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**Rejection to Resistance: A Study of Dalit Feminism in Bama's *Karukku*
and *Sangati***

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ABSTRACT

This research paper highlights the need of Dalit feminist writings as these writings provide a platform to the marginalized women of this community. Referring to Bama's two major works we can easily trace the atrocities that dalit women undergo in professional and personal sphere. The best part about both these works is that it ends with self realization that empowers the author and in turn the readers for the better tomorrow.

Key Words: Subaltern, Gender discrimination, Dalit Feminism, Resistance

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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. (195)

Gayatri Spivak's argument that the voice of the subalterns is not heard properly clearly highlights the need of dalit feminist writings. Dalit women writing protests the established social system which is based on discrimination and injustice. These writings have emerged out of anger and pain and that is why oppression, gender disparity and sexual violence are the main issues of such writings. Not only at home but even outside her four walls Dalit women had been abused, raped and insulted by upper castes. Dalit women writers specially voice out these experiences in their works.

Indian feminism can be divided into three phases. First, when European colonialist came to India and started raising their voices against many evil customs in Indian society, second during Indian National Movement; Indian social reforms like Mahatma Gandhi merged the women's empowerment with the movement for independence and third during post-independence when women started demanding equality with their male counterparts. At every step and in every phase they universalized the experience of women. Sharmila Rege argued about this in her book, *Writing Caste Writing Gender* where she highlighted that this kind of theorization is problematic because the actual experience of different sections of women in society are very different.

This is similar to the fact that if Indian feminism is different from western feminism and if Indian women is doubly marginalized in comparison to the western women than dalit women is thrice more marginalized. This dissatisfaction and disillusionment came up in the form of autobiographies though there is a debate among scholars regarding the appropriate terminology for these narratives as they not only voice about their life but about the oppression of the whole dalit community. Sharmila Raga has a similar take on this as she argues, “Dalit 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).

Historically there is no evidence of resistance or protest by the dalit women but dalit feminist literature provided a space to dalit women to express their 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 any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

The main narrative is presented through the eyes of eleven year old dalit girl child/author. The main focus of the novel is the continuous quest for self. Bama discussed the issue of identity crisis through her life story. Her childhood memories bring forth the idea of untouchability and oppression that dalit community was undergoing she discusses about the incident that left a mark in her mind. When she was in third class, she saw an elderly man carries a packet without touching it.

...He came along, holding out the packet by its string, without touching it. I stood there thinking to myself, if he holds it like that, won't the package come undone, and the vadai fall out? The elder went straight up to the naicker, bowed low and extended the packet towards him, cupping the hand that held the strin with his other hand. Naciker opened the parcel and began to eat the vadais.(Karukku 13)

Bama's elder brother suggests her that education is the only path to attain equality. After this Bama starts to watch out for means to uplift herself and her community.

“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.” (Karukku 15)

Even though Bama went to school, she worked as a laborer to meet her ends meet. The atrocity of society does not end here she further oppressed by the nuns in the church. Though Bama was baptized when she was six the nuns in the church still exploited her as they used Bama to wash

and clean the church and its belongings. The government grants and special tuitions also brought more of humiliation mainly because it singled out her caste identity.

“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...(Karukku 22)

At the age of twenty six her life she vows to become a nun but in the convent she learned that the situation of dalits is still the same. Even after converting dalits are marginalized and oppressed in the Christian society. Due to all this realization seven years later Bama walked out of convent which further resulted in societal interrogation.

The novel can also be seen as a spiritual journey of the author. The re-reading of the Christian scriptures enables her to figure out a new vision and hope for dalits. Later she discovers that the perspectives of the convent and the church are different from hers. In the end she makes her final choice where she sees the advent of change.

But Dalits have also understood that God is not like this, has not spoken like this. They have become aware that they too were created in the likeness of God. There is a new strength within them, urging them to reclaim that likeness which has been repressed, ruined and obliterated; and to begin to live with honour and respect and love of all humankind. To my mind, that alone is true devotion. (Karukku 104)

Similarly in her another novel *Sangati* Bama reflects the journey of dalit woman from subjugation to celebration. It highlights the vulnerable world of dalit women where they are

oppressed not only by the high caste people but also by dalit males. The novel reflects upon the patriarchal world whereby the oppressed dalit male becomes oppressor: “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”(Sangati 65).

Originally written in Tamil in 1994 and later translated by Laxmi Halmstrom into English. The whole narrative is divided into twelve chapters. As the name suggest *Sangati* means events, so the novel discusses various events through individual stories, memories, anecdotes about the life of woman in paraiya community. So the novel is not just the story of one woman it is the story of every women of paraiya community. In her acknowledgement she shares the purpose of writing the book: “ 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, enjoyment and about their hard labour. I wanted to shout out these stories” (Sangati 9).

In voicing these muffled voices Bama regain their lost identity. At the outset of the novel we learn about the vicious circle of oppressed and oppressor as we learn that how dalit men who are on the periphery of the structured society in turn marginalize their women on the basis of fixed gender roles.

This gender discrimination was inculcated in the young minds through childhood game. There was a differentiation in the sports played by dalit children on the basis of their gender. Bama recalls how as a young girl she was not allowed to play games like kabadi and marbles as these games were meant for boys while girls played cooking, getting marries etc.

Even when we played ‘mother and fathers’ we always had to serve the mud ‘rice’ to the boys first. They used to pull us by the hair and hit us saying. ‘What sort of food is this, di, without salt

or anything!’ In those days we used to accept pretence blows, and think it was all good fun. Nowadays, for many of the girls, those have become real blows, and their entire lives are hell (Sangati 31).

The novel is full of dalit women experiences. One such story is of mariamma, who is humiliated by her father, assaulted by the landlord and later abused by her husband. She never resists. Even after defamed as a 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. (Sangati 59)

The stories of Maikanni, Muukkama, Irulaayi and Pecchiamma throw more light into the lives of these women while discussing different aspects of their social system, of how women like pecchiamma dare to end their marriage. Bama also discusses about the pathetic treatment in which dalit women beget their children. She discusses about Pachamuukipillai who ended up giving birth to her child in the fields. She herself cut the umbilical cord with the sickle. Even Bama’s mother gave her birth when she was grinding masala for the evening meal. All this while, Bama interrogates her mother and granny on various issues like separation, child labour, choosing husband. almost every aspect of society is discussed and analysed.

The text comprises experiences and events that occurred in the life of dalit women of different age groups. Though some of the dalit women are shown voiceless like Mariamma, Thaayi and Esakki; as these women suffer in the fields as well as in the house. But there are also

women like Raakkamma and Kaaliamma who cannot assume silence. So they voice back in the utter disparity, “Instead of drinking toddy very day, why don’t you drink your son’s urine? Why don’t you drink my monthly blood” (Sangati 61).

Bama also highlights the reality of conversion. Though Christianity does not preach casteism but Christians do. Christians living in India are known as “Rice Christians” as they are just numbers in the Christian scheme. The author unearths the nexus of priest and menfolk to control the dalit women. Even after conversion the dalit community remains marginalized. Bama also discusses about the inability of dalit women to come up with their own political choices. In the tenth chapter she discusses the inability of dalit women to cast vote. Even they don’t know how to cast vote. Patti stamped all the pictures and the writer stamped to two pictures making their votes invalid.

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?” (Sangati 121)

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