



FROM SUBJUGATION TO LIBERATION: A CRITICAL STUDY OF BAMA'S KARUKKU

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ABSTRACT:

Dalit literature is a literature of protest, pain and agony. Its beginnings 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 writing was published in Marathi and Gujarati. Nearly two decades later, Tamil Dalit writing marked its identity in the literary map of Tamilnadu. A Dalit woman is a Dalit amongst Dalits. Doubly oppressed by a patriarchal and caste tyrannical society, a Dalit woman nonetheless has exemplary endurance and the indomitable spirit to bounce back against all odds. The time has come for Dalit writers to not only lament their subjugation but also to simultaneously celebrate with pride the dauntless spirit of the Dalit women. This paper seeks to explore how Bama's Karukku and Sangati are testimonies to this significant changing trend in Dalit literature.

Keywords: Dignity, Equality, Exploitation, Socio-political commitment, Untouchable

INTRODUCTION:

The root word for Dalit is „dal“ which means to crack, open or split. Dalit has come to mean things or persons burst, split, broken or torn which signify the state of downtrodden, scattered, crushed or destroyed people. It is said that the root „dal“ means low, weak, poor or helpless in Hebrew. Derived from Sanskrit, Dalit is a word current in Indian vocabulary as well as in some other languages of the world. Some of the writers hold the view that Dalit is not the caste. He is a man exploited by the social and economic traditions of this country. He does not believe in God, rebirth, soul, holy books teaching separatism, fate and heaven because they have made him a slave. He does believe in humanism. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution. Bama's writings specifically deal with the aspect of politics of gender in the church. The Church and its custodians entrust menial jobs to the converted Dalit women. Where as the upper caste women are not entrusted with any kind of menial jobs. Bama opines, “It is our women who sweep the church and keep it clean. Women from other castes stand to one side until we have finished and then march in grandly and sit down before anyone else”(S 119).

Bama draws the attention of the readers to the difference in wages. Though the Dalit women earn their wages, they are still under the male domination both within and outside the family. According to Bama the Dalit men refute the principles of Manu. But simultaneously they follow the principles of Manu in terms of women's freedom. Being low caste people, the Dalit women have to tolerate inhuman humiliation and adversities due to the caste system. Caste system is much more wretched in the rural areas than the urban areas. Bama views that many rural Dalit women have no safety, security and adequate protection. Therefore Bama created many strong Dalit women who have courage to break the shackles of authority. *Sangati* explores the lives of those women who dared to make fun of the class in power that oppressed them through which they found the courage to revolt.

DISCUSSION:

Dalit literature is mainly concerned with the expression of dalit voices. It attempts differently from the way elite discourses have constructed them. Women have historically been essentialized into silence. It is curious to note that the voices of dalit women have remained silent even when the silence of upper-caste women finds expression and voice in the so-called in the feminist representations. Dalit women's writing characterizes the emergence of dalit women's voices in literary discourses. It challenges the representations of dalit woman's experience in elitist and „dalitist“ (dalit+masculinist) narratives. It is also possible to view dalit women's writing as an outgrowth of dalit literature as well as reaction against it.

The writings of gendered dalits like Bama, Sivakami, Baby Kamble, and Urmila Pawar are an attempt to create a space for dalit women within the male dominated domain of dalit literature. Dalit literary writings tend to be male-specific, male-centric and defined by patriarchal representational strategies. Dalit women's writings seek to deconstruct the image of the dalit women in dalit literature and attempt to reconstruct alternative female selves. Although efforts have been made to study the thematic issues and narrative aesthetics of dalit writings, not much attention has been paid to the ideological and linguistic questions concerning dalit women's writings. This chapter is concerned with the dalit specific feminist notions and aesthetics, as they are exposed in dalit women's writing, taking Tamil writer Bama's *Sangati* as a typical representative. *Sangati* rejects dalit women's passive self-image in dalit literary discourses and celebrates their self pride and dauntless spirit. In *Sangati* dalit women are transformed from being the mute objects to strong articulate women. Bama's work challenges the reigning paradigm of „dalitist“ and feminist discourse by analyzing the overlapping structures of caste patriarchy and gender regulation in an attempt to subvert them both.

It is true that patriarchy and oppression of women cut across caste and class categorizations but the way a woman experience them individually differs, owing to the differences in the circumstances in which she lives. In other words, while patriarchy is a cross cultural constant and the subordination of women is a universal phenomenon, the structure of patriarchy and the form and extent of women's subordination have been conditioned by historical and contingent factors. It is in this context that the emergence of dalit women's writings, distinct from feminist and dalitist writings have to be understood. The interface between caste and gender, and the dalit women's resistance to both were left unaddressed in the dalitist discourse too. One probable reason for not understanding this dual resistance is the patriarchal orientation of literature. Gopal Guru is of the opinion that “it is not only in the political arena that dalit women face exclusion. In the cultural field, for instance, dalit women have criticized their male counterparts for dominating the literary scene” (80). Besides, dalit literary discourse mainly focussed on the oppression of dalits in general and the internal dynamics within dalit society was perceived to be a possible source of weakening the dalit cause through disagreement and contradiction. The dalit woman is doubly marginalized in the Indian society because of the overlapping structures of caste and gender. Hence, as Mangalam correctly points out dalit women's writings have a two-pronged agenda: to react against caste oppression and resist alit patriarchy,

Dalit women's fiction in particular has successfully resisted the constraints imposed by existing hegemonic discourses and created through positive subversion an independent space for itself. The gendering of Dalit discourse unravels the multilayered structures of oppression and foregrounds the need for recognising the challenges from within. (110) Bama's text radically disrupts the critical and epistemological ideas of feminist and 'dalitist' writings

with regard to the experiences of dalit women. It powerfully voices the concerns of several dalit women from an insider's perspective. The gendered caste subaltern's untold material miseries due to their caste and the patriarchal oppression are to be historicized in order to bring them out of the vague of timelessness hence, Sangati includes case histories of a number of dalit women. The history of the injustices of caste system is presented through the narrative along with the history of the subaltern patriarchy. Mangalam remark's, "Bama's Karukku and Sangati, for instance, capture the violence unleashed against dalits by the state, the church, the upper castes and the patriarchal family. Dalit women are exploited and attacked by upper caste landlords, church authorities, the police and dalit men at the panchayat" (111). Patriarchy is shown to have pluralistic dimensions with all sorts of socio-economic, cultural and capitalist manifestations. The novels probe deep into the causes of economic inequality which is the worst cause of dalit women's oppression and their interface with caste and patriarchy. The nexus between caste and gender, and the feudalistic social structure that exists in the village is laid bare.

Bama's Sangati deals with the struggle of Dalit women Sangati is not the story of an individual but it is a story about the whole community of Paraiaya women, a neighbourhood group of friends and relations and their joint struggle. Sangati has no plot in the normal sense, only the powerful stories of a series of memorable protagonists. „Sangati' means news, events and happenings. Sangati specially deals with Dalit feminism. In this novel, Bama tells about the sufferings of Dalit women and their struggle to survive. In her acknowledgement, Bama writes:

My mind is crowded with many anecdotes: stories not only about the sorrow and tears of Dalit women. But also their lively and rebellious culture; their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter them, but rather to swim vigorously against the tide; about the self-confidence and self respect that enables them to leap over their adversities by laughing at and ridiculing them; about their passion to live life with vitality, truth and enjoyment; about their hard labour. I wanted to shout out these stories. I was eager that through them, everyone should know about us and our lives. Sangati grew out of the hope that the Dalit women who read it will rise up with fervor and walk towards victory as they begin their struggle as pioneers of a new society. (Bama 9)

What seems interesting is the fact these individual stories, memories of personal experience, and anecdotes are narrated in the first person narrative and then counter-pointed by the generalizing comments of the grandmother and mother figures, and then further by the reflections of the author-narrator. The narrator, of the novel in the earlier chapters at least, a young woman; but the reflective voice is that of an adult looking back and meditating upon her experience. The reflections which may seem didactic are a means of bridging experience and analysis, and end with a practical for action. The form of each chapter is, therefore, exploratory, and the structure of the book as a whole seeks to create a Dalit feminist perspective.

So in this way, Bama tries to show that how Dalit women are suppressed and punished on the name of justice. For instance, Mariamma is fined two hundred rupees while the boy was fined only one hundred rupees. Women are considered inferior to men. After making his decision the Naattaamai says that, "It is you female chicks who ought to be humble and modest. A man may do a hundred things and still get away do a hundred things and still get away with it. You girls should consider what you are left with, in you bellies" (S 10). Sangati is full of Dalit women's torture by double patriarchy. They are considered inferior to men and upper caste people. They cannot play the game like boys, they cannot laugh loudly as boys, and they are not allowed to eat first. Expressing their pain they say:

Why can't we be the same as boys? We aren't allowed to talk loudly or laugh noisily; even when we sleep we can't stretch out on our heads bowed down, gazing at our toes, you tell us all this rubbish and keep us under your control. Even when our stomachs are with hunger, we mustn't eat first, we allowed to eat only after the me in the family have finished and gone. (S 29)

Bama shows that women have to suffer a lot; they are not given respect in society. They are treated as beast. The position of women is very pitiful and humiliating. They are not safe when they are outside at home. In the fields they have to escape from the lustful desire and molestations of the upper-caste men.

In the church they are also given lower position than men. They have to clean the priest's shoes and become his slaves because of patriarchy as he threatens them with the tales of God, Heaven and Hell. They even do not get rest at home because they have to submit themselves to their husband's pleasure. They are considered as the object of pleasure and children-machine. Nobody cares for them; they rarely go to hospital for their treatment and thus become the victims of death. Bama shows how women are tortured and beaten by their husbands. They are beaten just like animals. Nobody can protect them. For instance, Thaayi is beaten by her husband very badly but when Karuthamathu goes to save her, her husband becomes rather furious and say, "Who are you to speak for this munde? She's my wife I can beat her or kill her if I wish you go and mind you own business" (S 43). He becomes so much angry that he beats her more violently and abuses her.

Bama presents women as suppressed by society. Dalit women are considered as creatures of different species that have no sense of honour or self-respect. Sangati shows, how the women have to work while men only remain busy in gossiping. Many of the girls have to work in the match factory whole day. It is the women who have to struggle with childcare and everything else. Only Dalit women are the subject of suppression. They are tortured by everybody. They are also tortured by evil spirits. Bama examines why only the Dalit women are subject of evil spirits. Why the men and the women of upper caste are left free. She examines the reason and say:

From the moment they wake up, they set to work both in their homes and in the fields. At home they are pestered by their husbands and children; in the fields there is back-breaking work besides the harassment of the landlord. When they come home in the evening, there is no time even to draw breath. And once they have collected water and firewood, cooked a kanji and fed their hungry husband and children, even then they can't go to bed in peace and sleep until dawn. Night after night they must give into their husband's pleasure. Even if a woman's body is wracked with pain, the husband is bothered only with his own satisfaction. Women are overwhelmed and crushed by their own disgust, boredom, and exhaustion, because of all this. The one who don't have the metal strength are totally oppressed; they succumb to mental ill-health and act as if they are possessed by peys (evil spirit). (S 59)

According to Bama, there is no freedom for women. Men are free to do anything, but women have to suffer because of patriarchy. They cannot do anything they like, for example, they cannot go to cinema hall. The women cannot do so because they have the fear of violence against themselves by the men of upper-caste society. The violence is common to women; they are not free to choose their life-partner, while men are free to do so. As Bama tells about an incident that once a girl of Paraiya community fell in love with a boy of Palla community and she was beaten very badly by her family members. Men possess the right to do anything they like. They have no restrictions, but women have to suffer if they commit anything on their will.

Eventually, it is noticeable that Sangati is Bama's admiration for the women of Dalit community, from the little girl Maikkanni who helps and supports her family by working in a matchbox factory, to the old woman SammugaKizhavi who paves her path of ridiculing the upper-caste landlord and all this mesmerizes the readers. The moral values that Bama appreciates and applauds in Dalit women are not the traditional Tamil „Feminine“ ideals of accham(fear), naanam(shyness), Madam (simplicity, innocence), payirppu(modesty), but are audacity, defiance, intrepidity, self-dependence, and self-esteem. For Bama, "Sangatiis a look at a part of those Dalit women who dared to make fun of the class in power that oppressed them and through this, they have the courage to revolt" (S 8).

Bama presents dalit women as a separate category in the canon of feminism by explaining their exclusive experiences of subalternity. While attempting to define their dalit self as opposed to caste-self in narratives, the dalit

women writers like Bama reject a homogenous 'dalit self' by critiquing the 'dalit patriarchy'. Sangati demonstrates how dalit women are brutalised by brahmanical patriarchy along with the dalit patriarchy. By exposing the several layers of hierarchies that oppress the gendered dalits, Bama attempts to establish a distinctive dalit feminist stand point. Dalit women's writing is an example of the new mode and philosophy of articulation from the "other within the other." It tends to be experimental as it also calls for the undoing of the casteist and patriarchal narrative conventions and discovering a new language of desire and protest. Instead of privileging a single dominant omniscient voice as in feminist and dalitist narratives of self, Bama opens up multiple narrative voices in her fictionalised autobiography. The fusing of dalit proverbs and folk songs, myths and legends, rites and rituals and the use of the colloquial language and the oral story telling method of dalits, altogether improve the aesthetics of dalit womanist writing.

CONCLUSION:

Through her works, she has created the awareness about her community among the readers. Her influence as an effective Dalit writer comes from the various experiences of her life. She has brought out a great change among the readers as well as the other Dalit writers. Thus, with such merits as an influential writer, Bama finds the voice to the voiceless; where her individual voice turns into the collective voice of her people. After its publication, *Karukku* has brought about a number of changes in the people. This is because she has conveyed her message very effectively in this novel and we are able to see the strength of her mind, which is reflected in her writing.

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