



# The Significance of Dalit Aesthetics in Bama's Karukku and Sangati

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## Abstract

**Dalit literature** comes under the category of '*Marginalized literature*' or '*Subaltern literature*'. It gains a new significance identity of modern Indian literature. It is not the pain of any one person but it is the anguish of thousands of people, experienced over thousands of years. Experiences in Dalit literature constitutes an engagement in self-search to achieve self-respect; the rejection of traditions and religion that are opposed to such self-respect. They mark a rebellion against overbearing religion and traditions, as well as hypocrisy masquerading under seductive names such as freedom or democracy. They express the pain of human beings who are not treated as human. Dalit literature is articulated out of a desire for freedom, its character is collective rather than individual. The proposed research work intends to include within its scope the inexplicable plight of Dalits. The study shall make an objective exploration of the pathetic condition especially that of Dalit women as faced in Bama's *Sangati* and *Karukku*

Keywords:- **Dalit Literature, Dalit Consciousness, Marginalisation, Caste Prejudice, Class Distinction, Hypocrisy, Religion**

## Introduction

The present research work also shows the three layers of discrimination that the Dalit people especially the women who encounter in their everyday life. They are under the constant trauma, streaming from caste, religion and gender biases. *Karukku* happens to be Bama's autobiography and *Sangati* is her autobiographical novel. Bama being a Dalit has tried her best to put up a strong protest for the cause of Dalits in general.

Dalit consciousness plays a prominent role in Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati* respectively. Bama is constant self-questioning, her courage and dignity in the face of impossible odds, the process of self-discovery, which causes her so much, hurt and anguish is seen in her works. The ideals of Bama admire and applaud in Dalit women are not traditional Tamil 'feminine' ideals of accham (fear), nanam (shyness), madam (simplicity, innocence), payirppu (modesty) but rather courage, fearlessness, independence and self-esteem. Dalit literature is a literature of protest, pain, and agony. The primary motive of Dalit literature is the liberation of Dalits. It has become an effective tool in expressing their protest against the domination of the caste Hindus. Its beginning can be traced to the undocumented oral folklore and tales of the past decades.

Dalit literature as a genre was established in the 1960's and 1970's when a spurt of Dalit writings was published in Marathi and Gujarati. Dalit literature is also giving importance to the upliftment and liberation of Dalit women from patriarchal and caste ridden society. Dalit women face more atrocities due to caste and gender discrimination. They are subjected to systematic oppression and structural violence both from the general community and from within their own community and their families. Violence is used to curb the assertion of the rights of Dalit women in particular and of the community in general. Their socio-economic status combined with being a woman and Dalit also increase the incidence of violence against them. Dalit writing is a post-Independence literary phenomenon.

The emergence of Dalit literature has a great historical significance. The causes and effects leading to the age-old existence of oppression and despair of the lives of marginalized class of nation's vast population are also observed in many other parts of the world. Arjun Dangle has defined Dalit literature as: "Dalit literature is one which acquaints people with the caste system and untouchability in India... It matures with a sociological point of view and is

related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary.”

Bama is a Tamil Dalit woman writer who has contributed many literary works to Dalit literature such as novels, short stories, poems etc., In her autobiography *Karukku*, she has written about the gender and caste discrimination faced by Dalits even if they attain good education. In this research work, I would like to express about Bama's expectation and desperation regarding religiosity and the persistence of caste discrimination in her life. Caste discrimination is one of the most pernicious forms of discrimination as it condemns individuals from birth to a life of marginalization.

## Discussion

Bama belongs to Christian religion and goes to catholic church from her childhood. She has got impressed by the Christian scripture which teaches about love and about the intimate relationship with God. She decides to become a nun and to serve God. After she joins in the nunnery, she comes to know that there is a separate training center for Dalit Catholics and she has to go there. The way how Dalits are treated based on their caste makes to feel that she has taken a wrong decision. She gives up her wish to become a nun. Through this part of life of Bama, we can clearly understand that the caste discrimination occupies a major role even in the religious places and whom Dalits believe as highly spiritual are disappointing and humiliating them without reasons. Bama has bitter experiences on caste discrimination in her village. She wants to go to a new environment which gives her peace and to prove her identity. She has studied Holy Bible which says about the love and scarification. After the completion of her studies, Bama joins in a catholic Christian school as a teacher. She finds many Dalit children studying there and she likes to serve them with devotion in duty. When she observes the behaviour of other teachers and nuns towards the children, she gets angry and keeps on arguing with them for the sake of poor children. This experience pushes her to think about becoming nun. It struck me overwhelmingly that these nuns collectively oppressed Dalit children and teachers so very much; why should I not become a nun too and truly help these people who are humiliated so much and kept under such strict control?

Amidst the strong opposition from the members of family and friends, she prepares herself to go to convent. All her relatives and friends advise her that she could not find the peace in nunnery and nuns will never follow the truth of gospel in real life but Bama

could not accept it. Moreover, before joining the convent, she has learned about a nun who lived and sacrificed her life for the sake of downtrodden and poor. Bama wants to live like her and believes wholeheartedly that her wish will never put her in shame:

They said I could do far more useful work as a layperson than I would do as nun. They said that caste-difference counted for a great deal within convents.

After she enters into the convent, very soon, she finds that the atmosphere is not up to her expectation. She feels that the environment and life style of Nuns are against the God's call. She has seen how she is discriminated in front of other trainees without consideration. The Sister who supervises the training has asked Bama about the change of birth date from christening certificate and school certificate. Whatever the explanation she gives, the Sister could not agree it and she tells that the Tamil people will cheat the school administration to get admission with wrong birth date:

What a nuisance this is turning out to be; thus far they made us hang our heads in humiliation because of our caste; in this order being a Tamil seems to be equivalent to being a Paraya.

In *Karukku*, the main philosophy of human life is clearly revealed. It does not mean in which religion the person is born; it means that in which way he is grown. The society is having a blind eye on Dalits. Bama has got double depressed after she has joined the convent. Being a poor Dalit Christian woman, she has learnt the Gospel and possesses the wish of helping and serving poor as they have learnt that Jesus himself born in cattle-shed and died for the poor, ugly, disgusting sinners. We are surprised to hear about nuns through Bama who could not possess such love in them. How will come the truth of Bible is hidden to their eyes? Bama raises many questions to society, she asks:

Are Dalits not human beings? Do they not have common sense? Do they not have such attributes as a sense of honour and self-respect? Are they without any wisdom, beauty, dignity? What do we lack?

As a part of this society, we have to answer this question by understanding and uplifting Dalits. According to some critics, it is stated that the Dalit Christians are completely forbidden by the government and by the upper class. Due to the class discrimination, upper class could not accept them. Due to the conversion from Hinduism to Christianity, the

government could not recognize them as low-castes. The Dalit Christians are much depressed when compared with other Dalits. *Karukku* proves that even in religious places, they are not treated with respect. Those who commit atrocities against Dalits do not differentiate between Christian Dalits and non-Christian Dalits. For an Indian, a Dalit is a Dalit, whether Christian or not.

Bama decides to come out of the convent. She has refused to listen anybody's words and has joined in nunnery with full-fledge. With the same speed, she wants to come out of it. She is giving many reasons for her emotional action and reaction. Not only the caste-discrimination matters for her, but also, she points out the way how the order runs too. She complains that there is no presence of God. When Bama stays in convent, she has got a good and nutritious food, nice bed to sleep and a comfortable life with all facilities inside the compound. She says that the convent schools are admitting wealthy children compared to poor. When she asks about that she has got a reply that their parents are the sponsors for their sophisticated life, for their building constructions and there is no use of serving only the poor who could not give or do anything to the order. So, it is important to help, obey and honour the rich pupils. The other thing which disturbs her is, in the convent is the rich children who are acted as the owners of the order. Whatever they do, nuns keep quiet, accept all their mistakes and admit them as innocent in the class, acted only on their demands but Dalit Children are punished severely even for small mistakes. They have to suffer for the mistakes of wealthy children also. Bama could not bear such an injustice and unkindness. She says:

All those people who had taught us, had taught us only that God is loving, kind, gentle, one who forgives sinners, patient, tender humble, obedient. Nobody had ever insisted that God is just, righteous, is angered by injustices, opposes falsehood, never countenances inequality. There is a great deal of difference between this Jesus and the Jesus who is made known through daily pieties.

The Manusmriti, the so-called Holy Scripture of caste-Hindus, sanctifies the disparities between different castes. According to the Manusmriti – any Brahmin, even though he has murdered someone from the 'three-world', if he recites three times *Rig-Veda*, *Yajurveda*, *Saamveda* and *Upanishad* he will be pardoned from all his sins. "One should not think that it is a religious provision only and it's not actually practiced anymore in society". Dr. Ambedkar has given many true examples in his book *Annihilation of Caste*. Even today, after sixty year



of Indian independence and implementation of the constitution, the rural area members of Dalit communities are facing cruelty from so-called upper caste Hindus on a daily basis. Actually, in urban area some changes in caste behaviour are occurring– but in the average Indian mind the distance between castes is still very much there.

Reflecting upon both philosophies we can perhaps conclude that both thinkers were right in their own terms. Because today, despite the law that prohibits caste-discrimination, the Dalit community is still subjected to cruel practices including public rape, and other atrocities besides perpetual day-to-day discrimination and foreclosure of equal opportunities. But in cities, change of mind-set and fear of punishment bringing closer the different castes to each other. The face of violence upon Dalit by Non-Dalit is very obvious and barbaric in rural area of India. They go to inhuman level of tortures with Dalits. The literacy rate is very poor in rural part of India and most of Dalits are very poor and mostly agricultural labourers. It has been observed that sometimes even police and local administration help the non-Dalit exploiter instead of the sufferer Dalits. Because most of the officers and employees belong to the same caste category.

In the context of modern Indian literature, we can see these two philosophies as: -

(1) either the aesthetisation and idealization of rural life by non-Dalit writers who sometimes do write sympathetically about Dalits or

(2) the rejection of rural life in favour of urban life by Dalit authors that see clearly the emancipatory and liberating effects of the city on the Dalit community.

Another important difference between Dalit and non-Dalit authors is that the former will always support the reservation system to uplift the backward communities of India. Non-Dalit writers, rarely – if ever – defend this system. Interestingly, Dalit authors also defend the right to convert to another religion as a means to escape the caste system, inherent to Hinduism. Sympathetic non-Dalit writer rarely support this route out of the caste system.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we can also claim that Dalit Hindi authors are more content-based than based on form. This has led to sharp criticism from non-Dalit writers who assert that Dalit authorship lacks artistry and sophistication but instead is filled with primitive and raw language, including swear words and insults. First, and now senior writers that started the Dalit movement in fiction are: Omprakash Valmiki, Mohandas Nemisharay, Jaiprakash Kardam, Kanwal Bharti, Manoj Sonkar and Surajpal Chauhan. Besides these forefathers, the

following writers belong to the contemporary generation of Dalit authors: Hemlata Mahishwar, Kailash Chand, Kaushal Panwar, Kailash Wankhede, Sushila Takbhore and Roopnarayan Sonkar. This exposition by now shows clearly that Dalit-literature is the writing by Dalits, taking fully into account the issues of the community of untouchables and is profoundly Ambedkarite in spirit. The future of Dalit aesthetics would be formed from the term 'individual dignity and equal opportunities' as stated by Dr. Ambedkar in the preamble of Indian constitution. This would be the real aesthetics of Indian literature not only the aesthetics of the Dalit literature.

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