



**DALIT LITERATURE BECOMES A VOICE OF PROTEST IN THE NEW CONTEXT:  
SPECIAL FOCUS ON BAMA**

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Among the earliest references to the plight of the Dalits is made by Jawaharlal Nehru in *The Discovery of India* where he attributes the cause of social and political subjugation of the Dravidians by the invading Aryas. He reasons that “brought degradation in its train... and it (the Dalit situation) is still a burden and a cause”. While Nehru’s notes appear to carry a touch of condescension, Runoko Rashidi reads the significance of the color black, with which, the Dalit is often associated. He notes, with amusement, in his essay “The African Presence in Indian Antiquity” that they portray the human as black because it is consistent with their habit of portray(ing) and depict(ing) their gods and their idols black and their devils white as snow. Rashidi was to later admit to Vijay Prasad, “I’ve given the impression that Dalits are Black people”. What can be deluded from these references is that the voice of the outsider is either coldly analytical or too amused and inaccurate. One needs to read the voice of the outsider. About one such voice Saraswathy Nagarajan says, “It was a search for identity that transformed Faustina Mary Fathima Rani into a writer”. That was when Bama was born. Bama went on to be the beacon of light of Dalit literary articulation. She and the writers she influenced have given to Tamil literature an identity which is comparable to the over in Marathi and Kannada. So much so, D.R. Venkatachalapathy in his “Overview of Dalit Literary Writing in Tamil” says that “Dalit creative writers have since (the 1990s) asserted themselves”.

Bama is the first Dalit female writer to invest hugely in the articulation of personal experience. In her autobiographical novel *Karukku*, she is a homodiegetic narrator. The novel captures the poignant movements she experienced in the caste-ridden society in Tamilnadu. She moves from the rueful personal stories to the appalling condition of her own people who have been lacerated by the serrated edges of a biased society that visits upon them untouchability, segregation, isolation, humiliation, sexual harassment, exploitation and slavery. In the second novel, *Sangathi* Bama becomes the voice of the Dalit women. She candidly narrates the harassment meted out to the Dalit women by the upper caste men. Even as Bama articulates the harsh reality of the Dalits she assumes a Dalit feminist position by espousing a positive sense for the Dalit women.

In the third novel, *Vanmam* Bama narrates the rift between two Dalit communities—*Parayyas* and *Pallars* – and how they have been the victims of the politics of the upper caste men. The devious ways in which the Dalits are manipulated cause a deep sense of isolation felt by Dalit women in their colony after the violence in the village. Bama faithfully captures the sufferings of the Dalit women even as she does not fail to appreciate the efforts taken by the people in the two communities to ensure a peaceful life through negotiations. The peace forged by the two Dalit communities enables them to win the battle against the upper caste people in the local body election. Her fourth product is a collection of short stories entitled *Oru Thathavum Erumaiyum*. In this work, she painfully narrates the social evils and the atrocities unleashed on Dalit people, especially on Dalit girls. At the same time, unlike her other works, she sees many changes in the attitude of her people towards progressive ways. Bama’s novels and short stories reflect her revolutionary ardor and her conviction that the present order must be demolished for the ushering in of a new order.

In the novel *Karukku*, Bama shows the victory of the Dalit women against all kinds of social barriers. She does focus problems but only so that they offer the reader a prospect into the negotiations of the individual who wants to overcome humiliation, survive and become a respectable being. She leaves the cloistral comfort of the Seminary and she casts away her identity as a nun. These are deliberate moves of the determined individual to fight an evil monster like casteism. By becoming the visible and-vocal face of the struggle, she writes home to her community a message about struggle, about survival and the triumph in the form of a respectable identity. She emphasizes the need to keep oneself

alive by keeping alive the spirit to fight all forms of discrimination. Lakshmi Holmstrom, Bama’s translator for *Karukku*, says in the introduction to the novel that Bama did not subscribe to the traditional values associated with women. Parts of the introduction, cited by P. Devarajan in “For better or Verse”, reads: “And the ideas Bama admires and applauds in Dalit women are not the traditional Tamil feminine ideas of *accham* (fear), *naanam* (shyness), *madam* (simplicity, innocence), *payirppu* (modesty), but rather courage, fearlessness, independence and self-esteem”.

While *Karukku* addresses the larger community of Dalits, *Sangathi* specifically focuses the smaller constituency of the Dalit women. Unlike *Karukku*, *Sangathi* examines the wounds that hurt the Dalit women. Those are wounds caused by discord in marital relations; a stained communication between the woman and the man. The woman in the Dalit home is subject to untold physical and mental harassment. Bama intervenes in this inconvenient relationship and arbitrates on what can liberate the Dalit woman from the clutches of the male whose acts of violence do not appeal to abate. Bama suggests, as the first voice of feminist rebellion, the idea of ‘divorce’ as a multidimensional form of release for the harassed woman; physical, legal, moral and social separation that is the result of the woman’s own choosing. In this process, Bama reflects on the possibilities that lie before the Dalit woman for a new life.

In *Vanmam*, Bama moves back to her concern for the community at large. Her problem in *Vanmam* is to negotiate the dynamics of exploitation which is at the heart of the Upper caste-Dalit equation. The centuries old paradigm in which Dalit remains socially dispossessed needs to be re-worked into a more acceptable frame of social co-existence. The challenge of mending the age-old paradigm, Bama feels, must begin within the community. The members of the community must see reason in suiting their petty differences and unite for a common cause: of leaving the community out of the social net of subjugation. Bama plays the visionary social philosopher and reformer by drawing everyone’s attention to the role of Education in the journey of the Dalit community towards an identity and social respectability. She demonstrates through her many intrepid acts of rebellion the impact of education in one’s life.

In *Oru Thathavum Erumaiyum*, Bama lifts up her people from the century’s long dormancy. She creates a new Dalit woman who fights back the upper caste women with new courage. Her negotiation yields many ideas for the community that struggles to break out of the shell of

marginalization. She believes that boldness and conviction, derived from education will instill the confidence to fight the devious forces that have cribbed, cubined and confined the Dalit community. She sees rapid changes in the attitude of the Dalit youths too. Bama discovers in the Dalit youth a new found confidence to read and resist any upper caste move to insult subjugate the community or any individual.

Bama's personal liking for Kabaddi becomes an image that terminates the arc of interaction that Bama prefers between the upper castes and the Dalits. The game of Kabaddi, symbolically, suggests the elements of aggression, invasion, resistance, rebellion and retaliation that actually comprise the dynamics of the interaction between the communities: of the upper castes that believe that they are born to have the upper hand in the social equation with the Dalits. Bama's reference, in an image that adequately captures the dynamics of the societal equation: "I like the whole business of challenging, crossing over and vanquishing the opponent" (Dutt, 2003). While the game of Kabaddi refers to physical invasion or defense of one's home turf, there is another invasion that must be defended against and triumphed over and that is the cultural invasion.

Bama departs from the homogenization of Tamil culture when she chooses to modify the slogan that looks at the Tamils as one monolithic entity: Tamizhan as one monolithic entity: *tamizhan endru sollada; thalai nimirndhu nillada*. She likes to think that Dalit identity must be reclaimed from the sea of neglect before any overtures are made towards assimilation into the large entity of Tamil culture by making revisionary intervention: *Dalit endru sollada; Thalai nimirndhu nillada (Karukku 156)*. This way, Bama not only challenges the upper castes but crosses over the boundaries that segregate the communities and vanquishes the divisive forces.

Bama takes two identities very seriously; Bama the woman and Bama the writer. She makes separate choices: as the woman as well as the writer. As woman she chooses to remain single that would give her the space to champion social causes. As a married person, she would be encumbered by domestic responsibilities. So on the personal front, with respect to marriage, Bama chooses the austerity of being single. On the other hand, as a career choice, she chooses the career of writer. On the face of it, it is a career that restraint, discipline and rigor. However, it also promises the ample creative space for examining, explaining, enlightening the reader in her community and society, at large, about the problems that beset the Dalits. This single woman as a writer with a single-minded goal becomes a model for the Dalit community. Talking to reporters, Bama once said, "Dalit people welcome me. They are curious to read my ariting and for the younger generation, especially women, I am a role model" (Behel, 2003).

One may observe, with respect to Bama, that it is not only her characters that are marginalized and treated as outcastes. It is not only the Dalit women who form the central concern of Bama who are treated as 'outcastes'. Bama the writer, is herself an 'outcaste' if one understands her position to, linguistically, transcribe the dialect of her community thus inviting the displeasure of the mainstream Tamil novel with her non-confrontation. Vijayapathi Gupta in 'The Guarded Tongue' raises this issue, "Critics who review their work still treat women writers as 'outcastes'. Literary critics, mostly men, ignore the dynamic vitality in women's writing and treat it as recreational and decorative".

These are murky and harsh situations that persuade Bama to fight for justice and equality for Dalit society, especially for women who have traditionally been harassed and oppressed. She does not want to be a mute spectator like other women in her community, but she boldly exposes the bitter experiences that she has faced as a student, as a

teacher, and as a nun. She writes for her community, creating awareness among those neglected in society. In an interview she clearly states her objective of remaining single and writing novels. She highlights the present humiliation and suffering of Dalit community, especially the Dalit women. "The existing family system would not give me the space I needed to do my kind of work. So I choose to stay single. My ambition is to communicate the dream aspiration of my people, who have remained on the fringes for centuries in Indian History" (Dutt, 2003).

Bama, the Dalit writer, becomes the metaphor with her novel, *Karukku* as the vehicle and her own location of the Dalit reality as the tenor. The identification of Bama as a metaphor for the word 'suffering' and survival is complete when one reads the implications of her reaction to *Karukku* coming into print as well as an award; the recognition that comes with award; the award that encourages others to recognize the capacity of that voice to reach the hearts and minds of a wider community that is bound by the ability to read; and also the recognition that the more strident voice of Bama, the Dalit writers is only an amplification of voices in remote villages that are muted by suffering and oppression and the curse of dependence of the upper castes. In an interview with Dipti Priya Mehotra, Bama declares, "For me, rebellion is the first step to peace. A chronicler of peace has to chronicle struggles for human dignity and rights. Literary activity is part of the struggle".

After she walked out of the seminary, her family insisted she got married and settled down but she refused to do so because she did not forget the humiliation and hardship faced by women of her own community after their marriage. She did not think of marriage since she felt she was left in a desert; she had lost everything. She was a stranger to the society. She kept lamenting about life and harked back to childhood days in the village. Struggling to find herself again, she started to write her childhood memories. With self determination she becomes the architect of her own destiny. She emerges as a successful writer to fight her own battles and fight for her people too. With undaunted spirit she struggled hard that she rose from the dust like the phoenix bird. She sets a new height where everything is possible for her. In her conversation with Mohamed Peer titled, "The Voice of a Creator", Bama declares that "it is writing alone (that) gives me strength when the structures of caste, with the sense of domination weakens me". Now she can communicate to her people, to the audience out of her society, as she wishes. Breaking all established barriers, she creates a world of her own with her own understanding.

*Karukku*, in short, is the novel in which Bama structures her personal sphere according to her own design. She discovers the voice that will articulate the tribulations of her people. She acquires the assurance of the confident, liberated rebel who would not flinch from exposing the hypocrisy and duplicity in the religious institution like the seminary. Bama feels it is a sin to suffer injustice in silence. She takes the weapon of words which can lay out injustices in black and white, with words. Her people will fight against the odds that have kept them in discredit. She is a warrior, conqueror or ideas, restorer of social dogmas. She leads a hard life like her people, but she does not want to be a mute spectator. She initiates social and political reforms. She completely revolutionizes the world of human thought and behavior for all times to come.

Bama is committed to the larger cause of the living words awakening the conscience of her downtrodden and marginalized communities. She lends her awakened voice to the cause of awakening the conscience of the race. So, her individual voice became the polyphonous responses of the hinter to mute members of the community. So, the personal,

by conscious commitment of Bama, becomes the social, the communal and the universal.

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