

Caste and Gender Oppression of Dalit women: A Study of the Works of Bama

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Abstract

The paper focuses on how the hierarchy of caste and gender has oppressed Dalit women. Dalit women are highly marginalized and have been the worst hit. They were misrepresented in the works of upper caste/middle class women. At times, they were not even mentioned in the Indian literary canon. However, the decade of 1990s emerged with a radical shift in Indian feminism as Dalit women strongly opposed the exclusive focus on the issues of upper caste or middle-class women. Writers like Bama, in their works, portray how gender and caste oppression harshly affect the lives of Dalit women. She is a pivotal voice for these marginalized women. Her works embody Dalit feminism and celebrate the inner strength of these women.

Key Words: Dalit, Oppression, Caste, Gender, Discrimination.

Introduction: Dalit literature comprises the writings that begin with the revolutionary movement started by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. It is a literature of protest against the inadequacies of mainstream Indian literature which exhibits the belief system of a particular section of society. The term 'Dalit' refers to all the oppressed and exploited people belonging to lower castes in India. The word 'Dalit' has been derived from a Sanskrit word 'dal' which means disintegrated, broken, downtrodden, low, petty, secondary, subordinate, unclean, etc. The word is assigned to lower caste people who are

forced to do menial jobs and are termed as Untouchables. Dalit women, since ages, have remained as an object of male dominance. They have been doubly marginalized as they are discriminated on the basis of gender and caste. A Dalit woman is a Dalit amongst Dalits. Dalit women writers are now trying to create a space for themselves by narrating their traumatic and horrible experiences in their writings. A host of such writers have endeavoured to bring Dalit texts into mainstream literary canon.

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Bauma Faustina began her writing career around 1990. She is recognised as one of the best Indian writers writing in Tamil language and is credited for having produced three novels and a short story collection. Bama is an activist and has been working against caste domination and social discrimination. She believes that Dalit women are forced into a life where there is no freedom of choice. The women face multiple levels of marginalization. They are considered to be untouchables and are bereft of education. She is a pioneer in Tamil Dalit feminist tradition. Born in 1958 at the village of Wathirayiruppu, Puthupatty near Madurai in Tamil Nadu, Bama's real name is Faustina Mary Fathima. She belongs to a family of converted Christians. *Karukku* (2000) is her first work and was actually written in 1992. *Kisumbukkaran* (1996), a short story collection, was translated into English as *Harum, Scarum Saar*. Her third work, *Sangati* is translated into English as *Events*. *Vanmam* (2003), translated as *Vendatta* by Malini Seshadiri deciphers the caste system which is deeply ingrained into the psyche of the Tamils.

2

Karruku is a poignant novel that speaks of the childhood experiences of the author. It is an autobiographical novel which narrates the poignant experiences that she encounters in the caste-ridden society in Tamil Nadu. About the book, Dr. Anil K. Aneja remarks, "Karukku is the first Tamil dalit epoch-making autobiography which is written in the first person narrative. This is not the autobiography of Bama only it tells about the

real plight of the whole dalit community” (22). Bama is one of the pioneer female Dalit writers to articulate personal experiences. She is anxious of the passivity of her community over atrocities and has a number of questions to ask. As she writes, “How did upper caste become so elevated? How is it that we (Dalits) have been denigrated? And in my heart I have been grieved over the fact that I was born as I am . . . Are Dalits not human beings? . . . What do we lack?” (*Kurruku* 27) Bama narrates pain, memories, and sad conditions of the life and culture of her people. In the beginning of the novel, she describes forests, rocks and fields—natural surroundings of her village. The book describes the life of a Dalit Catholic Christian woman and caste-based atrocities in her village, experiences of untouchability, and her final breaking away from the nunnery. It is the account of her life from childhood till her adulthood when she decides to give up her job of a nun. Since her childhood, Bama is unable to understand how her village came to be divided on the basis of caste—lower and upper. She says, “We only went to their side if we had work to do there. But they never, ever, came to our parts. The post office, the Panchayat board, the milk depot, the big shops, the Church, the schools . . . meant only for the upper caste children (*Kurruku* 7).

Bama is surprised to see a Paraya old man carrying an envelope and handing it over to a Naicker with care, making every effort of not touching him. She narrates this story to her family and she is told that Naickers are an upper caste and get polluted if touched by Parayas. This memory continues to disturb her psyche. She observes that the Naicker ladies used to give their left-over food to the Paraya women, but from a distance without touching their vessels. Bama’s brother convinces her that it is only through education that they can come out of their indignities. These Harijan children were discriminated at schools also. Teachers used to make them do their household chores like bringing the drinking water, watering the plants and gardens, etc. Bama is admitted in a hostel in a neighbouring town to continue her studies from class 9th. She feels broken after watching the treatment that she receives from the hostel warden. She remarks, “The warden sister of our hostel could not abide low-caste or poor-children. She’d get hold of us and scared us for no rhyme or reason” (*Kurruku* 20). Dalit parents did not allow

formal education to their children, especially girls due to their poverty and manual jobs.

Bama remarks:

In the face of such poverty, the girl children cannot see the sense in schooling, and stay at home, collecting firewood, looking after the house, caring for the babies, and doing house hold chores. And there are many who patiently accept and endure their hard lives, consoling themselves that this was the destiny given to them, that they cannot see a way to change the caste they were born into . . . the humiliation of it all. (*Kurruku* 68)

In *Kurruku*, Bama discusses oppression of Dalits at the hands of police, upper castes, and the Church. The book also depicts how Dalit Christians are discriminated in Church as they are not even allowed to sing in the Church choir, are forced to sit at separate places, are not even allowed to bury their dead in the upper caste cemetery and are made to use a separate graveyard beyond the outskirts of the village. The Paraiyars, who in order to escape from caste oppression, converted to Christianity, but met the same fate in the Church even though Christianity recognizes no caste. After staying in a nunnery for seven long years, Bama observes that Dalit Christians met discriminatory conduct of Church authorities. As a Dalit woman and social activist, she held Jesus Christ as a champion of justice for the poor. But her views were shattered when she observed that Christian teachers showed sincerity in teaching only the upper class students with zest and zeal in the convent. She exposes the naked reality of nuns in the nunnery. Apparently, they seem to live a life of physical and mental chastity, love poverty, eat simple food, etc, but the fact is that the ground reality inside the church is totally different. The nuns are fond of eating delicious food, want to have much money and clothes, are jealous of one another, and are asked to keep distance with Dalits. At times, they make use of very abusive language as well. Bama holds the view that Church authorities misguide and mislead the lower caste people for their personal gains. The priests teach these people that they should follow the rules of the religion strictly as

otherwise God will punish them. Bama questions why God should punish poor lower caste people only. Bama goes on saying that they can no longer befooled these people as they have now found a voice. The novel reflects that churches distort the real image of God and teachings of Jesus Christ.

Even at college, Bama observes the same caste discrimination and says, “It struck me that I would not be rid of this caste business easily, whatever I studied wherever I went” (*Karruku* 22). In particular, the Dalit women suffer the most. They are not encouraged to pursue higher education. Bama says, “They said it would be difficult for me to find a husband in my community if I went in for further education” (*Karruku* 74). About *Karruku*, Anamika says, “It deals with two main aspects namely caste and religion and also with the third aspect i.e., suffering of the dalit women” (123).

Sangati describes the plight of girls and women in her rural community. In the novel, Bama says that the sufferings of Dalit women start from their infancy while it is different with boys. As she says that, “if a boy baby cries, he is instantly picked up and given milk. It is not so with girls” (*Sangati* 7). According to Bama, the situation remains the same until they attain old age. She further adds that, “boys are given more respect. They will eat as much as they wish and run off to play. As for the girls they must stay at home and keep on working all the time . . . (*Sangati* 7). The gender discrimination is seen throughout the novel. Bama recalls how her grandmother used to give the left over skin of the mangoes to her and things in full to her grandsons. She remarks:

If she brought anything home when she returned from work, it was always the grandsons she called first. If she brought cucumbers, she scooped out all the seeds with her fingernails, since she had no teeth and gave them the remaining fruit. If she brought mangoes, we only got the skin, the stones and such; she gave the best pieces of fruit to the boys. Because we had no other way out, we picked up and later the leftover skins. (*Sangati* 8)

Dalit women suffered in every way due to the oppression from men for none of their faults. The men take advantage of their situations and label the women who protest as whores. Kummarasami, an upper caste man tried to molest a Dalit girl, Mariamma and

accused her before the upper caste elders in order to save his face and reputation. Nobody hears the sighs and sobs of the Dalit girl and she is called a whore. Bama views that it is only Dalit women who face such atrocities. She blames her society for this and says, “If ever there is a problem or a disturbance, everyone, starting with the police, chooses to blame and humiliate the women of our community” (*Sangati* 66). She remarks that even the spirits haunt Dalit women only and leave others. As she puts in:

I thought about the fact that only women and *Dalit* women in particular become possessed. And when I examined the lives of our women, I understood the reason. 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 called 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 to 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 stronger ones somehow manage to survive all this the one who don't have the mental strength are totally oppressed; they succumb the mental ill-health and act as if they are possessed by peys. (*Sangati* 59)

This paragraph summarizes the oppression of women committed upon them by their society and men. *Sangati* is a collection of incidents told to the narrator in different situations. *Sangati—Events* is the appropriate title. The characters in the novel are either relatives or neighbours to the narrator. Bama observes that Dalit women face molestation and says, “Whatever a man does in the end, the blame falls on the women” (*Sangati* 26). About the novel, Sharma remarks:

Sangati reflects the voice of many Dalit women. They share the experiences of their lives. In fact Bama's mother and grandmother used to narrate the stories. Bama had observed and experienced from childhood factors like economic inequality, political inequality, sexual harassment, authority of men, bitter experience and ceremonial occasions. (188)

Conclusion: On the daily basis, Dalit women encounter rape, sexual abuse, physical torture, violence, etc at public places as well as at home. After having worked at home and work places or fields, Dalit women meet violence at the hands of their own men. They abuse them the same way upper caste men do with them. This is better observed in *Karruku* and *Sangati*. Bama calls herself a Dalit feminist. *Sangati*, a feminist narrative, exhibits caste and gender oppression. *Karruku* highlights how Dalit women are oppressed by their own men at home. Patriarchy and caste hegemony make the lives of these women very harsh.

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