

Breaking Barriers: Caste, Gender, and Resistance in Bama's *Wherever You Look*

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Abstract

This paper analyses Bama's short story *Wherever You Look* as a critique of the caste system and social hierarchies in India. The narrative highlights the ways in which caste and class are intertwined, and how social hierarchies are reproduced and reinforced in institutions such as schools. The story explores the themes of internalized oppression, intersectionality, and resistance, and underscores the importance of solidarity in challenging dominant power structures.

The paper examines how Bama's work challenges dominant discourses of caste and highlights the experiences of Dalit women. It also explores the ways in which education can perpetuate social hierarchies, but also be used to challenge dominant power structures.

The analysis draws on critical theories of caste, class, and intersectionality and engages with the prominent critical works. The paper argues that Bama's work is a powerful critique of caste oppression and its impact on Dalit women, and highlights the importance of Dalit women's voices and struggles in challenging dominant power structures.

Key Words: Caste system, Social hierarchies, Intersectionality, Internalized oppression, Resistance, Solidarity, Dalit women, Education

Introduction

Bama's short story *Wherever You Look* is a scathing critique of the entrenched caste system in India, particularly in rural Tamil Nadu. Through the narrative, Bama masterfully exposes the deep-seated prejudices and social hierarchies that perpetuate inequality and discrimination.

This paper will delve into the themes of caste, class, and social hierarchy in the story, exploring how Bama uses the narrative to challenge dominant social norms and promote social change. Bama's work is a crucial intervention in the dominant discourse of caste, highlighting the ways in which Dalit women are marginalized and excluded from mainstream society.

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One of the primary elements of the story is the exploration of caste as a social construct. Bama highlights how caste is used to justify social exclusion and marginalization. The character of Kamalavalli, a Tamil language teacher, embodies this mindset when she says, 'These SC donkeys are getting bolder these days. Otherwise, would that wretch have dared to use my plate? Just because she's got a smattering of an education, does she think she can cat off my plate? (Wherever You Look 114). This statement underscores the notion that caste is not just a matter of birth, but also of social status and education. As the critic Gopal Guru notes, 'Caste is not just a system of social hierarchy, but also a system of economic exploitation' (Guru 23).

Bama's critique of caste is also closely tied to her examination of class. The story highlights the ways in which economic privilege is often tied to caste status. Kamalavalli's refusal to eat off the same plate as Kanniyamma, a Dalit teacher, is not just a matter of caste prejudice, but also of class superiority. As the critic Sharmila Rege notes, 'The school is a site where social hierarchies are reproduced and reinforced' (Rege 12). The character of Lakshmi, the midday-meal staff worker, is subjected to humiliation and degradation by the other teachers, simply because of her caste status.

The story also explores the theme of social hierarchy within the school setting. Bama highlights the ways in which teachers and students are stratified according to their caste and class status. The character of Prema, a science teacher, is a powerful symbol of resistance against caste and class oppression. Her refusal to condone Kamalavalli's behavior and her solidarity with Kanniyamma are testament to the power of individual agency in challenging social norms.

Furthermore, it underscores the importance of intersectionality in understanding social hierarchies. The character of Kanniyamma, a Dalit woman, is subjected to multiple forms of oppression, including casteism, sexism, and classism.

It is clear from a brief overview of the policies and programmes in place that the approach towards empowerment of Dalit women is either subsumed under their identity of being a Dalit or of being a woman. Recognition of the fact that women are a heterogeneous group with varying issues and needs and at the same time, concerns faced by Dalit women are different from those faced by Dalit men, is yet to be incorporated in our policy framework. What is lacking is a substantive approach to address the specific issues faced by Dalit women. (Shrivastava 44)

Bama's narrative highlights the ways in which Kanniyamma's experiences of marginalization are shaped by her intersecting identities as a Dalit woman. Bama illustrates how oppression is not merely a sum of her Dalit identity or her gender but rather an interwoven reality that dictates her everyday life. Her marginalization is compounded by both caste-based discrimination and patriarchal structures, making her struggles distinct from those of Dalit men and upper-caste women alike.

In addition, the story also explores the theme of internalized oppression. The character of Kamalavalli, a Tamil language teacher, is a product of the same oppressive system that she perpetuates. Her internalized oppression is evident in her refusal to eat off the same plate as Kanniyamma, and her justification of this behavior as a matter of 'purity' and 'pollution'. Hooks states that Internalized oppression is the process by which individuals internalize the negative messages and stereotypes perpetuated by the dominant culture Bama's narrative highlights the ways in which internalized oppression can perpetuate social hierarchies and reinforce dominant power structures.

Moreover, The emphasis is laid on the importance of resistance and solidarity in challenging social hierarchies. Bama's narrative highlights the importance of building solidarity across caste and class lines in order to challenge dominant power structures.

Finally, the story also raises important questions about the role of education in challenging social hierarchies. As the critic Antonio Gramsci notes, Education is a site of struggle, where dominant ideologies are reinforced, but also where counter-hegemonic struggles can emerge. 'The entire function of educating and forming the new generation ceases to be private and becomes public; for only thus can it involve them in their entirety without division of group or caste' (Gramsci 30) Bama's narrative highlights the ways in which education can

perpetuate social hierarchies, but also the ways in which it can be used to challenge dominant power structures.

In conclusion, Bama's *Wherever You Look* is a powerful critique of the caste system and social hierarchies in India. Through her narrative, Bama highlights the ways in which caste and class are intertwined, and how social hierarchies are reproduced and reinforced in institutions such as schools. The story is a testament to the power of resistance and solidarity in challenging social norms and promoting social change.

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