

SUBJUGATION AND OPPRESSION IN SELECT NOVELS OF BAMA

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ABSTRACT

The caste system in India has been a source of social evils such as slavery and racism, with untouchability, purity, and pollution affecting the lives of the disempowered. Dalit literatures highlight the social, religious, and caste oppression faced by Dalits, who struggle to survive and exist. Untouchability is a result of the Varna Vyavastha, a socio-religious slavery forced on Dalits by Hindu casteists. Dalits are considered the sons of Indian soil and are considered the salt and savour of the traditional land. Untouchability has been a peculiar institution in India throughout history, with Dalits being the sons of Indian soil and considered the salt and savour of the traditional land. Dalit writers are seeking answers to their questions about their identity, their forefathers, and the reasons behind their rejection. Dalit literature has been shaped by Dr. Baba Sahib Ambedkar, who inspired Dalit writers to seek answers to their questions and redefine their conditions. Through their writings, Dalit writers aim to weed out the weeds that are rampant in India. Dalit literature in India, inspired by Afro-American writers and Dr. Ambedkar's works, aims to challenge social prejudice and caste practices. Women, particularly Dalit women, face sexism and exploitation from upper caste men. The feminist movement has reshaped the concept of women's identity, but Asian women focus on cultural norms and traditions rather than liberal or radical feminism. Marginalization in India began during British colonial times, with tribes ruling their ancestral land and being notified as criminals. Dalit women are often treated as non-entities and face discrimination and abuse. Bama, a Dalit women writer, delves into the effects of discrimination and poverty faced by Dalits. Her works, including Karukku, Sangati, Vanmam, and Kusumbukaran, have been translated into English and other languages. The ten-year anniversary of Karukku's publication in 2014 in Chennai marked a significant milestone in Dalit intellectual and activist spheres, with Bama expressing her admiration for Dr. Ambedkar's centenary and the importance of Dalit literature in addressing these issues.

Keywords: Ambedkar, Bama, Christianity, Dalit Community, Karuku, Oppression, Sangati, Subjugation, Untouchability, Vanmam, Women.

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INTRODUCTION

Social evils such as slavery and racism existed with the caste system in India with its untouchability, purity and pollution. In India, the socio-political structures of race and caste function at different level in the respective societies. The consequential effects of discrimination, humiliation, unequal opportunities and subordination create impact on the life style of the disempowered lot. Those people who oppressed historically leave the marks of exclusion depending on their caste. Through the histories of their oppression, individuals are able to understand their identities.

DALIT CONCEPT

The term Dalit implies downtrodden, oppressed, exploited, or condemned to peripheral life. Dalitness is a stable reality in human life. It is everywhere and it makes its presence in one form or other all over the world but for tribal people. Dalit literatures is created to show the juggernaut of social, religious and castes oppression under which Dalit's of India struggle to eke out an existence. Inequality is the sole reason behind marginality. People are mostly beyond a dominant culture. Their survival is always marginal. In all societies, there will be power centers. The marginalized people are knowingly or unknowingly away from the centers of power. They remain scattered without any cohesiveness and strength. Having been denied economic, political or religious power, they relegate in darkness. They dwell in physical or psychological ghettos. They are imprisoned by the customs and traditions constructed by the social setup in which they live. Yet they fight for emancipation.

The Indian Dalits are very much marginalized and exploited people. Their voices of protest are well heard in literature. They constitute a major marginalized group in India. They were treated as untouchable in ancient land of dreams, nightmares, reveries and hallucination.

Untouchability is an outcome of the Varna Vyavastha in India. It is a sort of socio religious slavery forced on Dalits. Over a period of time, it got institutionalized in society, culture and tradition. It turned out to be a universal and all pervading phenomenon. The casteist Hindus forced them beyond the peripherals of religion and culture. The Indian Dalit suffers from anguish and anger. Although it was a reaction in despair, it is felt even in present literature. Their marginalization transcends one's imagination. The untouchability has been a peculiar institution in India all through history. For generations, it has been a dilemma for the Indians. It has not been possible for the anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists to trace its roots. The Hindu society is basically "a closed society" deprived of ventilation, air and light. Dalits are the sons of Indian soil. They are considered as the salt and savour of this traditional land. In spite of it, they were discarded by high caste Hindus for centuries. At presently, a Dalit writer questions; what is India to me? An enigmatic land? A dream or a night mare? or a puzzling riddle? He is in the lookout for answers to all these questions. What it refers to an untouchable or a pariah? He is very much aware of the fact that his forefathers emerged from the same womb as the Brahmins. What for he was rejected by the mother? Why and how? Who is to be considered responsible for this inhuman act. There are many questions to be answered. They emerge from what, who, why and how. All these questions seem to be simple, yet their answers are very much complex. Once Dr.Baba sahib Ambedkar expressed angrily to Gandhiji as "Gandhiji, I have no homeland! The Dalit writer, of late, has been trying to find answer for all these questions. Due to Dr.Ambedkar's inspiration, Dalit literature has been defining and redefining Dalit conditions. The Dalit writers pens resemble pointed axes which could be used for weeding out the thickly grown weeds rampant everywhere in India.

The family structure of the subjugated people are always disrupted and fractured. Though women defend their positions, they are not able to withstand racism and sexism. The men folk among the Dalits face humiliation in the society and they try to compensate it by being male prerogatives on their women. The Dalit women face the onslaught of sexism from Dalit men and similar exploitation from upper caste men. The Indian tribes undergo untold cruelty and suffering.

Dalit literature in India seeks inspiration from Afro-American writers. These dalit writers are inspired by the works of Dr .Ambedkar. These writers vehemently protest against century old social prejudice and caste practices. Dalit literature has found its voice to enable the Dalits fight, affirm and assert their identity.

It is evident that feminist movement has opened new vistas in the lifestyle of women and it has enabled in remolding the idea that what it means to be women. Unlike Western women, the Asian women do not concentrate on liberal or radical feminism. They do not oppose patriarchal system in the same intensity as their Western counterparts. Instead, they are more focused on cultural norms and traditions, which ill-treat them.

For several decades, men were calling all the shots in black literature. The black men considered themselves as the representatives of their race. In the beginning of the 20th century, several literary works based on black literature showed their women as poor victims. These women considered powerless, vulnerable and incapable of taking an aggressive posture.

Marginalization emerged in India during the colonial days of the British. During British imperialism, the tribes have been ruling their ancestral land. The British were greedy after the riches identified in the forests and they notified

. these tribes as criminals. From there on, these tribes have been at the end of all sorts of discrimination, abuse and social and economic marginalization. In India, a Dalit woman is a non-entity and she is forced to face discrimination and abuse at each stage of her life

BAMA AS A DALIT WOMEN

Bama is a Dalit women writer who delves deep into the effect of discrimination and poverty suffered by Dalit women. She is both a writer and a chronicle recording the lives of Dalits. She daringly takes up the themes of inter communal rivalries and their after effects in people's lives. She has authored *Karukku* (1994), *Sangati* (1994) and *Vanmam* (2003) and a short story collection named *Kusumbakaran* (1996). Dalit literature in Tamil Nadu carries two decades of history. It all started with publication of *Karukku* in 1992. The nationwide celebrations of Ambedkar's birth centenary has brought back the focus on Dalit issues. Dalits in Tamil Nadu started gaining awareness about their rights.

During this time, Bama gained prominence both as a Dalit writer and a significant woman writer through her translation of her autobiographical work named *Karukku*. Bama became internationally acclaimed writer after translating *Karukku* in English. Due to developments in Dalit intellectual and activist spheres, Bama's works are hailed everywhere and are translated in other English and European languages. *Karukku's* tenth year anniversary of publication was celebrated in July 2014 in Chennai. During this function, Bama said, "ten years ago when I went to attend a meeting (conducted as part of the centenary celebrations of Dr.Ambedkar), I was told that I came there like a child who carried a small flag lying on the road in the Civil Rights Movement. It may be true then. But now I have become aware of things and the politics of representation. My writings reflect that, "This awareness could be found not merely in Bama the writer alone, but also among Dalits".

Naturally the local Dalit communities who agitated over Bama's writings as exploiting the Dalit way of life began to find her acceptable. Awareness of this kind helped not only the Dalits, but also completely intellectual circle to understand that untouchability is a political problem and not simply a social evil in the sense in which Gandhi understood it. Even those who have not read Ambedkar understood the truth behind his words, "If the Hindu society plays its part in maintaining the Established Order, so do the Hindu officials of the state. The two have made the Established Order impregnable." (Ambedkar 107). In all her interviews, which appeared in Tamil journals, Bama mentions local recognition to be greater than international fame. Being a writer alive to the environment, Bama shifted her focus from invoking Dalit victim hood (in *Karukku*) to inter relationship between caste and patriarchy in writings. Unlike the victim hood mentioned in *Karukku*, her next work *Sangati* dwelled on the complexities involved in Dalit women oppression. The theme of the novel echoed the slogan displayed at the Durban Conference against Racism; "we are, raped not because we were women, but because we are Dalits." This cross over effect can be felt in several Dalit writings removing the border between literature and human rights.

In all her works, Bama has displayed that Dalit women are capable of exerting control over their destinies without the support of their male counterparts. Her novel *Sangati* displays the autonomy and individuality of Dalit women. These women fight against their bad-tempered alcoholic and hostile husbands. They retaliate against their spouses when they beat them. The women characters in the novel daringly face their married life and the struggles in it.

DALIT FEMINISM

In her novel *Karukku*, Bama shows that the nunnery is not the place to render her service to the community for fostering self-esteem and social

consciousness. She wishes to dedicate her whole life for the welfare of the Dalits and therefore she boldly leaves the nunnery and attempts to find a job outside.

Her novel *Vanmam* talks about the marginalized people. Bama wants the marginalized lot to join the mainstream by sinking their internal differences to acquire self-respect and a prominent place in the society. The novel probes into the hatred and vengeance among the Dalit communities.

In the novels of Bama namely: *Karukku*, *Sangati* and *Vanmam*, the readers are able to find the author trying to create a Dalit feminist perspective and study about the effect of discrimination and poverty in Dalit women's suffering. The Indian Dalits are very much marginalized and exploited people. The caste minded Hindus forced them beyond peripherals of religion. Bama gained prominence as a Dalit writer and a significant women writer through her translation of her autobiographical work named *Karukku*. The manner in which it is treated, Dalit literature carries its own dynamics. This aspect is evident in the works of Bama. In *Karukku*, Hinduism and Christianity are the major themes whereas in *Sangati*, the ineffectiveness of legality and the pitiable conditions of the Dalit women are the major themes. The themes come on their own due to this author's response to the prevailing Dalit struggle. On the contrary, *Vanmam* novel is based on a village in Tamil Nadu. It talks about the enmity between two groups of dalits -Pallars and Parayars. The novel shows how smartly the dominant Naickers exploit this difference to retain their status.

In the novel *Karukku*, Bama narrows herself to the casteism prevailing in Roman Catholic Church. She highlighted on the enmity between the professed values of the church and the real practice. In *Sangati*, she criticizes the church on broader terms. She talks about

conversion, which took place in her granny days. Among the several Dalit communities, only Parayars embraced Christianity as their children were offered free education by the missionaries. Bama criticizes patriarchy as well as casteism prevailing in the church and the rules imposed by the church such as divorce force against women and make them subservient, cruelty shown by parish priests towards women's individual choices of life partners. These Dalit women are forced to toil as menials in the church with a promise of reward in heaven. The novel presents a total picture about the manner in which the Church ordered and influenced the life style of the Dalit Catholics.

Sangati talks about many generations of women and their inner feelings. It is evident that the Dalit women consider themselves as the most privileged as the upper caste women. Within their close circle, they criticize the upper caste women. They consider themselves lucky to enjoy the freedom of swimming and bathing in pond. These women are happy and well

Bama in all her works has projected caste domination and social discrimination. In her maiden novel *Karukku*, she has unfolded the miserable conditions as well as life and culture of her people. She feels proud about quite a few practices prevailing among Dalits. For example, she happily states that there is no dowry system prevailing among them. The Dalit women are economically independent of their husbands. They earn money to bring up their family.

Unlike other novels of Bama, the novel *Sangati*, does not have a definite plot. Instead, the novel is a collection of incidents told to the narrator in several situations. The characters happen to be either neighbours or relatives to the narrator. In the novel, Bama insists on girl children getting educated. Both mistakes and evil deeds are cast upon the Dalit women. They cruelly suffer due to male oppression. The men be in charge and label women as whores. Bama states that the Dalit women are involved in the crusade against their men, upper class and patriarchal society. After a

great struggle, these Dalit women wriggle out of tight situations and daringly face the society. She expects her women to be independent in raising their voices against social injustices meted out to them and they need not expect anyone to champion for their cause. She also raises the patriarchy issue in a triumphant manner in the novel. She questions the economic inequality.

In her novel *Vanmam*, Bama has ventured into a highly troublesome area and opened an embarrassing argument. It is evident that both Pallars and Parayars came together and called themselves Dalit community. They understood that education alone could enable in overcoming this social barrier. Bama expects the marginalized people to join the mainstream of the society by sinking their internal differences to acquire self-respect and a significant place in the society. There has been rivalry between Pallar and Parayar community for ages. To overcome this rivalry, sports and games as well as cultural events are arranged. Unfortunately, some Dalits are converted to Christianity and it turns out to be a key variable for friction.

TWO IMPORTANT CONCEPT

The novels of Bama discuss two important issues. The concept that human beings are created from the image of God does not simply refer to the humanity of the Dalits, but it has a straight reference to the Book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible. The Christian community is very often reminded of the special quality of 'humanity', which resembles God's own image.

It has to be understood that Dalitization of Christianity has noticed the sufferings of Dalit community in the hands of Church and upper caste persons and hence identified their treatment as human beings to be much more important in their empowerment. For example, her novel *Karukku* employs rationality in a selective manner to display how rituals and blind beliefs undermine an individual as well as a community to think in a different manner. The novel harps on a single issue namely caste domination and social

discrimination within the Catholic Church and its institution. The novel brings out Bama's life as a journey in quest of self-discovery and spiritual identity. In the novel, Bama states that there are many identities between the saw edged Palmyra leaves and her own life. "Events that occurred during many stages of life cut me like Karukku and made me bleed.... Later they also became the embryo (karu) and symbol that grew into this book". Bama talks about the commitment to the Dalit cause. She feels happy to feel the growing respect among the dalits and foresees those playing greater roles in political, economic and cultural aspects.

Her novels bring to limelight the protagonist's mind and character since childhood through several experiences and understanding of her identity and her role in the world. *Karukku* novel exhibits Bama as a Dalit individual who goes in pursuit of self-discovery, self-definition and self-affirmation. The themes harping on individuals such as these act as voices of the whole Dalit community who have experienced similar discrimination.

Bama, after leaving the Christian convent, was straining every nerve to discover herself. It was her close chum Fr. Mark who suggested her to ventilate all her feelings in verbal forms in her diary. She wrote in the manner in which she was brought up. She called it, the story of the Dalits. The term 'karukku' symbolises not only the double edged stem of the palm leaf, but also the social cuts which her Dalit people experienced on all days. All Dalits were forced to live under a stifling system. Therefore; Bama is clear about her mission of fighting against the 'worst justice' or what she calls 'injustice'. She is a hapless Dalit woman who has been gifted with a greater degree of creative potential, self-awareness and quest for attaining loftier and nobler things. Her journey in her mission has been tedious and the encounters have been painful and experiences revealing.

CONCLUSION

In all her novels, there are certain important issues of Dalit feminism which she talks about and makes a sincere attempt to exhibit how the socio-religious slavery has been forced on the hapless Dalit community. Bama opines that Manu, the ancient lawgiver has caused great damage to women in general and Dalit women in particular. Manu stated, "A woman has no separate sacrifice, ritual or fasting. She gains high place in heaven by serving her husband." (43). From this, it could be inferred that all women have to be subservient to their husbands all through their lives. It has been the fate of women in common and it transcends an individual's imagination to understand the plight of Dalit women.

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