

**Equal Education: Eradication of Discriminations: A Study of Bama
Faustina's *Karukku* and *Sangati*: Events**

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Abstract

The present paper focuses on understanding the role of education in Dalit lives in the autobiographical works of Bama Faustina, a Tamil Dalit writer. The dehumanization of the Dalit population due to the caste system has been a living example of how more than 16 million people became the victims of an unjust social order. Indian history is stuffed with examples of how Dalits have been involved in pursuing wars against caste. Naturally, Dalits could not gain for themselves the opportunities like their counterparts. It is a well-known fact that modern education in India remained an exclusive domain of upper-caste men until the British came and upset the power structure of Indian society. The struggle for humanization, for the emancipation of labour, for the overcoming of alienation, for the assertion of men and women as persons would be meaningless. It is imperative to understand that dalit women are doubly subjugated as compared to mainstream women. They have to bear the inhumane behavior of males from mainstream society in general and dalit males in particular. It is only education through which they can make a livable place for themselves in the society.

Keywords: dehumanization, caste, education, power structure, emancipation.

. . . my single solitary and individual life is like the lives of the tribe; it differs in these specific ways, but it is a balanced life because it is both solitary and representative. (Morrison 327)

Though feminism as a movement questioning the predominant patriarchy arose as a powerful social movement during the 1970s, most of the feminists of this period were upper caste, educated women asking for establishing equal economic, social and political rights for women. Feminists failed to recognize that a Dalit woman's experience is very different from theirs. This held true even in India. When upper caste women talked about subjugation, they considered Dalit women to be similar to themselves and talked about a generalized victimization of womanhood. But Sharmila Rege pointed out what she called "a masculinization of and a savarnisation of womanhood, leading to a classical exclusion of Dalit womanhood" (qtd. in Shweta 40). While Dalit men are victims of casteism, Dalit women are doubly oppressed as Dalits and as women. They are reprimanded and assaulted not only by upper caste men but also by men from their own community. Secondly, in rare cases the Dalit women are actually given a voice or representation in Dalit men's autobiographies and their contribution to the family, community and Dalit movement on the whole is undermined. This invisibility, silencing and stereotyping of the Dalit women has led to an alternative voice from the Dalit women themselves. Dalit women's personal narratives try to test their absence in Dalit men's narratives to criticize the patriarchal structure in their society. Hence Dalit woman's autobiography is both a self-representation and a self representation.

When a Dalit writes, (s) he writes with a polyself both as an individual and as a spokesperson of his/her community. A Dalit has not only a personal life of his/her own but she also gets incorporated in the swamping swirl of his/her community. The latter is termed as "Dalit Consciousness refers to the consciousness of their own slavery, an understanding of their experiences of exclusion, subjugation, dispossession and oppression down the ages" (Limble 71). The very first line of this book *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations* "By Dalit literature I mean writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness" (1), clearly points out the idea that "Dalit consciousness" is the yardstick by which the Dalitness of Dalit literature is measured. The emphasis on the concept of 'Dalit consciousness' is a search for the subject position. This ideology has significantly influenced the lives of millions of Dalits by awakening them and inspiring them for self-realization and aspects as a human being beyond caste and creed.

Bama Faustina is the most distinguished Dalit fiction writer in Tamil, and one of the most acclaimed of all Dalit women writers. Faustina Mary Fathima Rani is the original name of Bama. She was born at Puthupatty near Madurai in 1958. Her family was converted to Christianity way back in the 18th century. Her father was Susairaj and mother Sebasthiamma. The works of Bama in Tamil represent the emergence of the Dalit writings. At present Bama works as a teacher in a school at the small village of Uthirameroor near Kancheepuram. Bama began to be noted as a writer with the publication of *Karukku* (1992), an autobiographical novel which was first

published in 1992 in Tamil on the Christian Dalit community. It was translated into English (2000) and many other Indian languages. It won the Crossword Award in 2001. The second one is *Sangati* (1994), which is translated into English as *Events*. She has published three collections of short stories: *Kisumbukkran* (1996), *Oru Tattvum Oru Erumaiyum* (2003) and *Kondattam* (2009). Her work *Kisumbukkaran* (1996) has been translated into English as *Harum, Scarum Saar*. Another one is *Vanman* (2003), translated into English under the same title in 2008.

As she belongs to Dalit community, her works are a manifestation and representation of the individual as well as collective self of a Dalit. In an interview with Suchitra Behl, Bama says, “My books talk about the condition of Dalit women and Dalit culture. The need for unity among Dalit sub-groups, the need to get political power, the need to get self-confidence, to own up to their identity and be proud of their own culture” (“Laboring for the Cause of Dalits”). In all her works, Bama represents herself in her representation of her community. Her *Karukku* is the first autobiography of its own kind in Tamil Dalit literature for it is structured like a novel and it talks about casteism ingrained within Christian order as well as enmeshed within the gendered ideology. It begins with the first person narration. The first person narrator articulates the traumatic experience of caste discrimination from the stand point of Dalit women. Rahiminezhad observes, “‘I’ is a sign of growing and becoming a subject and as a result becoming aware of the right to govern one’s own life” (83).

Bama gives us a clear picture of the caste oppression meted out to the Dalit Christians not only by the upper caste society but more so within catholic Church itself. Bama has always had an inner urge to actively engage herself in alleviating the sufferings of the oppressed. She becomes a nun to fulfill her aspirations. But very soon she realizes that the catholic institutions are filled with caste prejudice and hatred. It is a powerful portrayal of Dalit suppression in society as well as institutional religious system which the Dalit turns to for self and social redemption. In it, Bama tries to expose the hypocrisy behind the caste system as well as religious conversion and portrays the Dalit identity on a wider canvas. This awareness further propels Bama’s inner quest for self-discovery and resultant courage, which at the crossroads of her life force her to move away from the life as a nun to live the life of a Dalit woman.

While representing her selfhood Bama not only contextualizes its development in inter caste and intra caste conflicts but also exhibits a deep sensitivity to the intersectional oppression of women. Her *Sangati: Events* is a true account of Dalit women experiences of the triple oppression of caste, class and gender faced by them. Patriarchy places power in the hands of the upper caste men at the center while on the margins; centers of power are created by marginalized men. Hence Dalit women remain doubly marginalized. The text of *Sangati: Events* points out an account of the aggressive exploitation of Dalit women in terms of double day labor, domestic violence, harassment at the hands of priests in the Church and upper caste landlords. The text further suggests remedies too. Bama finds out male violence unchecked by their caste men in their own sense of powerlessness vis-a-vis upper castes. The upper castes’ exploitation and threat of rape is analyzed in latter form of patriarchy which sustains a strong sense of gendered spaces and sees the habitual visibility of Dalit women as a sign of their accessibility to inscribe them as lustful women whose sexuality cannot be precised by the Dalit men. Bama foregrounds the

distinction between Dalit women and privileged upper caste women. She celebrates Dalit woman's identity in their strength, labor and resilience. The dilemma of work versus domesticity that beset the high caste woman's self poses no enigma for these Dalit women who have learnt to bear the double burden. The focal point of *Sangati* is multi-layered oppression of Dalit women. Unlike high caste women whose self was confined within homes, she focuses how Dalit women worked both at home and outside. She probes how violence against Dalit women is legitimized and institutionalized by state, family, church and upper caste communities. Her autobiographies document how Dalit women toil and get exploited at home and outside. They are subjected to violent treatment by upper caste landlords, the panchayat, and the police as well as by Dalit men within their homes. In her representation of Dalit women, Bama presents Dalit women primarily as workers who join the work force right from girlhood and work through adolescence, womanhood, middle age and old age almost until their last breath. Their work goes unrecognized by their community as well as by the society at large. Bama's representation of Dalit women's life span mirrors their struggle for empowerment and realization of a dignified existence within their struggle and their larger society. Bama says, "I know what it is to be hungry, to suffer illness in solitude, to stand and stare without a paisa in one's hand, to walk along the street without protection. . ." (*Karukku* 102). These experiences and observations go a long way in the formation and evolution of the self of Bama as a person and writer.

Bama's critique of the upper caste Hindus and the lower sub-castes is combined with a vehement critique of the religious institution. Though Bama also writes of the oppression that Dalits face at the hands the state agencies such as police force, the central motive of her work is the inhumanity within the Christian religious institutions through her reflections on the low status of Dalit Christians in the Roman Catholic Church and the Hindu social order. She realizes ecclesiastic hierarchies as demeaning Dalits to the subaltern. The nuns humiliated Dalit people in a convent school where she went on a teaching assignment. In the convent she found that she was teaching elite only so she uncomfortable with herself in the convent. Bama says:

See, I joined the convent with a definite purpose. Because I am from the Dalit community and because of education I could come up and have a job as a teacher. I wanted to spend my life educating people from marginalized sections. But at the convent that desire was not fulfilled. I was with an elite school. It was of no use as a teacher for me to teach only those children. Another thing was the caste discrimination in the convent life. One more important factor was my Dalit culture and the culture in the convent. It didn't agree with them. That was a suffocating experience for me. Mine is a more alive, transparent living life to the full type of culture whereas there was all restraint. (qtd. in Behl "Laboring for the Cause of Dalits")

Personal experience and observation of caste discrimination developed her "Dalit consciousness" and shaped her selfhood – materially, socially and spiritually. Thus Bama reworks Christianity not confining oneself to sculptures or the Church but living out the ideals that Christianity represents.

Through a series of poignant and sometimes funny considerations on her childhood in a caste-divided village in Tamil Nadu, Bama refabricates for us the self of a Dalit child. When an elder from her community (the Parayas) brings a Naicker some vadais, he holds the parcel by its string—not touching it directly, Bama observes: “I wanted to shriek with laughter at the sight of such a big man carrying a small packet in that fashion” (*Karukku* 13). This incident of her childhood describes her initial responses to her experience of the caste discrimination. Bama’s initial realization of her community’s pathetic state is ironically tinged with humor. But slowly and gradually she attains the consciousness of the injustices done to her community, anger starts brewing within her. Personal experience of caste discrimination in the public sphere came at an early age. She observes: “When I was studying in the third class, I had not yet heard people speak openly of untouchability. But I had already seen, felt and been humiliated by what it is” (*Karukku* 11). Other members of her community also make her to realize that she belongs to lower caste and that she has to surrender herself to upper caste. Her grandmother and other people of her and outside community keep on telling her that higher caste people are like “Maharajas” (14) for them, though she herself does not give any reaction. Anan, Bama’s brother tells her that, “Because we are born into Paraya jati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect we are stripped of all that” (15). A little Naicker boy addressing an old Paraya woman by name and the old woman in turn addressing him reverently as ‘Ayya’, the humiliating act of drinking water that is poured from the height of four feet into the cupped hands of the thirsty Parayas or the leftovers from the Naicker kitchens being thrown into the vessels of the waiting Parayas and many more such disgraces showered on them – all make Bama acutely aware of the intersecting class and caste lines. These comments and incidents condition the formation of Bama’s self.

The autobiography developed as a novel narrates how Bama had to face the pangs of casteism every now and then right from her childhood. She recollects ““If ever anything bad happened, they would say without hesitation, “It must be one of the Cheri children who did it” ” (*Karukku* 16). It is sheer disappointing for her that even elite section of the society suffers from narrow consideration. Her self-consciousness evolves as her reactions earlier marked by a sense of shame and sadness give way to a sense of assertion. Her brother Anan seems as an abject lesson. He tells her that, “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” (45). Bama hopes that education will help her to come out of her bitter experiences but this does not happen. She finds the school environment also ridden with caste discrimination. She observes, “We carried water to the teacher’s house; we watered the plants. We did all the chores that were needed about the school” (15). Not only the children of low caste are humiliated and engaged as labor for carrying out menial works, they also feel isolated. Even the ways the welfare schemes of the government for such people are implemented, leaves Dalit children humiliated and alienated. Bama remembers her sense of humiliation and indignation at the ways they were made to stand up in the class for publically linking them to these schemes. Though following religiously her brother’s advice of academic excellence as redemption from caste discrimination, Bama is beset by the casteist system. She describes her sad experience when she is offered four hundred rupees only for a job and that too is snatched away from her for being a Dalit: “I did not get that job. Why? Because I am a Dalit” (101). The interrogative structures highlight the anger and assertion spirit of the author questioning the administrative/social order, and manifesting her “Dalit consciousness”. The deep anger that brewed within her is constructively channelized as she commits herself to impart education to the poor as the reiteration of her faith in education and social activism. Bama becomes very well aware of the education system which is not related with the reality of their life, which alienates them from their own community and which though brings more awareness opens very few avenues for employment. Even if much resistance of a Dalit woman becomes educated, finds a job,

she finds it difficult to survive in a world where marriage is a norm and celibacy an exception. Unmarried women are treated like whores. Leading independent life for a Dalit woman is an added problem because of the resistance of the people to rent houses to Dalits: “Why should I tell a lie and live a false life? Women of other castes don’t face this problem. They can move where they choose, take a house, set up a livelihood. But we are denied the basic rights to pay our money and rent a house. Are we so despicable to these others?” (121). The question of Dalit women’s independent identities is a real and serious crisis for her. Only one who has developed awareness of her selfhood mustered all the courage that she can survive. Bama’s own experiences of humiliation not only by Dalit men but also by (Dalit) fellow women is most painful for her:

Karukku fulfills the parameters of Dalit women autobiography as the author represents herself as a woman and exhibits her concern and understanding of women’s suffering and their strength. As a child she observes: “It was always the girl children who had to look after all the chores at home. The older women would come home in the evenings after a day’s work, and then see to the household jobs. If there were boys in the house, they were grown older; they’d go off to work in the fields like the older men” (45). She observes the economic discrimination of Dalit women. She says, “Even if they did the same work, men received one wage, women another. They always paid women more” (47). The uniqueness of this discrimination is the observation of the Dalit woman’s labor, which was not merely to credit her as a potential labor but also as a potential sexual ‘victim’. This consciousness dawns on her as she matures. She realizes how the hegemony of caste and gender act as two edged sword like the leaves of *karukku*.

This autobiographical novel explains the existential predicament of the Dalit women and the protagonist’s struggle against patriarchy. Being illiterate, though employed they are the ones most exploited peripheral groups in the society. Dalit women are also sexually exploited and economically burdened yet discriminated. Within her own family she is alienated by the dominant male and is considered as mere objects for sexual satisfaction and for reproduction. They are labeled ugly, sluggish and unintelligent. Hence while Simon de Beauvoir says, “It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine” (*The Second Sex* 249), Bama’s portrayal of Dalit women complicated these categories. Instead of only dealing with the main stream feminist percepts to expose the exploitation and subordination of Dalit women, Bama’s writings also celebrate Dalit women’s life, her resilience and creativity despite humiliation. Her decision to become a nun and later realization of the unredemptive situation within Christianity, brings to the fore a Dalit woman’s self-dignity and subjectivity. *Karukku* describes how the female narrator comes to understand the various dimensions of her selfhood.

Bama’s questioning spirit is her mode of self assertion. The growing years of her life and the chapters of her autobiography reveal this evolution, which soon becomes statements of her assertion. She remarks, “But Dalits have also understood that God is not like this, has not spoken like this” (*Karukku* 94). The very emergence of literary self of Bama is itself marked by the transformation of her selfhood. Bama represents herself both as the narrator and her Dalit women characters in her writings. Though in her short stories we find such women characters as have developed the strategies of subversion for the preservation of their self esteem, the autobiographical novel *Karukku* in spite of having included some stories of other women in her community concentrates on the narrator’s selfhood. Nonetheless she makes it apparent that writing from the margin – the act of writing for a Dalit woman – is a political act. She seeks to destabilize dominant perception, representation and articulation of Dalit women’s lives. In this writing, there is found a close link between education, writing and empowerment that she postulates as tools that could liberate women of her caste from a degraded, repressed existence.

Bama exhibits different ways to overcome the caste discrimination and self-humiliation. First, she suggests that by challenging all the derogatory representation and imposed identities. Secondly, through assertion of all the positive aspects of Dalit culture, they can make the non-Dalits realize that they are also human beings. Thirdly she reiterates her brother's faith in education for self-assertion, self-affirmation and subjectivity/self-agency. She exhibits courage and dignity in the face of impossible odds and a realization of the 'othering' accelerates the process of self-discovery and self agency. She models herself by following her brother's advice. Bama's brother has been a great source of inspiration for her. He taught her the ethics of hard work and the value of education. He says to her:

Because we are born into the Paraya jati, we are never given any honor 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)

This advice influenced child Bama so much. She did hard work and secured first rank among all Harijan students in the school. Teachers and students were greatly impressed by her intelligence. Everyone took notice of her and she was overjoyed at this. This helped in boosting up her confidence and a sense of pride as well. A desire started emerging in her heart to prove that 'they' can study just as others and can make progress. Again in college when she had to face the discrimination, but she protested against it. She managed to get her way by insisting that there could not be different rules for different castes. Her meek mute self transformed into speaking self as education gave her courage to evaluate things and speak up for herself. She declares: "I didn't care a toss about caste. Whatever the situation, I held my head high. And I completed whatever I took up, successfully. . . . In this way, because of my education alone I managed to survive among those who spoke the language of caste-difference and discrimination (19).

Bama realizes that education makes Dalit women conscious of injustices done to them all the more but it also incites antagonism in men because "a girl studies a little, writes a little, or dares a little, or dares to speak up in public places" (*Sangati: Events* 109). She exposes the patriarchal mentality of Dalit men who would not tolerate a girl who may go around with ten men of her own caste, but she must not seek a single man outside it" (110). Conformity to the patriarchal law is imposed so strictly that the ordinary Dalit women never think of crossing the line men have drawn. Bama questions the discretion in conformity to this: "And what have we ever gained by never crossing that line all this time?" (110). Thereby she gives the message of subversion, rebellion and resistance.

In brief, it can be safely said that in her autobiographical works, Bama boldly assert that education can only empower women in general and dalit women in particular.

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