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## REFLECTIONS OF DALIT FEMINIST VOICE IN BAMA'S KARUKKU AND SANGATI

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*'Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experience of joys and sorrows and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of the society'.*

-Arjun Dangle

The forces of Post-modernism that are simultaneously operative in the social scenario are based on a contrary position-that of projecting difference and alterity, delving into the fractures and fragments, throwing further margins and boundaries. Seen from a deconstructive/reconstructive perspective, there arise conflictual relations of indeterminacy and determination. Therefore, along with renewed geographic locationing there is a call for polyphonous social navigations- not only are the pressures from outside inundating space but the pressures from within are calmouring to break the margins and emerge as equitable/equating forces. All this has resulted in a deconstruction of dominant hegemonic discourse to subvert boundaries from bottom up. A significant shift in the feminist thought of the 80's and 90's was brought on by the increasing visibility of black and third world feminist work. There has however, been a reluctance on part of white feminists to confront the challenges posed to them by black and third world feminism. Often, this reluctance has been justified in terms of white feminists refraining from an appropriation of the voices of black and third world women.

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In the Indian context, the political pit falls of the ever increasing impact of postmodernist and post-structural approaches in terms of the rise of 'culturological' and communitarian approaches; the rise of the 'later subaltern subject' and the post-colonial subject have been noted. In the framework of post-orientalism studies, the focus remains of colonial domination alone, thereby the pre-colonial roots of caste, gender, and class domination come to be ignored. The application of Saidian framework, therefore, presents a problem, especially when applied to the non-Brahman movements and movements by or on behalf of women since both these had utilized and the colonial law, justice and administration as major resources. Recent feminist scholarship in adopting the Saidian frame work not only falls into the above mentioned traps, but ends up with a frame that completely overlooks the contributions and interventions of women in the non-Brahman movement. The invisibility of this lineage has led scholars to conceive the recent autonomous assertion by Dalit women as 'a different voice'.

Women have only recently become part of intellectual narratives, having had their traditions deemed 'unworthy' for centuries by patriarchal societies engaged in the task of constructing and deconstructing identities. While the question of gender is being engaged with at a consistent level today, there is a need to focus on the identity and politics of dalit women. An understanding of the dynamics of caste illustrates how gender equations are determined and influenced by caste. In the Indian context in general, the notion of a Dalit woman has to be understood in the framework of 21<sup>st</sup> century cultural politics. The notion of a complete monolithic Indian society connected through religion is completely broken by the caste system. The context of the Dalit woman needs to be understood not only from the overall perspective of women but also that of caste. The existence of the Dalit woman cannot be recognized similarly like upper caste woman simply because the values of feudal society are deep-rooted in caste. To perpetuate sexual harassment, some feudal communities chose to keep the Devadasi tradition going, so that sexual assault could take place in the name of god and therefore legitimized. If for the upper class, caste women, sexual oppression could take place within the framework of family and caste, for the Dalit woman, the entire male society competed to make sexual assaults on her. In fact, female goddesses were created simply to carry on with sexual oppression, and Feudal society has inflicted as much violence on women as the Vedic traditions have. Though these values



belong to an ancient past, they continue to exist in the present times too, albeit in newer forms.

Feminism is of crucial interest to postcolonial discourse. The experiences of women in patriarchy and those of colonized subjects can be paralleled in a number of ways. The feminist and postcolonial approaches rediscover hidden works by people considered subordinate in the past, value difference and different voices, recognize and empower lives and perspectives previously erased or marginalized. There is double colonization for women as they are subjected both to general discrimination as colonial subjects and specific discrimination as women. Even post-independence practices are not free from this kind of gender bias. There are two different special voices shouting in the wilderness for liberation—the Dalit women in India and the Black women in America who are under the triple – subjugation of caste or race, gender and class. It is therefore imperative to isolate the problems specific to these triple-subjected women and work for their emancipation and empowerment. For millions of Dalit women in India, Dalit and stifling diffidence in order to assert their dignity, individuality and human rights.

Bama, a leading Tamil Dalit woman writer, has been using her pen like “**Karukku**” – a sharp edged weapon to cut the weeds of untouchability and patriarchy which have thickly grown over the centuries in this ancient land. Bama’s stories “**Ponnuthayi**”, “**Molahappodi**” (chili powder) and “**Samiyattam**” (possessed by the Goddess), “**Sangati**” are powerful Dalit feminist stories which highlight the untold miseries of Dalit women and their indomitable courage to resist oppression. In spite of their subjugation to tyranny by their own men, upper-caste men and the brutal police force, these women possess a rare spirit and zest for life in addition to a free flow of earthy, pungent swear words. Present paper focuses on Dalit women’s struggle in Bama’s *Karukku* and *Sangati*.

Dalit women have been the silent, suffering minority in the works of both upper-caste and Dalit male writer. Denied a voice, the Dalit women withers away at the margins of such literature. Dalit women are oppressed both by men from the upper caste and men from their own community. This twice-over oppression from caste and patriarchy has not drawn enough attention from male Dalit writer. If Dalit writers accuse the upper castes of denying them a voice the same may be said of the Dalit women who have been denied voice and a presence in the concerns of the Dalit literary critics.



Dalit Literature in Tamil has many firsts to its credit. The first Dalit novel in Tamil written by a woman Dalit writer, Sivakami, was published in 1989. In 1992, another significant Dalit work in Tamil was published i.e Bama's *Karukku* a Dalit autobiography. Bama's *Karukku* discusses oppression born by Dalits at the hands of state (police), panchayat, the upper castes and at the church. Bama also highlights how Dalit women are oppressed further by Dalit men at home. The collusion of patriarchy with cast hegemony is a harsher and more unjust suppression of Dalit women as shown in the works of Bama.

Bama's *Karukku* records the trials and tribulations of Bama as an individual, as a woman and as a writer. When she arrived at the college, with just the clothes that she was wearing and admitted herself into the hostel. She felt deeply humiliated by her classmates where she went around in the same skirt, jacket and daavani for a whole week. She endured all the shame and humiliation and stayed on. Then she decided to become a nun and enter a convent and in that she work hard for other children who struggle as she had done. The nuns from the convent matched their attitude and behavior to the power and prestige of those families. The convent does not know the meaning of poverty. The more she watched this the more frustrated she felt. Her mind was disturbed and her conscience was bothered and bruised. And it was this conviction that made her leave the convent.

For writer, this was a double cross, where she left the convent she was an cross roads. The future was uncertain and she did not know where her next job would be, and then came the writing. Bama wrote from the heart, her dreams, her aspiration and her desires. Bama's re-reading of the Christian scriptures as an adult enabled her to carve out both a social vision and a message of hope for Dalits by emphasizing the revolutionary aspects of Christianity, the values of equality, social justice and love towards all. Her own life experience urged her towards activity engaging in alleviating the sufferings of the oppressed. When she became a nun, it was with the stubborn hope that she would have a chance to put these aspirations into affect. She discovers, however, that the perspectives of the convent and church are different from hers. The story of that conflict and its resolution forms the core of *Karukku*.

Bama's *Karukku* discusses various forms of violent oppression unleashed on Dalits, specifically on the Paraiyar caste. A significant aspect of this work pertains to the oppression of Dalit Christians at the hands of the church. Institutionalized religion discriminates against Dalits in direct contravention of biblical tenets. While Christianity, unlike Hinduism, does not



recognize caste divisions, church in India is casteist in its dealings. *Karukku* depicts how Dalit Christians are not allowed to sing in the church choir, are forced to sit separately, away from the upper caste Christians, are not allowed to bury their dead in the cemetery within the village, behind the church, but are made to use a different graveyard beyond the outskirts. The Paraiyars who converted to Christianity in order to escape casteist oppression at the hands of orthodox Hinduism are shown to be greatly disillusioned as they are not able to escape caste oppression within the church fold. Further, reservation benefits are not granted to Dalit Christians as theoretically, Christianity does not recognize caste. The Government's reservation policy fails to take into account the gap between belief and practice and Dalit Christians face the brunt of it. Bama traces her personal disillusionment with the church and her walking out of a nunnery after seven years of stay as she found unjust, unchristian, and discriminatory conduct of church authorities towards Dalit Christians.

Bama's work points out that the church distorts the real image and teachings of Christ and preaches docility, meekness and subservience to the faithful while suppressing the radical, liberative teachings of Jesus. She hence urges Dalits to educate themselves, read the Bible themselves and recognize Jesus as a defender of the oppressed.

*Karukku*, adopts the native tongue to manifest the narrator's solidarity and integrity with the Dalit community without which the narrator's very existence, in her contemporary social milieu is jeopardized. The general evolution of Bama being gets reflects in her life-story at various stages like, childhood or a state of innocence to education or a state of indignation or self-realization that runs metaphorically throughout her life until she is compelled to resign to church, the institutionalized religion, and a source of her disillusionment. In a way, Bama's long agonizing travesty from repudiation to reclamation, weakness to strength, subjugation to defiance and then liberation, corner to horizon negation to affirmation.

Bama's *Samgati*, deals with Dalit women's dual oppression, agony and anger. The Dalit women are downtrodden and oppressed because of suppression by their own men and by the upper caste men and women. Being illiterate, they have become one of the most exploited peripheral groups in the society. Bama's *Sangati* can be seen in terms of the aspirations and struggle of a Dalit woman towards social empowerment. Dalit women use literature in general and autobiography in particular as a means of expressing themselves



and their aspirations for social liberation and empowerment. Following *Karukku*, *Sangati* continues to have an autobiographic claim to authenticity, but is not quite autobiography. Nor is it a novel or a collection of short stories. It defies genres. The introduction treats this as a virtue: '*Sangati* flouts received notions of what a novel should be'. While '*Kaarukku* traced a Dalit woman's journey toward Roman Catholicism and her eventual estrangement from a convent, *Sangati* is a series of episodes of Dalit women talking, about their lives and little insurrections. Bama loosely strings voices that demonstrate how Dalit women's bodies are scarred by the many burdens of domestic, farm and sexual labour and yet how in ways they are better placed than caste-Hindu women. The 'book', as this formless narrative is termed in the blurb, is more an ethnography of the Paraiya self than creative writing. An insider account of the onset of menstruation, food, culture, marriages and domesticity is offered, yet it's not quite ethnography. The novel depicts the oppression, agony, and anger of the Dalit women. The Dalit women have become one of the most exploited peripheral groups in the Indian social system. The double oppression of Dalit women signifies a power struggle in the patriarchal society. The historical double oppression of Dalit women is institutionalized in India. Women are subordinate to men through their acceptance of sex or gender system. Bama in the novel questions and challenges much of the world's literature that dismissed women's writing. The author narrate her common experience related to a sense of sisterhood. She depicts Dalit women's life often as a struggle. But she also portrays the strength of family, community and self worth. She paints her women protagonists who confront and overcome oppressions in their lives. According to Bama, a Dalit woman is Dalit amongst Dalits. *Sangati* deals with Dalit women who confront frequent threats and menaces of rape, sexual assaults, physical violence and damage at work places in public arena. Apart from experiencing all these problems, Dalit women are to face mental torture and violence at home by their husbands. Their husbands without any specific reason beat up Dalit women. When Bama was returning from school, she hears the *Thaayi* weeping. Her husband beats up *Thaayi*. Bama writes in the novel, "*Thaayi's* husband was beating her up again and again with the belt from his waist. She did not even have a blouse on. Everywhere the strap fell on her light skin, there were bright red weals"(47).

Instead of creating a healthy atmosphere for the nourishment of Dalit women, her own men such as husbands, fathers, and brothers suppress her freedom in the name of Hindu



tradition. In the novel, Mariamma goes to collect firewood as usual. While getting back home, she goes to drink water to Kumarasaami Ayya's fields. When she goes innocently to get some water, Kumarasaami seizes her hand and pulls her inside. She escapes from him, leaves everything and gets back home. She reveals the incident to her friends. Mariamma's friends warn her not to reveal what actually happened. Her friend says: 'It is you who will get the blame; it is you who will be called a whore....the land owner is an evil man, fat with money. He is upper caste as well'(20). Being a Dalit woman she is unable to protect against the landlord. But Kumarasaami, being afraid of this news may spread and it loses his reputation. He complains to the headman of the Paraya community( one of the Dalit community in Tamil nadu). He misinterprets that Mariamma uses his fields to behave in a very dirty way with her uncle Manikkam. Male elders do not give a chance to Mariamma to speak the truth in the village meeting. She is abused in front of the villagers and is forced to pay a fine of Rs. 200 whereas Manikkam is fined only Rs. 100 because he is a male and upper caste. Bama has larger vision of the ongoing struggle of the Dalits and miserable life of the Dalit women to show how they are twice oppressed. Dalit women suffer from social excommunication for being born in a lower caste. *Sangati* springs from the experiences of Dalit women lives. After relentless pursuit of an arduous labour, the Dalit women workers have to look after and graze the cattle and have to prepare food for a large family. Ultimately the tired women often may reject sex to their boozed men who bash them up severely. Domestic sexual violence at the hands of husbands at home and sexual exploitation of Dalit women workers at workplace form a subject of concern in the Bama's *Samgati*.

Bama's experiences open up new perspectives for Dalit women. We find that centuries of oppression have not succeeded in completely sapping the vitality and inner strength of the Dalits. Dalit women, in particular, have enormous strength and vigour to bounce back against all odds. If *Karukku* exploded with the realistic description of the subjugated existence of the Dalits, *Sangati* appeared in 1994; two years after *Karukku* was published. While *Karukku* depicts the sufferings of Dalit woman, *Sangati* moves away from the individual to the community. It is a statement of pride underling the herself writes in the Preface to the book:



In *Sangati*, many strong Dalit women who had the courage to break the shackles of authority, to propel themselves upwards, to roar (their defiance) changed their difficult, problem-filled lives and quickly stanching their tears. *Sangati* is a look at a part of the lives of those women who dared to make fun of the class in power that oppressed them, and through this, they found the courage to revolt (Bama, 2005,vi).

*Sangati* means news and the book is full of interconnected events- the everyday happenings in the Dalit community. Similar to *Karukku* that flouted the conventions of autobiography, *Sangati* goes against the notions of the traditional novel. It has no plot in the normal sense, but is a series of anecdotes.

*Sangati* dwells at length on the gender bias faced by Dalit women right from the childhood. The story of Mariamma, the narrator's cousin, speaks volumes of the sexual assault and abuse confronted by Dalit women and their inability to stand up against it. *Sangati* does not stop with just an analysis of the plight and sufferings of the Dalit women. The book takes us to the inner premises of Dalit culture asserting its richness and tradition. The Dalit women consider their state better, since the upper caste brides are forced to give a large sum as dowry to fix the marriage. 'They have to cover the girl's neck with jewellery, give them cash in their hand, and write off property and land in their names' (Bama, 2005,112). On the contrary in the Dalit community it is the bridegroom, who gives *parisam*(gift) to marry the bride. Women rarely wear the *mangalsutra* in the Dalit community, so when the husband dies she is not expected to remove it like the upper caste women, and keep away from flowers and *kumkum*. 'The girl's life is finished, then. She can't wear jewels, she can't even wear coloured saris. They'll call her a widow and keep her away from all occasions' (Bama, 2005,112). Widow remarriage is a socially accepted norm. That's the custom in our community'. (Bama, 2005, 113).

*Sangati* also reveals the innermost feelings of the Dalit women. In spite of all their sufferings and oppression, Dalit women consider themselves privileged than the upper caste women. Through *Sangati* we get to hear the inner voices of the Dalit women. We find that within their close circles, Dalit women ridicule the upper caste women. They take pride in having the liberty to swim and bathe in pond, whereas the upper caste women are confined to the





wells in the house. Dalit women also take great pride that they are financially independent and capable of doing the toughest of jobs.

Dalit feminism has been described as a 'discourse of discontent', 'a politics of difference' from mainstream Indian feminism, which has been critiqued for marginalizing Dalit women. Dalit feminism has put a new and subversive ethic. It awakes the conscience of Dalit women and instills confidence and pride in them. Thus, it shares its aims with other marginalized and subaltern groups worldwide. As a feminist write Bama protests against all forms of oppression and relying on the strength and resilience of Dalit women, makes an appeal for change and self-empowerment through education and collective action.

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