

Choosing the Margin as Space for Resistance in Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati*

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ABSTRACT: In India, rule of Patriarchy in society and the exploitation or oppression of stronger over weaker is not new. The Dialectic and conflict between exploiters and exploited, colonizer and colonized, powerful and powerless, upper and lower is deeply ingrained in Indian society. Amongst Dalits also, the women faces the most oppression as she is "Dalit among Dalits". The Dalit women face threefold discrimination: as Dalit, as poor and as women. This paper focuses on showing how the Dalits resist against oppression and rejection. In *Karukku* and *Sangati* she shared her experiences and that of other Dalit women in her community. She further shows how her community faced discrimination on the basis of gender, her caste and religion and how their oppression is legalized by state, family, church and upper class communities. Here, Bama in *Karukku*, tried to show how religion oppresses Dalit and how Christianity interpellates them for conversion which is also not free of caste discrimination, whereas in *Sangati* Bama tried to show the rule of Patriarchy within the Dalit community. The Methodology used in this paper is Dalit Feminist Standpoint Theory which shares the feminist perspective in favour of Dalit women.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Religion, Dalit women, Oppression, Discrimination.

It is not so much that subaltern women did not speak, but rather that others did not know how to listen, how to enter into a transaction between speaker and listener. The subaltern cannot because their words cannot be properly interpreted. Hence, the silence of the female as subaltern is the result of failure of interpretation and not a failure of articulation. (Gyatri's argument: 195)

Gyatri Spivak augmented that it is not that the dalit women cannot speak what actually no one wants to listen them and interprets their words correctly. In India, about 16 percent of population consists of Dalits community. They have been boycotted from the Indian especially Hindu social structure for centuries. They have been denied even the most fundamental rights like freedom to go to temples and to drink water from the public wells. The word "Dalit" shows their oppressed state which comes from Sanskrit word "Dal" means "broken, crushed, grinded and oppressed". Dalit are also known with the name "Harijan and Untouchable". Dalit are discriminated from the society as well as from the four *Varna* of Hindu society. To raise their voices against oppression, discrimination and harassment, they choose the power of writing which name to be "Dalit Literature". Dalit and Dalit Literature has been a subject of argument in India. Many politicians in India often raise this issue regarding the suffering of Dalit for their own purposes whether to grab more votes from Dalit community or to fix their position in the Parliament. Besides all, there are Dalit writers who actually stand and wrote about the conditions of Dalit in their writings or works. There are so many great writers like Mulk Raj Anand and Omprakash Valmiki who made their great influence on the lives of Dalit through their writings as Dalit began to stand for equality against discrimination. There are also many Dalit woman writers who write specially for the struggle, oppression and exploitation faced by Dalit woman in their day-to-day lives. Bama Faustina is one of those Dalit woman writers. Bama Mary Fatima Rani is a Tamil Dalit woman writer who was born on 1958 in a Roman Catholic family. She took the last and first syllables of Fatima to make her pen name "Bama". Bama, herself belongs to a Dalit community whose ancestors worked as agricultural labourers. She completed her early education in her village and then took her bachelor and B.Ed. degree, she started working as a teacher. Later, she served as a nun for seven years in a convent but after seven years she left the convent because she realized that even in the Christianity, the Dalits have been discriminated where every human is equal before God. She left her job and started writing in favour of Dalits. She wrote many texts from which I have taken *Karukku* and *Sangati* for my study. *Karukku* is the autobiography of Bama herself whereas *Sangati* is the autobiography of her own community which are translated by the well known translator Lakshmi Holmstrom. To critically analyse Dalits and their conditions, I have taken some research papers along with the primary text for my study which helped a lot me to understand the problems of Dalits well.

Dr. Kiran Kumar Golla in his paper "Experiences Have For Long Been Silenced And Marginalized: Bama's *Karukku* focused on the childhood experiences as a Dalit girl and tried to analyse her youth as a Dalit Christian who is searching equality and justice for herself and her community within the Catholic Church. In his research, he begins with a description of the "beautiful village" in which Bama spent her childhood Right from the beginning, he analyzed that in the village the upper and lower communities were allotted different settlements according to their position in the caste ladder. As Bama belonged to the Paraya community, which is the lowest among of all the communities, she lived in a settlement next to the cemetery, as abandoned, as ignored and as isolated as the dead. As a young child, Bama enjoyed every single moment of her life in her village but her identity as a Dalit always hurt her on social grounds. She was subjected to humiliation and exploitation even before she had grown up enough to understand the actual meaning of caste distinction and the purity-pollution business. However, unlike the others

of her caste Bama was not the one to accept everything with servility and refused to be treated as a doormat. She stood out as a rebel in social situations and stood first in her class mainly to defy the superiority of the other upper caste students.

K. Latha in his paper “Double Oppression in Bama’s Karukku and Sangati” tried to present the double oppression faced by dalits especially Dalit women. He showed in his paper that in Karukku, the Dalit Christian women were doubly oppressed on the basis of religion as well as caste. The conversion from Hindu to Christian did not help them to get equal rights as others and remove their identity as Dalit whereas in *Sangati* the Dalit women were finding abused and harassed within and outside their own community. Bama says that how her family members shows their more concern for the boys than girls and the girls were not even allowed to play games of boys and if they do so they were abused or many times punished which shows the rule of patriarchy within their own community.

A Dhanalakshmi in her paper “Bama’s Karukku: A Scathing Attack on Religion in Dalit Perspective” talked about the religion which is one of the cause of exploitation of dalit Community. As Bama shared her experiences that in her childhood she with her other dalit friends has to go for the early morning and evening mantra classes which they could not skip and if they do so they were punished. When they enter the Church, the interaction of them with the sisters creates the fear which effects the psychology of the young girls forces them to shift towards Christianity. In her paper, Dhanalakshmi throws light on the incidents that on Sunday evening, special mantra class was held followed by blessings (Asirvadam) at the church. It would be a long drawn out affair punctuated by a lecture, followed by questions and clarifications, etc. The children would feel sleepy at this session. But the sisters would keep vigil over them. They would hit them violently on the girls' backs or pinch them hard on their thighs or punch them on their heads. Each act of violence would follow one after the other to prevent nodding children from dozing off! The girls would be often shocked out of their wits by such violent reprisal that some of them would wet their skirts. The traumatized girls' experience is no less violent or painful than the brutality borne by adult Dalit men and women at the hands of the policemen. Her identity as a Dalit Christian adds a further texture to the notion of social oppression. Her protests and subversive acts including her choice to invade the literary space hit her to dominated by upper caste male writers are rooted in her experiences and driven by her caste identity. While all Dalits are highly treated and discriminated against, Christian Dalits face more specific forms of discrimination. Dalits who had converted to Christianity or born in Christian families experience caste discrimination within church and its various official organizations.

D.T. Muraleeswari in his paper “Broken World of Dalit- A Critical Study on Bama’s Karukku says that Karukku highlights the exploitation and oppression faced by Dalits at the hands of the police, the Panchayat, the upper castes and the church. Bama also highlight Dalit women are oppressed further by Dalit men at home. The practice of Patriarchy along with caste hegemony is a highly unjust suppression of Dalit women as shown in the works of Bama. Karukku discusses various forms of violent oppression of Dalits; specifically on the Paraiyars caste. The important aspect of this work is that the church too oppresses the Dalit Christians. The series of incidents that took place in the life of Bama enabled her to discover herself as a woman, Dalit and Christian. Bama, as a Dalit encountered many problems in her life; as a woman she is rejected; faced the cruelty from her childhood and caste bias taught her the meaning of shame. In his research Muraleeswari discloses the harshness faced by the dalit community and the miserable situations they live in. The most striking thing about his research is that it reveals the oppression in the modern form and the unchanged attitude of the so-called forward-thinking society.

The theory fitted for this research is Dalit Feminist Standpoint Theory which is derived from Standpoint Theory. Standpoint is developed by Sandra Harding and Nancy Hartsock through the book “The Feminist Standpoint; Developing ground for a specifically feminist historical materialism. It is a view point towards a particular situation or condition or even an issue from the perspective of the particular who lives it called Standpoint theory. It can be applicable to aware the marginalized sections of the society to fight for their identity and to contribute to the society. Dalit Feminist Standpoint Theory by Sharmila Rege further adds in it as Dalit Feminist Standpoint is that in which the marginalized section (Dalits) articulate their situations or oppression in their own ways and stand by it to aware the people of their own community. . It is always against the Dalit Patriarchal movement enhancing Sanskritization and Savarnization. It argues through analysis of the material basis patriarchy. Dalit Feminist Standpoint also argues for bringing at the centre stage the differential access to and control over labour, sexuality, and reproduction by castes, classes and communities. It also argues for revisioning of contemporary feminist politics by suggesting an ideological position of multiple/plural standpoints. Sharmila Rage argued the same, “Dalits life narratives are in fact testimonies which forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual and provide the context explicit or implicit for the official forgetting of histories of caste oppression, caste struggle and resistance” (13.).

Previously there was no such proof of aggression came in light by the Dalit women but Dalit feminist literature provided a identity to Dalit women gave them the right to express their views on their miserable condition. Bama’s novel *Karukku* is one such feminist work that depicts the discovery of Dalit women identity. ‘Karukku’ means *Palmyra* leave with searing edges like double edged sword. In her foreword, Bama draws attention to the symbol and to the words in Hebrews (New Testament), “For the word of God is living and active sharper than two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” by Hebrews 4:12 (Bama, 2012: xv)

Bama herself is the narrator who stated narrating her journey through her experiences and of those who belongs to Dalit community. The novel mainly focuses on the identity crises and the quest for self. Bama throughout her novel talked about the oppression and about the incidents which left mark in her mind as a Dalit moreover Christian Dalit. She recalls the incident when she reached third class; she saw a Dalit male bringing *vadias* in the plastic bag holding it from the top so that *vadias* in it could not

get impure which shows the height of hypocrisy of the upper class. Then, the Bama got a priceless advice from her elder brother to fight against such hypocrisy, discrimination and untouchability. Bama's elder brother whom she was very much attached suggested her that education is the right way to get over of all the hurdles. Bama very soon realized this and started working hard to make her life smooth and better in every ways especially in terms of equality and other fundamental rights.

“Because we are born into the Paraiya jati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that. But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities. So study with care, learn all you can. If you are always ahead in your lessons, people will come to you of their own accord and attach themselves to you. Work hard and learn” (Bama, 2012:15)

Even her school days were not out of the box of oppression as she had to work like a laborer there. The Church had also made a great revolution to oppress Bama. Bama was “baptized” many times by the nuns in the Church at the age of six as they use her to wash the Church and its belonging. “In that school, attended by pupils from very wealthy households, people of my community were looking after all the jobs like sweeping the premises, swabbing and washing the classrooms, and cleaning out the lavatories. And in the convent, as well, they spoke very insultingly about low caste people. They spoke as if they didn't consider low caste people as human beings. They didn't know that I was a low-caste nun... (Bama, 2012: 22).

The government grant and special tuitions which gives some relaxation to the Dalits often irritates and humiliates her because it singled out her caste identity as a taboo. At the age of twenty six of her life she managed to become a nun and there she found that the condition of the Dalits is much miserable. Even after conversion, the Christianity did not accept them as Christian but Dalits. After realizing all this Bama left the convent which resulted in societal interrogation and spark of resistance. Karukku also depicts the spiritual journey of Bama. The re-reading of the Christian scriptures enables her to figure out a new perspective and hope of identity for Dalits. Later she found that the ideology of her and the convent was like the two banks of the river. In the end she made her final choice where she saw the advent of change.

After her autobiography *Karukku* she wrote a novel *Sangati* which is also a Tamil word means ‘Events, news or happening’ in which she talked about the struggle of her community. *Sangati* is a shift from the struggle of individual (Bama) towards the struggle of Paraiyar community to which she belongs as we can say that *Sangati* is the autobiography of her community. *Sangati* is a novel which shows how patriarchy works within and outside a Dalit community against Dalit women. It shows that how a women have to suffer the exploitation, discrimination and oppression of Patriarchy. In *Sangati*, has also played a great importance for the oppression of Dalit women. They were treated as slaves and were not allowed to involve in the works and other activities of the church. The Dalit women were targeted by the upper community or Christians for sexual harassment and mental torture which reveals that the conversion into Christianity did not work for the Dalit women. *Sangati* also throws light on the Domestic sexual violence faced by their (Dalit women) husbands at and sexual oppression and abuse faced at the work places. Bama in *Sangati* shared that the girls reaching puberty were not allowed to enter to colleges and schools. Overall *Sangati* is History of Dalit women and mainly an account of the experiences of narrator's maternal grandmother and her contemporaries. In *Sangati*, Bama showed the life journey of Dalit woman who made her path from Subjugation to celebration. It also highlights the absolute critical world of Dalit women where they are torched not only by the hierarchy but the Dalit males. *Sangati* reflects the rule of patriarchy as the Dalit male were torched by the bourgeois and that torches they further carry on to their wives.

“It is not the same for women of other castes and communities. Our women cannot bear the torment of upper-caste masters in the fields and at home they cannot bear the violence of their husbands” (Bama, 2005: 65)

Sangati is the novel which clearly and critically describes the joys and sorrows of individual as well as all the women of Paraiya community. Bama has beautifully recapitulated all the events and memories of Dalit women in one novel. She also presented the purpose of writing this book in her acknowledgement: “My mind is crowded with many anecdotes: stories not only about the sorrows and tears of dalit women, but also about their lively and rebellious culture, passion about life with vitality, truth, and about their hard labour. I wanted to shout out stories” (Bama, 2005: 9)

The novel, *Sangati* is full of dalit women experiences. One of such story is of the character named mariamma, who is humiliated by her own father, assaulted by the landlord and later was abused by her husband but she never resists. Even after defamed as an immoral woman she never utters a word. Even though the whole village knows that she is not guilty, nobody had courage to defend her and Mariamma accepts what comes to her as her destiny. Bama tries to logically examine the situation.

“We must be strong. We must show by our own resolute lives that we believe ardently in our independence. I told myself that we must never allow our minds to be worn out, damaged, and broken in the belief that this is our fate. Just as we work hard so long as there is strength in our bodies, so too, must we strengthen our hearts and minds in order to survive”. (Bama, 2005:59)

In *Sangati*, Bama showed that how her education made her power to think what is right and what is wrong. Education helped her to question the society and the supremacy of Church. All this show her stubborn to get her own identity as a women, as a Dalit and as an individual.

“Though through her education, Bama made a difference in her life. She brings the reality of dalit women to the fore and poses a question as to why a woman cannot belong to no one but herself as she says: “I have to struggle so hard because I am a

woman. And exactly like that, my people are constantly punished for the simple fact of having been born dalits. Is it our fault that we are Dalits?" (Bama, 2005: 121)

Conclusion: Dalits faced so many oppression and discrimination from the society but their patience and aggression at the same time made them rise from rejection to celebration. They united together to fight against the bias society and made their own identity which is very well presented in Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati*. There are so many reforms made for the Dalit community. Furthermore, there are so many important safeguards in the Indian Constitution for Scheduled Castes or Dalits. Some of them are given below:

"The State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections, of the people, and in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation" (Constitution Of India, Article 46)

Indian Constitution provides for reservation of seats for SCs/ STs in the Lok Sabha"
(Constitution of India, Article 330)

It also provides for reservation of seats for SCs/STs in the state Vidhan Sabha (Legislative Assemblies) (Constitution of India, Article 332) which means they can vote as well as name themselves for election further can appointed as Prime minister or President according to their ability.

The protection of Civil Rights Act, 1989 (Indian Constitution)

The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities), Act 1976 (Constitution of India)

The Child Labour is Prohibition and Regulation (Constitution of India, Act 1986)

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