

Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati* as Narratives of Subjugation and Oppression of Dalit Women

Jahid Hussain Choudhury

Graduate Teacher
Public Higher Secondary School
Hailakandi, Assam.

Abstract:

Dalit literature has always portrayed the sufferings of the marginalized through memoirs, novels, poems and autobiographical narratives. Dalit literature is the literature of the Dalits, by the Dalits and for the Dalits. The term "Dalit literature" came into use in 1958, when the first conference of Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha (Maharashtra Dalit Literature Society) was held. It gives the Dalits a medium to express their pains. Their works often highlight the deep social stigmas that are still persistent in the Indian societies. Bama like other Dalit writers uses her skills to bring out the wrongs done to the Dalit women. She in her works highlights the importance of independence and the harmful impacts of humiliation and subjugation. Bama in her texts has also portrayed gender oppression and hegemony. Her texts are mouthpiece for the downtrodden and attempt to redefine the status of women in society. The paper analyses her two works- *Karukku* and *Sangati* to bring out her sufferings.

Keywords: Dalit, sufferings, humiliation, societies, downtrodden.

Dalit literature has always been true portrayals of the lives of the Dalits in India. It is the literature that is written by the Dalits, of the Dalits and for the world outside to empathise with the oppression, subjugation and domination that the Dalits face for their caste. Dalit literature first emerged in the early 1960s in Marathi language and soon it gained acceptance in other regional languages be it Kannada, Punjabi, Sindhi, Tamil and Hindi languages. Dalit writers mainly focused to highlight the pangs of caste system mostly through life narratives and also through poems, short stories, literary criticism and lyrics. Dalit literature has also played a key role in asserting their identity. Their political rights too got immensely amplified by the scathing

works of the Dalit writers as they denounced the deep-rooted caste system in the society. This social movement of censuring the caste system was given a further push by the Dalit Panthers which was an Ambedkarite social organisation that aimed at eradicating caste system and caste-based discrimination. The organisation was founded in Maharashtra by Namdeo Dhasal, Arjun Dangle, Raja Dhale and J. V. Pawar on 29 May 1972. Though the movement was short lived, it propelled the urge among the Dalits to seek a caste free society. The Dalit Panthers also heightened the body of Dalit literature by embracing the ideas of Babasaheb Ambedkar and soon made it a pan India phenomenon. According to Kasuma Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu, “although it is possible to identify a few Dalit writers from earlier times, the real originality and force of Dalit writing, which today comprises a substantial and growing body of work, can be traced to the decades following the late 1960s. Those are the years when the Dalit Panthers revisit and embrace the ideas of Babasaheb Ambedkar, and elaborate his disagreements with the essentially Gandhian mode of Indian nationalism, to begin a new social movement. In the following decades, Dalit writing becomes an all-India phenomenon. This writing reformulates the caste question and reassesses the significance of colonialism and of missionary activity. It resists the reduction of caste to class or to non-Brahminism and vividly describes and analyzes the contemporary workings of caste power.” (Satyanarayana and Tharu, 2013). Arundhati Roy has also observed that we observe a form of apartheid that always goes unnoticed towards the Dalits. She has pointed on the need for the Dalits to express their views and opinions as their works would be the truest to life and would give a first-hand experience of the atrocities and hegemony that they face.

Bama, also known as Bama Faustina Soosairaji, is a noted Tamil Dalit feminist writer, novelist and a committed teacher. Her autobiographical novel *Karukku* (1992) gained her instant popularity among the Dalits as the narrative brings out not only pains and sufferings but also joys experienced by the Dalit Christian women. She also wrote two more novels namely *Sangati* (1994) and *Vanmam* (2002) that also were true portrayals of Dalit lives in the caste based Indian society. Bama's works mainly focused on the atrocities and caste and gender-based discrimination meted out to the Dalit Christian women in her society. Her works also highlight her childhood experiences as a Dalit and her growing disillusionment towards the Christian

convents. Her works are also mouth pieces of Dalit feminism that embodies the strengths and determinations of the subaltern women. To Bama, it was her duty to bring out the pains and ill treatments of her tribe and she devoted her entire life for the upliftment of the Dalits. For her, “writing itself is a political act”, and a “weapon” that she uses to continuously fight against the dehumanizing caste practice. All her works advocated against marginalisation, discrimination, oppression and humiliation of the Dalit women in everyday life as she solely wrote back to shatter the chains of subjugation meted out to the Dalits.

Karukku (1992) is the first autobiography published by a Dalit Christian women that for the first time brought out the pangs of being a Dalit women as Dalit women are often doubly marginalized, firstly by their male counterparts in their homes and secondly by the society outside. Bama wrote her autobiography *Karukku* to express her traumatic experiences that she faced since her childhood and to heal herself from the wounds that were inflicted upon her. She writes in her book, “...I left behind my life of renunciation and came out into the world. After that, I wrote my book *Karukku*. That book was written as a means of healing my inward wounds; I had no other motive.” (Holmstrom, ix)

Karukku is a Dalit women’s narrative against patriarchal and caste-based society and gained immense popularity when Bama won the Crossword Award for *Karukku* in 2001. The book portrays the minute details of patriarchal and traditional sufferings that the protagonist faced since her childhood. Dalit women are always bound by the patriarchal norms and values and are not free to live their life as they are even subjugated in their homes by their close relatives. They are often pushed to the margins with no or a very little personal right. Traditionally, the structure of India’s caste system has often been outrageous to the lower castes and Dalit women are often placed at the bottoms of caste hierarchy. Bama in the novel writes, “In this society if you are born into a low caste, you are forced to live a life of humiliation and degradation until your death. Even after death, caste-difference does not disappear....If you are born into a low caste, every moment of your life is a moment of struggle” (Holmstrom, 26, 27).

In Bama’s *Karukku*, the protagonist belongs to the Paraya caste, a very lower caste group found in the Southern state of Tamil Nadu. The Paraya community in the text is surrounded by many

higher caste group like the Naicker, Nadar, Aasaari, Thevar, Chettiyar, etc. Bama through her text highlights the atrocities, oppressions and the hegemonic practises done to her community by the upper castes in her society. The Paraya community was suppressed in every sphere by the upper castes and were bound to show their respect and servitude towards the members of the upper caste groups. The women were forced to do menial works for just a handful of coins and sometimes for “*joothan*”. They were considered to be the other and were often ill treated. Bama refers a experience she witnessed in her childhood in the novel,

"The elder went straight up to the Naicker, bowed low and extended the packet towards him, cupping the hand that held the string with his other hand.....He said everybody believed that Naickers were upper caste, and therefore must not touch Parayas" (Holmstrom, 15).

This incident changed her outlook towards life as she for the first time saw a Paraya elder bowing down before a Naicker out of oppression. With this scene, she realised that humans were divided on the basis of caste and religion. The upper castes have always exploited the lower castes and are never given shares of their hard works and Dalit women have been the worst sufferers in every aspect. Social discrimination and caste hierarchy are still prevalent in most parts of the country and are tools for the oppressors to suppress the downtrodden. It is also because of the low representations in politics and economics of the country from the community. The atrocities on Dalit men also hugely impact the women in many ways, this is in addition to the pain they endure on their own. Bama highlights one such instance from her childhood where all the village men had to hide in the jungle to escape police brutality.

“All of a sudden a huge gang of policemen came out of the Chaaliyar settlement, batons in hand, drove our men back ruthlessly, mercilessly beating up those they caught, before arresting them....Outside, we heard the thud-thud of police boots stamping up and down, the sharp sounds of blows as our men were struck repeatedly, and the yells, ‘Ayyo Amma’, of unendurable pain” (Holmstrom, 34, 35).

She describes this incident as one of the regular skirmishes with the upper castes where the upper castes instigate police brutality against them. She also mentions in the text that the police force is feasted to launch an attack on them for a disputed cemetery land.

The text also portrays the sufferings of the Dalit women in a number of occasions. She mentions that Dalit women are bound by not only the social norms of the upper castes but also by the patriarchal rules in their own homes. Through the text, Bama tries to give the readers a real-life impression of the horrors of caste system on the Dalit women. She questions through her text the various post-colonial institutions that suppress the Dalit women. Dalit women are often forced to work for more than what their male counterparts work for. They are not paid the same for the same work they do like the Dalit men and are also many a times sexually assaulted in their workplaces. Furthermore, they spend the little money that they earn to run the household whereas their males are free to use it for entrainment with no obligations to run the household affairs.

Bama in the text also highlights the issue of poverty and illiteracy. To Bama, it is sheer poverty and illiteracy that force the Dalits to beg for menial works from the upper castes. Illiteracy forces the Dalits to work in farms only for a handful of coins and in the text *Karukku*, Bama has portrayed a series of incidents that reflect Dalit poverty and illiteracy.

"Most of the land belonged to the Naicker community. Each Naicker's fields were spread over many miles. The fields were spread over many miles....Our people knew all the fields by their names and turned up exactly where they were required to work" (Holmstrom, 6).

Bama through the lines highlights that it is only the upper castes that owned the lands and they were only daily wagers. The upper castes always had the luxury to control the land allocation and they never allocated any for the Dalits as this would empower the Dalits.

The novel *Sangati* (Events), also deals with a number of traumatic experiences faced by the Dalit women for several generations. The novel was written in Tamil and was then translated into English by Laxmi Halmstrom. Bama's *Sangati* as a Dalit feminist narrative exposes patriarchal norms at different levels, with an autobiographical tone. It highlights the double oppression of the women in society. The novel with several anecdotes and inputs from the author portrays caste discrimination in the Paraiyar community lucidly. Women in *Sangati*, like in *Karukku* earn their livings working as daily wagers in the fields. Bama also highlights the issue of sexual abuses

faced by the Dalit women in the community. The text is a true reflection of the lives of the Dalits.

Through the text, Bama also protests against the unequal treatments that the women face at the hands of their male counterparts. The older women of the community also side with the males and collectively they exploit the Dalit females. She in the text throws several questions on the unequal opportunities that women face at home and outside.

“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 backs nor lie face down on our bellies. We always have to walk with our heads bowed down, gazing at our toes . . . even when our stomachs are screaming with hunger, we mustn't eat first. We are allowed to eat only after the men in the family have finished and gone. What, Paatti aren't we also human beings?” (Holmstrom, 29)

Bama in the text also highlights the daily chores of young Dalit girls. The young ones generally spend most of their time in running the household, baby-sitting, cleaning and dishwashing. They are not encouraged to go to school and are indirectly forced to work for the upper castes. The boys, on the other hand are care free and footloose. They spend their daytime in pleasures with their friends. She in the book writes-

“We have to labour in the fields as hard as men do, and then on top of that, struggle to bear and raise our children. As for the men, their work ends when they have finished in the fields. If you are born into this world, it is best you were a man. Born as women, what good do we get? We only toil in the fields and in the home until our vaginas shrivel....” (Holmstrom, 6-7)

Bama boldly explores that they are constantly vulnerable to a lot of sexual harassment in the world of work. Within their community, the power rests with men as the caste-courts and churches are male-led. Rules for sexual behaviour are brow-raising different for men and women. With regard to the gender violence by her family and community, domestic violence is the major form of violence faced by women from their families. Physical and sexual violence are also the common forms of violence faced by them from their community members. Bama

realizes that she is rather proud to belong to her caste and that lack of education has actually perpetrated their slave-like situation. She sums up their situation thus:

“Everywhere you look, you see blows and beatings; shame and humiliation. If we had a little schooling at least, we could live with more awareness. When they humiliate us, we do get furious and frustrated . . . because we haven’t been to school or learnt anything, we go about like slaves all our lives, from the day we are born till the day we die. As if we are blind, even though we have eyes.” (Holmstrom, 118)

Therefore, Bama enlightens the people of their community to educate boys and girls alike, without showing any difference. She wishes that girls should be brought up in a new way so that in future there will be a day when men and women will be treated with equal rights. We have a vibrant record of disparity and dialectic between two opposite forces like exploiters and exploited colonizer and colonized, powerful and powerless.

Bama in both her texts highlights the plight of Dalit women in the upper caste society. The women are often doubly marginalized and are forced to the margins. Bama in her texts has also portrays gender oppression and hegemony. Her texts are mouthpiece for the downtrodden and attempt to redefine the status of women in society. She also has made her point regarding women empowerment through her texts. *Karukku* and *Sangati* are true representations of the cultural and social matrix of our societies. Her works have surely ignited a new discourse on equal opportunity for the Dalits in workforce, education and cultural and political rights.

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