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The Unflinching Lexicon of Bama's Short stories

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Abstract

This paper explores the radical linguistic strategies employed by Bama in her short stories to articulate the lived realities of Dalit communities, particularly focusing on the unapologetic and bold use of language. Anchored in the socio-cultural matrix of rural Tamil Nadu, Bama's narratives foreground a typology of defiant, vulgar, and emotionally charged expressions that challenge dominant caste norms and literary aesthetics. By incorporating vernacular idioms, raw emotional outbursts, and subversive insults, Bama not only asserts the authenticity of Dalit experiences but also mobilizes language as a form of resistance and cultural reclamation.

The analysis categorizes these expressions and evaluates their narrative function across multiple dimensions: authenticity and realism, resistance and subversion, emotional catharsis, and the exposure of caste brutality. Drawing on scholarly perspectives from Dalit studies and translation theory, this study contends that Bama's linguistic boldness is a deliberate political act, destabilizing hegemonic discourse and foregrounding a radical counter-narrative that demands both recognition and reckoning.

This paper posits that Bama's strategic deployment of bold, unapologetic, and vernacular language in her short stories serves as a powerful and multifaceted tool. This linguistic choice is instrumental in achieving authenticity and realism, fostering resistance and subversion against dominant power structures, enabling the visceral expression of raw emotion, and unflinchingly portraying the brutal realities of caste oppression. Far from being gratuitous, this distinctive linguistic approach is a fundamental component of her impactful storytelling and a profound political act of asserting Dalit identity and voice.

Keywords: Bama, Dalit Literature, Linguistic Resistance, Caste Oppression, Vernacular Tamil, Subaltern Voice, Social Realism.

Introduction: The Unflinching Voice of Dalit Experience:

Bama, a prominent figure in contemporary Indian literature, has carved a unique and indispensable space within the realm of Dalit writing. Her works are deeply rooted in her lived experiences as a Dalit Christian woman in rural Tamil Nadu, offer an unparalleled insider's perspective on the systemic oppression, daily struggles, and indomitable spirit of marginalized communities. Her literary work is distinguished by its raw honesty, refusing to romanticize or sanitize the brutal realities of caste, and instead presenting them with a stark, unflinching clarity.

Bama's notable works include *Karukku* (1992), *Sangati* (2000), *Vanmam* (2002). Bama's influence extends globally, with translations of her works into languages such as English, French, Malayalam, Telugu, and more. In the realm of English translations, Bama's Short story collections have gained recognition. *Harum-Scarum Saar* (2006), translated by Mr. N. Ravi Shanker, and *Just One Word* (2018), translated by Ms. Malini Sheshadri, exhibits the depth of her storytelling. The most recent collection, *The Ichi Tree Monkey* (2021), also translated by Mr. N. Ravi Shanker, presents a blend of both old and new short stories.

Authenticity and Realism: The Unfiltered Voice of the Oppressed:

Bama's primary narrative objective is to portray the lived experiences of Dalit people with an unvarnished authenticity. This commitment necessitates capturing their genuine speech patterns, daily struggles, and raw emotional responses, which frequently involve strong language born out of frustration, anger, or even a defiant sense of humor. The language employed is a direct reflection of the colloquial Tamil spoken in Dalit communities, often diverging from upper-caste or "polite" linguistic norms (Kannalil and Shanth 4801). Indeed, one critic observes that Bama's use of colloquial speech "makes the story... more realistic and its Dalit roots... strengthened" (Kannalil and Shanth 4801). To expunge such language would be to distort the very reality Bama endeavors to present. Scholars note that this approach yields *"a raw and authentic voice"* for her characters while preserving the *"emotional depth"* of their experiences (Rani and Chahal 525). In other words, Bama's bold dialect choice far from being gratuitous obscenity, serves to embed readers in the truths of Dalit life.

For instance, in *"Pongal,"* Madasami's exasperated curse at a rooster, *"The idiot has chosen the right time to shit, just when I'm leaving for Ayya's house!"*, (Pongal 1) is distinctly colloquial. This mundane expletive, stemming from everyday frustration, immediately immerses the reader in Bama's world. It exemplifies how colloquial profanity, far from weakening the prose, reinforces its veracity. Bama's narrative mirrors the speech of her community so faithfully that it captures experiences often omitted by mainstream literature. This verisimilitude has been widely recognized as integral to Dalit writing. As one study argues, Dalit literature *"prioritizes authenticity over beauty,"* challenging established literary forms to present a more truthful picture of marginalized lives (Kannalil and Shanth 4801).

Language as Resistance and Subversion: Challenging Dominant Narratives:

Bama's bold language is a potent instrument of resistance, challenging entrenched power structures and subverting dominant narratives. By employing the raw, unadorned speech of her community, she directly confronts literary traditions that have historically excluded or misrepresented Dalit voices. This linguistic defiance is a performative act of reclaiming agency, disrupting expected power dynamics, and forcing the oppressor to confront their own vulnerability or hypocrisy. It is not merely an expression of anger, but a strategic re-assertion of selfhood and dignity. As translation scholar Hephzibah Israel notes, Tamil Dalit writers "insist on writing Tamil as spoken among Dalits" and deliberately use "ungrammatical constructions" to "shock and unsettle" elite audiences (Israel). Bama's own approach confirms this strategy; her English translator observes that Bama is doing something *"completely new in using the demotic and the colloquial routinely, as her medium for narration and even argument"* (Israel). In short, by writing in the vernacular of the oppressed language that was long deemed "unrecognized by the pundits of literature", Bama transforms dialect into a weapon of subversion.

The narratives themselves dramatize this defiance. In *"Annachi,"* Ammasi openly defies a Brahmin landlord who demands he relinquish his bus seat: *"I will not get up even if you stand on your head!"* (Annachi 10) This sarcastic retort, delivered to upper-caste men at the panchayat, is an act of open rebellion. Ammasi follows it with *"Shit is shit. All men are just men,"* (14) a blunt, vulgar assertion of radical equality that dismantles the premise of caste superiority. In *"Harum-Scarum-Saar,"* Puthiyamuthu, exasperated by an upper-caste

demand, shouts: *"Go, bring your wife here—we'll take turns bedding her."* (Harum Scarum saar 28) This outrageous insult is a deliberate violation of social norms designed to strip the oppressor of dignity and expose the hidden violence in the power structure. Such scenes epitomize Bama's intent: even the crudest language can invert hierarchy. Indeed, one scholar connects this grotesque humor to Bakhtinian carnival, a space where laughter and bodily excess become a *"free weapon"* of the oppressed (Israel). Through these irreverent outbursts, Bama's characters do more than curse, they enact a localized revolution of the tongue.

Visceral Expression of Raw Emotion: The Language of Unbearable Pain:

Bama's narratives frequently employ expletives and harsh language as direct, unfiltered outlets for intense emotions such as anger, frustration, pain, and humiliation. This raw emotional expression is a testament to the profound psychological toll exacted by caste oppression. When conventional, "polite" language proves inadequate to capture the depth of suffering or the intensity of rage, these *"bad words"* emerge as the only fitting vocabulary, serving as a powerful, albeit often shocking, cathartic release for characters who are otherwise silenced or systematically suppressed. Indeed, critics note that Bama's style gives voice to Dalit anguish with unflinching honesty, utilizing *"simple yet powerful language"* that retains its full emotional depth (Rani and Chahal 525).

In *"Chilli Powder,"* Pachayamma's furious curses after Gangamma throws chili in her eyes exemplify this visceral outpouring of emotion. Her enraged cries, *"Chi, can you be called a woman? ... Your husband popped off after just one child because of your character, di!"* and *"Whore-widow! May you be taken around like a corpse in procession!"* (Chilli Poder 32) are not merely insults but screams of pain and humiliation. The language is raw, unmediated, and intended to wound, reflecting the immediate and overwhelming nature of her suffering. These words become a direct, unfiltered scream, a linguistic breaking point in the face of unbearable assault. The use of such extreme language forces the reader to confront Dalit suffering head-on, transforming abstract discrimination into palpable rage. In effect, characters like Pachayamma wield words much like weapons, and as one commentator points out, this kind of grotesque humor reveals how laughter itself can become a "free weapon" against oppression (Israel 334).

Similarly, in *"Ponnuthayi,"* Ponnuthayi's defiant retort to her abusive husband, *"I will do whatever I want to. Who are you to question me? Did I give birth to the children without your help? Try and bring them up."* (Ponnuthayi 65) is a raw assertion of autonomy. Her mother's subsequent verbal assault when Ponnuthayi cuts her thali : *"You mad whore, what have you done?"* (70) underscores the shock such defiance causes. These exchanges reveal that for Dalit women, even modest displays of self-assertion ignite fierce emotional backlash. Even innocent actions by children carry this visceral quality: in *"Freedom,"* young Subramani, driven to desperation by a cruel headman, urinates on the man's plants, sneering *"She makes me suffer so much, let her cook with my pee now and eat."* (Freedom 85) This primal act of rebellion is accompanied by a simple shout of defiance, a nonverbal yet unmistakable outburst of pent-up fury. Across her stories, Bama shows that Dalit anger often refuses suppression; when it bursts forth in language, it compels the reader to share in the outrage rather than look away.

Unvarnished Reality: Exposing the Brutality of the Caste System

Bama's commitment to portraying the unvarnished reality of Dalit life extends to explicitly depicting the brutality and violence inherent in the caste system—whether physical, verbal, or systemic. The inclusion of harsh and explicit language strips away any romanticized or sanitized notions of rural or marginalized existence, revealing the insidious nature of casteism in its most grotesque forms (Rani and Chahal 526). This forces readers to confront the ugliness and cruelty often hidden in mainstream narratives. As one analysis observes, Bama's work serves as *"a crucial critique of the systemic injustices entrenched in Indian society,"* advocating solidarity and social change for the oppressed (Rani and Chahal 526).

The depths of this brutality emerge shockingly in Bama's tales. In *"Harum-Scarum-Saar,"* Puthiyamuthu, in extreme defiance, hurls a sexually explicit insult at a moneylender, *"Go, bring your wife here—we'll take turns bedding her."* (28) This is not a mere curse word but a direct assault on the oppressor's masculinity and honor, exposing the underlying violence in caste relations. Likewise, in *"Those Days,"* Masanam Thatha recounts being beaten and skinned alive by an upper-caste landlord. He directs equally violent fantasies back at his oppressor threatening to "hack you to pieces" and Malandi Thatha vows to *"ask the buffalo to pee in his mouth."* The most chilling moment comes where Malandi Thatha confesses: *"I*

made his cow lunge at him and slit his belly in two!" (104) This stark, unapologetic confession of murder which is described in gruesome detail is a portrayal of violence that most literature would shy away from. Yet Bama includes it without flinching, so that the reader cannot remain detached from the reality of vendetta and rage born of systemic injustice.

Bama similarly exposes the systemic degradation faced by Dalits, especially women and children. In *"Half-Sari,"* the brutal murder of a young Dalit mother, Chellakkili, is recounted in stark, euphemism-free terms: *"The smallest mistake, her two sons would pull up her skirt and spank her bottom… She was hit on her neck with a log of wood. One blow…in the wrong place."* (Half-sari 78) This explicit account of sexual and physical assault culminating in death is harrowing evidence of the vulnerability of Dalit laborers. Kaliappan says "*You said you would send the child to school, but you sent her to the cremation ground instead!"* (Half-sari 79) is a direct accusation which exposes the brutality of Chellakkilli's death. *"Corpse,"* an upper-caste woman casually recounts the cobbler origins of a successful Dalit man, disparagingly noting that his aunt *"cleaned out cow dung and filth and drank the kanji that we gave her."* (Corpse 54) Such casual casteist slurs and stories of exploitation underscore how prejudice persists even across class lines. Through dialogue like this, Bama reveals caste not as ancient custom but as present-day cruelty. Each hateful phrase and violent incident in her stories is a deliberate exposure of oppression at its rawest.

Beyond overt violence, Bama also exposes how caste prejudice is internalized and propagated. In *"Verdict,"* a little girl refuses to drink from a communal tap because *"the children who live in those streets"* (Verdict 15) are Dalits a line learned from her parents. In *"Wailing,"* the dismissal of a newborn girl as worthless because *"it's only a girl"* makes the readers complicit in gender bias. In *Just One Word* Sundari's statement "*These fellows have no IQs but they get in on RQs and give us hell."* (Just One Word 70) is a derogatory slur, and a casteist remark. In *Worldly Wisdom* Seeni Patti *"I tell you, boy, whether it is the school or the office, nothing gets done unless you pay money.*" (Worldly Wisdom 83) is a cynical assertion of realism. In *Stereotype* the little boy Ashok's statement *"I may be a small child, but I am a man!"* (Stereotype 124) is an unapologetic assertion and a symbol of patriarchal norms rooted in Dalit children. In the story *Acharamanippoo Tree* Ghost exclaims "*Only*

those who are alive have caste, ghosts don't have caste" (The Ancharamanippoo Tree 139). The dialogue is a philosophical Subversion hidden in sarcasm and rustic humour.

These moments show how discrimination is learned from an early age and even inflicted by victims upon themselves. By holding such mirrors up to society, Bama implicates readers in the brutal reality of caste, witnessing these horrors, the reader cannot remain an innocent observer. Her raw, unsettling language leaves no room for denial or discomfort, demanding accountability. This unflinching portrayal of brutality is, for Bama, both documentation and indictment, a call to awareness and, implicitly, to change.

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