

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EDUCATION: A STUDY OF BAMA'S KARUKKU AND SANGATI

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ABSTRACT

Dalit literature articulates the exploitation of the untouchables in an unjust society based on caste and class inequities. Bama, the first Dalit woman writer of India vehemently protests discrimination and untouchability imposed on dalits by the upper class in the society. With the publication of Karukku(1992), she rose to popularity. Her other works include Sangati (1994), Kusumbakaran (1996) and Vanmam (2003). The quest which had been depicted in Bama's works is a reflection of her identity which was neglected.

This paper aims to explore the plight of the socially underprivileged. Karukku and Sangati casts light on the most agonizing and wretched lives of the dalit women. It argues against patriarchy and caste oppression. Bama lends her voice for those communities that are silenced by caste oppression. Through these works, she envisages the empowerment of the dalit people through education.

KEYWORDS: *Oppression, Gender Discrimination, Sufferings, Education*

INTRODUCTION

Dalit literature has attempted to portray the sorrows, slavery, and poverty experienced by the Dalits over thousands of years. The ordeal of discrimination and violence are brought to the forefront through Dalit literature. In *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, Alok Mukherjee opines that, "the term 'Dalit' describes all the untouchable communities living outside the boundary of the village, as well as Adivasis, landless farm laborers, workers, and the suffering masses" (30). Dalit writers have braved all hardships and depicted the sufferings of the Dalits in their writing. These writers use writing as a vehicle for their pain, problems and unanswered questions. They express the inhuman and unequal order which has exploited Dalits. The inexpressible and unfathomable bitter feelings of the Dalit individuals are voiced in their works and have taken considerable semblance in a variety of languages. The trauma of being untouchable is questioned invariably by all Dalit writers. Their writings have now developed into a considerable collection of literature in its own right. Phadke opines, "The suffocation of enduring slavery from birth to death is the inspirational force behind Dalit literature" (105).

The most famous Indian writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Bhabani Bhattacharya have dealt with oppression and suppression of the low-class Dalit people at the micro and macro levels in their writings. As observed by Col Gurnam, "Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudra were the four divisions of the caste system that existed in

ancient India” (2). The Shudra were considered as the low caste people in the social hierarchy and socially excluded from the rest of the society. They were forced to oblige the upper-class people without any question and made to lead a passive life. Dr. Ambedkar is regarded as the savior of the outcasts. These downtrodden people were treated in an inhuman way by the upper-class people.

Some of the notable Dalit writers who made Dalit writing as a distinct part of Indian Literature are Bama, Abimani Poomani, Sukirtharani, Prathiba Jayachandran, Chanakya, Dharman, Yazhan Adhi.

Bama is a notable Tamil Dalit writer who tries to bring social awakening in her community. She uses the most important literary medium – novel to propagate her ideas. She has made bold attempts to portray the heart breaking tragic plight of the Dalit women and reveal the hidden and hardened facts of the caste-bound society. She mirrors a realistic picture of the contemporary lower middle-class people who are being segregated as untouchables and as the evils of the society. She expresses agony and trauma experienced by these women in the male-dominated society and expresses her protest against the society without any fear and favor.

Her voice focuses boldly the disappointments and frustrations of women.

Dalit women face many inevitable challenges in the traditional framework of the society. The discrimination of the lower class society by the affluent upper-class people is finely evinced. The discrimination on the grounds of caste, creed, and family backdrop had a cataclysmic effect on the lives of the underprivileged people. They were given freedom only to live outside the village.

Bama’s *Karukku* and *Sangati* are an agonized cry of protest against social injustice. Her personal experiences have been reflected in both her novels. The word *Karukku* means palmyra leaf with serrated edges on both sides. The word *Sangati* means ‘events’. The author narrates the events that took place in the life of Dalit women. She explores the oppressed state of women in the Paraiyah Community. The conflict between the self and the community is exhibited in *Karukku* whereas *Sangati* reverberates the voice of the Dalit community. In both the novels, Bama tries to liberate the people of her community from the hands of the upper-class community’s ideologies.

Karukku focuses on the crude attitude of the upper-class people over the underprivileged. The experience of caste discrimination from the Dalit point of view is echoed in her narration. Bama refers to the inhuman treatment of violence against Dalit woman by the most downtrodden man who thrashes his wife in public, drags her to the community hall and beats her mercilessly every day. This endless tragic scene is witnessed by everybody in the village helplessly. From ancient times, women handle all household chores including cooking, washing, cleaning and rearing children too. The hard labor of the women is well brought by Bama who enlists the tasks of women from morn to dusk thus:

Ploughing, manuring, watering, sowing the seed, separating the seedlings and planting them out; then the wedding, spraying the fields with fertilizer, reaping the grain, working on the threshing floors, planting groundnut, selecting ripe coconuts. Apart from this work in the fields, there’s construction labor... if even this is not available, then people have to go up to the hills to gather firewood, or they must work with palm-leaves, or at the kilns making bricks. People have to do some work in order to eat (41)

In spite of all these hard labor, Dalit women were exploited with new cruelties. Though, they were subjected to violence both at home and outside, they struggle hard for social and economic empowerment. Bama emphasizes that the

only weapon to achieve social respectability is to be Educated. In *Karukku*, Bama argues the importance of Education for the upliftment of her community:

Because we are born into the paraya jati, we are never given any honor or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that. But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities. So study with care, learn all you can... work hard and learn (15)

In *Sangati*, Bama expresses the agony and trauma experienced by the Dalit woman in the Paraiya Community. A Dalit girl named Mariyamma does all the household chores on her own. She walks in the scorching heat to gather firewood. While returning from the fields, she drinks water from Kumarasami Ayya's pump set. Eventually, he finds Mariyamma in his field. Frightened of her wits, she rescued herself by escaping from his hands. "He is an evil man, fat with money is an upper caste as well"(20) went to the headman of the paraiya community to complain that Mariyamma was behaving dirty with another boy named Manikam in his field. Mariyamma's father promptly slaps her hard repeatedly right before the panchayat, ordering her to beg forgiveness from the village elders. When Mariyamma relates the facts to panchayat, the men disbelieve her. The headman authoritatively announces the panchayat's decision to fine Mariyamma(Rs.200) and Manickam (Rs. 100).

Mariyamma is abused and made a victim of the upper-caste maliciousness. In a twist of irony, Mariyamma's father decides to marry her off to Manickam as she is unable to get a groom from the village. Manickam is a drunkard, gambler. From the time, she is married, Mariyamma suffers blows and kicks and domestic violence. Mariamma suffers violence both at the hands of her father and her husband.

...even if all women are slaves to men, our women really are the worst sufferers; it is not the same for women of other castes and communities. Our women cannot bear the torment of upper-caste masters in the fields, and at home, they cannot bear the violence of their husbands. (65)

The unjust and repressed attitude of the upper caste men towards Dalit women is evinced. Bama explores the inability of the Dalit women to stand up against the violence of the upper caste. The Dalit women have to bear the oppression of caste and gender discrimination in the society. In order to uplift the oppressed state of the Dalit women towards empowerment, Bama in her last chapter advocates:

We should educate boys and girls alike, showing no difference between them as they grow into adults. We should give our girls the freedom, we give our boys. If we rear our children like this from the time they are babies, women will reveal their strength. Then there will come a day when men and women will live as one... with equal rights. (123)

Bama firmly believes that the women in the Dalit community can be empowered and strengthened through education. Though her writings portray the dimensions of humiliation which the Dalits suffer, the need for literacy is strongly amplified. Bama voices the bitter experiences, some of which have long been silenced.

CONCLUSIONS

Education is the most effective channel for achieving equality between men and women and this is the necessity of time to accomplish emancipation and economic independence. K.C Agrawal opines "Education is for the mind and soul. Literacy to a society is the same as clothing to a body. No society or country can ever progress whose masses remains

illiterate”(210). A self-reliant and educated woman can stabilize the society which has been threatened by the breakdown of values. It is in this context, Mohd Mujtaba Khan observes “Dr. B.R Ambedkar had a vision for a people’s education movement to realize universal education for all”(79). Both *Karukku* and *Sangati* is a wake up call to the people to enable them see the social reality more closely and understand the unbound miseries of Dalit people.

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