits, the oppressed class under Indian caste system forms an important and distinct part of Indian literature. Though Dalit narrations have been a part of the Indian social narratives since 11th century onwards, with works like Cekkilar's Periyapuram portraying Dalit women life half naked and sexually exploitable and praising the killing of thousands of Dalits on "Kazhumaram" in the hands of Gnanasambandan. Dalit literature emerged into prominence and as a collective voice after 1960, starting with Marathi and soon appeared in Hindi, Kannada, Telugu and Tamil language through self- narratives,

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like poems, short stories and most importantly autobiographies known for their realism and for its contribution to Dalit politics. It was denounced as petty and false by the then prevailing romanticism with the bourgeois Sadashiv Pethi literature, they ignored the Dalit issue, and the consequent social reality of appalling poverty and oppression of caste Hindus which was the result of the bourgeois character of this culture.

It is a literature produced by the Dalit consciousness. The nature of this literature consists in a rebellion against the suppression and humiliations suffered by the Dalit in the past and are suffering even in the present. An outstanding work of Dalit literature would be born only when Dalit life would present itself from the Dalit point of view. The primary motive of Dalit literature is the liberation of Dalits. Dalit struggle against castes tradition has a long history. For example, in Kannada, it goes back to the first vachana poet of the 11th century, Chennaiah, the cobbler. The 12th century Dalit saint Kalavve challenged the upper castes in the following words:

Those who eat goats, fowl and tiny fish.
Such, they call caste people
Those who eat the sacred cow
That showers frothing milk for Shiva
Such, they call out-castes.

Discussion

While dealing with the trends of Dalit literature, the writer will make a humble attempt to point out the core issues of its ideology. In this context it can be said that Dalit literature questioned the mainstream literacy theories and upper caste ideologies and explored the neglected aspects of life. Dalit literature is experience based. This 'anubhava' (experience) takes precedence over 'anumana' (speculation). Thus, to Dalit writers, history is not illusionary or unreal as Hindu metaphysical theory may make one to believe. That is why authenticity and liveliness have become hallmarks of Dalit literature. Those writers make use of the language of the out-castes and under-privileged in Indian society. Shame, anger, sorrow, and indomitable hope are the stuff of Dalit literature. Because of the anger against the age-old oppression, the expression of the Dalit writers have become sharp.

Faustina Mary Alias Bama was born in a converted Christian family in 1956 at Puthupetty near Madurai. She was a constant witness to the hardships the Dalits especially the Paraiyas had to face. Through her literary works she reveals how caste informs and runs through all aspects of life. Bama is one of the first Dalit women writers widely recognised and translated. She is also regarded as the first black literary writer in Tamil literature.

Bama's Sangati was published in 1994 and was originally written in Tamil and it was also translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom. Sangati voices the community identity. The word 'Sangati' means events, and thus the novel through individual stories, anecdotes, and memories portray the event take place in the life of the women in Paraiya community. The novel also reveals how the Paraiya women are presented as daily labour and it is up on them that the burden of running the family falls. The men on the other hand spend the money they earn as they please. In addition, the women are vulnerable to sexual exploitation and harassment.

'Sangati' is a Dalit women history. It tells the experiences of Bama's maternal grandmother even as it incorporates Bama's and her experiences. Thus, it drawn as an autobiography as well as a community's history. It stands for every Dalit woman's history. The economic precariousness of Dalit women leads to a culture of violence, and this is a theme that runs through the book; the terrible violence and abuse of women by their fathers and husbands, and sometimes even brother's wife fights back.

A positive image is created as well, of certain freedom enjoyed by Dalit women; no dowry is required of them, for example widows remarry as a matter of course. There is also very strong sense of a Dalit women's relationship to her body in term of diet, health and safety. There is one set of stories women who have worked hard all their lives, from the moment they are able to help with the care of younger siblings or with chores about the house or outside. There are other stories as well; telling of rites of passage, coming of adolescence ceremony, an engagement, a group of wedding, and of possession and exorcism.

Bama speaks about the sufferings of women who live in Bama's own community. This toil, the fields as well as at their,, Chalas. (Huts) is picturised here in this critical perspective. Bama's Sangati drastically gives an account of Dalit women's dual oppression on account of gender and caste as well as other discriminated situations of womanhood in Tamil literature. The book Sangati. Encapsulates the author's experience of working within a heterogeneous and oppressed society.

In the deep level of their mind she has kept back female marginalization and oppressed condition of the Dalit women in the converted Dalit Christian society. Bama clarifies her acknowledgement of the work:

My mind is crowded with many anecdotes; stories not only about the sorrows and tears of Dalit women, but also about lively, rebellious culture their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter them, but rather to swim vigorously against the tide...about their hard labour. I wanted to shout out these stories.

The economic inequality plays a major role in the life sphere of Dalit womanhood. The character presented in Sangati, is a wage earner as much as men are, working as agricultural and construction labourers, but earning less than men does? They do not even care for the family, whereas women bear the financial burden of running the family, often singly. Those females are also constantly vulnerable to sexual harassment and abuse in the world of work. The structural power of their society mainly concerned with men or patriarchy. The caste courts and churches are male dominated and rules for sexual behaviour are very different for men and women. She writes about the treatment of violence of women by their father, husbands, brothers and other higher caste patriarchal. Above all she describes violent domestic quarrels which are based on publicly.

In Karukku and Sangati, Bama foregrounds multi-layered oppression against Dalit women. She focuses on the 'work' that is routinely done by Dalit women both at home and outside. She explores how violence against Dalit women is legitimised and institutionalised by state, family, church and upper caste communities. Her fiction documents how Dalit women toil and get exploited at home and outside, are subjected to violent treatment by upper caste landlords, the

panchayat, the police as well as by Dalit men within their homes. In her representation of Dalit women, Bama presents Dalit women primarily as workers who join the work force right from girlhood and toil through adolescence, womanhood, middle age and old age almost until their last breath. Their work goes unrecognised by their community as well as by the society at large and they are exploited at every conceivable turn. Bama's representation of Dalit women's life span mirrors the Dalit community's struggle for empowerment and realisation of a dignified existence. Her fiction, through a detailed account of Dalit women's trials and tribulations, triumphs and aspirations, thus, documents the Dalit struggle for social, economic and political empowerment.

In *Vanmam* forging of unity among Dalits is stressed upon most forcefully. Education for Bama is not limited to formal education. She lays equal emphasis on spiritual education but wants this to be free from interference from enthusiasts and officialdom. Dalits have to gain enlightenment with a political sense, rather than merely accumulate university degrees. We can conclude that Bama works within the Ambedkarite vision for Dalit empowerment. If *Karukku* upholds education, *Sangati* foregrounds organised agitation, while *Vanmam* enjoins upon unity among Dalit communities. Bama reiterates and calls upon Dalits to organise and help themselves, "Who would come forward to aid us? We would have to help ourselves" is her repeated reminder. In *Karukku*, she comments:

"Each one of us has to wake up from slumber. Instead of accepting our lot as our fate, we should reject this bondage, this unjust system. We must be brave and stand up for ourselves. Break up caste barriers and biases and prove to the world that no man is inferior to another. Those who have prospered by suppressing us would not give up their hold so easily. But we need to show them their place, show them all are equal and change this society."

Karukku is a clarion call to Dalits to liberate themselves from bondage based on caste, religion and Bama deposits great faith in education as a possibility for deliverance from exploitative social structures.

Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati* engage in the process of the native image construction. She takes these narrative texts as an apt literary form to voice her experiences of the Dalit, a Christian and a woman are expressed in an autobiographic and episodic mode to transmit the inner and outer experiences of the Dalits. Bama being an activist, guides the Dalit people that education could be used as a tool for uprooting the Casteism that exists in India and devastating consequences it has had on the lives of the Dalit people.

Karukku and *Sangati* seek to establish a specific identity in narration as well as in theme. Both the novels employ quest as a predominant theme. Nevertheless, it is a quest for not a singular identity but social identity. Thus, the process of reconstruction and representation for the community is one of the important features.

Dalit literature serves its radical function through its representation of Dalit reality. Through this representation, the Dalit finds a voice to speak across the caste-line and thereby destroys the vaunted purity of saravana space. As a result, the Dalits no longer remain invisible and this recognition enables the development of a new consciousness

and identity for Dalits. Dalit women's journey from the cradle to the tomb passes through different stages and it has formed the matter of asserting their identity with a focus on Dalit feminism. The Dalit women assert their identity by eradicating all forms of violence, intolerance, hierarchy and discrimination in the society. An effective way of achieving this assertion is through Dalit feminism. *Sangati* analyses Dalit women's oppression as a triple jeopardy of oppression by double patriarchies- 'discreet' patriarchy and 'overlapping' patriarchy as well as poverty. Bama foregrounds the "difference" of Dalit women from privileged upper caste women and celebrates their "identity" in their strength, labour and resilience. In *Sangati* as a feminist writer, Bama protests against all forms of oppression relying on the strength and resilience of Dalit women leading to a significant change and self-empowerment through education and collective union.

Conclusion

Bama's focus changed from invoking Dalit victim hood towards focusing on the interrelationship between caste and patriarchy in her writings. There has definitely been a shift in the method of storytelling in *Karukku* and *Sangati*. In *Karukku*, the protagonist is both the narrator and participant. However, in *Sangati*, the protagonist is not a participant but only an observer. Renaissance to oppression is not limited to violent and military forms. Writers employ wide variety of literary forms, devices and styles as weapons of resistance. The language of resistance is a powerful weapon of the oppressed.

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