

THE POLITICS OF GENDER AND DALIT WOMANHOOD IN THE WORKS OF

BAMA

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The aim of Dalit writing is not simply about realistically revealing the conditions and problems of Dalits. The writings attempt a transformative cultural and political agenda critiquing the Hindu feudal culture and Indian literary history while reformulating the idea of modernity and its literary culture.

Dalit writers have made a claim on the vernacular and are leading through sharp, critical interventions in the domain of literature. The Dalit vernacular of late has become the vanguard because of the self-critique it has helped engender in the mainstream and also because of the self-assurance it has gained through political and conceptual interventions in the domain of literature.

The writings of Bama attain significance because it deconstructs by foregrounding the gendered experience of caste from being a target of social oppression to being a politically awakened social subject and emerging as a meta-narrative in the dominant male voice of the Dalit literary scene. Her focus on the gendered experience of caste places a new emphasis on the domestic and deeply personal sphere of Dalit women. While reading Bama, it is important to pay attention to the language of the text to understand how the collectivity of experience is not accidental, but politically and consciously constructed in the course of the narrative.

This paper examines the intersection of gender and caste politics in dalit writings with special attention to Bama's *Karukku* (1992). In the backdrop of subaltern writings in India, I suggest that Bama's works offer ways of reading the personal experiences of Dalit women with the social exclusions of the caste system, and in so doing, brings a complexity to the dynamics of dalit writing emphasising the need to speak out against caste and gender oppression.

With the publication of Bama's autobiography, *Karukku* in 1992, Tamil Dalit writing enters a new phase: that of Dalit Feminism. Both *Karukku* and *Sangati* (1994) bring to

Tamil writing a number of language strategies, which overturn a mainstream aesthetic and propose a new one integral to Bama's politics as a Dalit woman and a Christian. Some of these strategies are: a consistent use of the colloquial, the reclamation of a cultural frame of reference which is based on oral tradition, the use of ridicule or lampooning as a means of subversion, and the foregrounding of the use of transgressive language by women as a means of self-defence. Arjun Dangle writes that, "Dalit is not a caste but a realisation and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows, and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of society" (lii).

Continuing the same language project, the poet Sukirtharani, fifteen years younger than Bama, has written that she seeks an 'infant language', *baalyamozhi*, still 'sticky with blood', a sensual language in which she maps a Dalit world and history through the sensitive reading of a Dalit woman's body and her sexual self. Thus Sukirtharani brings a Dalit dimension to the new poetry by Tamil women and its exploration of the politics of sexuality. Together, these new language strategies constitute what I have termed the 'Dalitization' of Tamil writing

Bama's *Karukku* is the articulation of the silence of the Dalit community as a collective whole. The work shows how Bama's village girl grows from a disillusioned being and becoming a force by the odds she faced. *Karukku* universalizes the struggles and sufferings of the Dalit community who live in suffering unaware of the power of education that can deliver them liberation.

Following the teachings of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Dalit movement uses literature and art as a medium of revolt alongside political activity. Short stories, poems and novels have become the voice of protest of the Dalits. Dalit literature, "expressed grinding poverty and often misery—and yet it reflected pride in the way in which people had survived and sometimes fought under these conditions" (Omvedt xiv).

Karukku is about the lives of Tamil Dalit Christians in the native village of Bama and their day to day interactions with members of other castes and communities living alongside. Bama is a Tamil Dalit Christian born as Faustina Soosairaj in Puthupatti village of Virudhunagar district in Tamil Nadu. Though Bama received higher education and was

empowered to pursue a career as a teacher, she feels the same pain as any dalit still living the dark world of the village. She writes, "I share the same difficulties and struggles that all Dalit poor experience" (79). The narrative of Karukku recounts instances from the all stages of her life events that shaped her social perspective and gives the readers an overview of the injustices meted out to her right from childhood to leaving the Christian convent renouncing the three vows .

The consciousness of the dalit community finds expression in Karukku. The central concern of the book is that Dalits should break free from the constructed social order and question the forces of oppression and segregation. She remarks that, "Instead of being more and more beaten down and blunted, they must unite, think about their rights, and battle for them" (xxiv). The redeeming feature of Karukku is the simplicity of language employed with the implicit function of assisting the Dalits in recovering the lost identity of a community that has historically suffered social, cultural and historical exclusion. The only way out, according to Bama, is to dare to stand up against injustices.

Karukku stands up against the traditional hierarchy of caste prevalent in India and reflects upon the experiences of the Dalits as reflected in a series of interrogatives evolving out of the personal experiences of Bama. Karukku articulates the Dalit self and ushers in a world of respect and pride for the hitherto marginalised classes.

Dalit patriarchy is an important subject of concern in Karukku, expounding how Dalit women are oppressed further by Dalit men at home. Dalit movements were traditionally led by men with a tendency to silence issues concerning Dalit women who were then compelled to voice their doubled marginalisation due to caste and gender discrimination. This has resulted in the rise of Dalit Feminism and Bama has found in Karukku the space to articulate the hardships and sufferings of Dalit women.

Karukku throws open to the reader what it is to be born a Dalit and a woman. Bama writes on the plight of the Dalit woman amongst the Dalits being doubly oppressed by her caste and gender.

Bama published her first novel *Karukku*, a semi autobiographical work in 1992, for which she received the Crossword Award which was followed by 'Kisumbukkaran' in 1994, 'Sangati' in 1996 and 'Vanman' in 2003. Bama in *Karukku* shares her experience exposing issues like caste, religion and gender .

Karukku and other works of bama gives the reader a glimpse into the lives of the subalterns.it gives expression to the lives of the lowest of the low castes – the Paraiyars. Bama's work is the anthem of all marginalized people who constantly struggle to overcome inequalities that have been imposed on them from times immemorial. Her work can be read as the powerful voice of a subaltern subject reflecting the lived experiences of herself and of other victims of social marginalization. Bama in her works records her own bitter experiences that moulded her character and made her what she is today. The pain and mental suffering she had been subjected to since childhood made her write in the preface of her book *Karukku*: "Instead of being more and more beaten down and blunted, they must unite, think about their rights and battle for them.The driving force that shaped this book are many:events that occurred during many steps of my life, cutting me like *Karukku* and making me bleed." (p. xiii).

Inversely Bama's work can be read as a narrative of the subversion of the authority of the oppressor. Through her narratives, Bama was able to foreground the voices of the Paraiyar community into the mainstream discourse bringing to her community a sense of dignity and selfhood. Through her works, she attempts to create an identity and selfhood for herself and for her people,while interrogating dominant literary practices and articulating theexperience of the oppressed in the language of the oppressed .

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