

# **Excavating the Dalit Consciousness for the Subaltern**

## **History and Identity: A Study of Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati***

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The word 'History' by itself ironically suggests that it is 'his' story, written by men from their point of view imposing their perspective and predilections. She has no say in it; 'her' story is never told, never heard rather. She has remained mute and voiceless. Her conscience was tamed into accepting everything that was forced upon her, by very many external forces, worked upon her by physical, psychological, social, cultural and textual conditioning. Denial and discrimination ruptured her voice, numbed her pain, whispered her cries and simmered her protest. The urge to liberate her self from the clutches of oppression was never spent. The vibration of her voice echoed vehemently shattering all the obstacles: Bama declares "I wanted to shout 'these' stories". Such stories deconstructed those long-held (mis) interpretations of women.

Women being the marginalized of the marginalized are deprived of a voice against patriarchal world as well as a caste-centered society. A woman has a double edged sword against her with patriarchy and caste aiming her, endangering her human dignity as well as her gender. In

this context Dalit women's writing has evolved as the most powerful medium of expression, foreseeing the instrumentalization of the text to become a rebellious narrative.

As a gendered subaltern, Bama shook the slumber of the Indian society over the suppression of women under the pretext of gender and caste. Bama made it happen with an enlightened feministic tone and a bold visibility of dalit aesthetics that lacked in the Indian Literary scene.

Bama being a dalit herself earns the credibility and sympathy of the reader; her narrative is further strengthened by her depiction of her social system. Bama autobiography '*Karukku*' is more the history of her village from the dalit's eyes.

*Karukku* is considered to be a classic of subaltern writing, in Tamil. It was a bold attempt to give expression to a poignant tale of life outside the mainstream Indian thought and function. The main theme of the novel illustrates caste discrimination within the Catholic Church, it portrays the tension between the staff and the community and presents Bama's life as a process of self-realization, self-reflection and recovery from social and institutional betrayal. It projects her quest of identity that moves from a 'Christian' to a 'dalit women'.

*Karukku* focuses on two essential aspects: caste and religion that caused great pain in Bama's life, she expresses herself in the preface of the Book:

The driving forces that shaped this book are many: events that occurred during many stages of my life, cutting me like *karruku* and making me bleed; unjust social structures that plunged me into ignorance and left me trapped and suffocating; my own desperate urge to break, throw away and destroy these bonds: and when the chains were shattered into fragments, the blood that was spilt then: all these, taken together. (*Karukku*: 2012, xxiii)

Dalit writers see literature as an expression of their pain, suffering, questions, problems and resolutions and Bama, unexceptionally, made her writing a strong weapon to fight against social discrimination. The Dalit consciousness in Dalit Literature is the revolutionary mentality connected with any struggle. It is a belief in rebellion against the caste system, recognizing the human beings as its focus. Ambedkarite thought is the inspiration for this consciousness that found expression in Bama's writing.

*Karruku* is an autobiography of an individual and *Sangati* is the autobiography of a community; it deals with the story of the community of *paraiya* women, their neighbourhood group of friends, relatives and their joint struggle. Both *Karruku* and *Sangati* draw on autobiographical material in order to create strikingly new literary forms: they tell real –life stories of risks taken, challenges, choice and change.

Bama formulated, what is called the 'Dalit feminism' which redefined the status of a Dalit 'woman' from the socio-political perspective of a Dalit, and examining caste and gender oppressions together.

*Sangati* deals with the story of the community of *paraiya* women, who are the protagonist telling powerful stories, as interconnected anecdotes that suggest the title *Sangati* which means news, events and happening. It is not mere lamentations of the dalit women that Bama is trying to project, rather she admires in them this 'self-confidence and self-respect that enables them to leap over their adversities' and acknowledges that *Sangati* elucidates; 'stories not only about the sorrows and tears of dalit women, but also about their rebellious culture'

Dalit Literature constitutes the protesting voice. 'Rejection' and revolt' in Dalit literature have been birthed from the womb of Dalit pain. They are directed against and inhuman system that was imposed on the dalits and the anguish expressed in Dalit Literature is in the nature of a collective social voice, similarly the rejection and revolt are social and collective. This rejection is

aimed at the unequal order which has exploited Dalits. Its form is double-edged; rejecting the unequal order, and demanding equality, liberty, proximity and justice. Rejection and denial leads to revolt, such an expression of explosive rejection, piercing revolt and rebellious attitude accommodates Dalit Literature.

The view of life conveyed in Dalit Literature is different from the world of experience expressed in the mainstream Literature. A new world, a new society, a new human being is engendered in literature. The reality of Dalit Literature is distinct, and so is the language of dalit literature. It is the spoken language of Dalit. Dalit Literature is a genre of reality.

Bama has captured the Dalit language as much in details as with her realistic tone. In *Sangathi* Bama has made a linguistic leap in reclaiming the language particular to the women of her community. If *Karukku* is told in Bama's own speaking voice, *Sangati* is in the voices of many women speaking to and addressing one another as they share the incidents of their daily lives. These voices that sometimes express anger and sometimes pain and they lash out at each other, or against their oppressors, is reported exactly. Bama suggests several reasons for the violence of their language, and its sexual overtones. Dalit women often used their language as a shield and a weapon to protect them and to escape from the physical violence by shaming men imposing obscene words on them. At other times, Bama says, such language may grow out of a frustrating lack of pleasurable experience or it might be the result of the internalizing of a patriarchy based on sexual dominance and power, Azhagarasan in his Introduction to *Vanmam* says as far as the language of dalit is concerned, within Dalit discourse its focus is on the caste of Language/ language of caste and enables us to see, in the words of Derrida, 'the monolingualism of the 'other' " within the massively multilingual India

The historiography of the Subaltern has no record in Literature. The voice of the Subaltern was denied; the expression of the Subaltern Culture and life was ignored and suffocated from

expression through literature and art. This localized approach of the subaltern writing restricts its limit within a particular group and constrain the universal appeal but the awakened voice of the subaltern vibrates in the changing literary scenario, demanding recognition by redefining literature with the subaltern perspective.

A subaltern social group is by definition disorganized, lacking in class consciousness, and entirely excluded from the fumitories of dominant and hegemonic classes of civil society. And they attempt on their part to become heard, to bring them into the domain of political and textual representation. Bama represented herself, the community and the 'other' that demands social reorganization. Writers like Bama could deliberately give a positive answer to Gayatri Spivak's's question Can a Subaltern speak? Yes they can and they do.

Literature, the mirror of life so far reflected the one-sided conventional image received as literary aesthetics in an accepted variety. Bama's work throws light on the other side of the reality reflecting the Dalit's perspective, breaking stereotypes, appreciating beauty and setting a new trend in Dalit aesthetics.

Dalit Literature is considered to be human Literature. The hegemonial conception is synthesized with the received knowledge given by the dominant source, Bama writes:

..... there were the streets of the Thevar, Chettiyaar, Aasaari, and Nadar. Beyond that there were Naicker streets. The Udaiyaar, too, had a small settlement there for themselves. I don't know how it came about that the upper-caste communities and the lower caste communities were separated like this into different part of the village ....(*Karukku*, 7).

She continues with her frustrated doubts and questions to investigate the wretched roots of the caste system that favoured one section of the society and ruined the others. She explains how the manipulative caste system has poisoned and slowly induced the idea of discrimination.

Because Dalits have been enslaved generation upon generation, and been told again and again of their degradation, they have come to believe that they are degraded, lacking honour and self-worth, untouchable, they have reached a stage where they themselves, voluntarily, hold themselves apart. This is the worst injustice. This is what even little babies are told, how they are instructed. The consequence of all this is that there is no way for Dalits to find freedom or redemption (*Karukku* 28).

Bama eventually raises some fundamental questions which essentially challenge the concept of mainstream society and literature, she questions:

Are Dalits not human beings? Do they have not common sense? Do they have not such attributes as a sense of honour and self-respect? Are they without any wisdom, beauty, dignity? What do we lack? They treat us .... As if we are slaves who don't even possess human dignity. (Ibid, 27)

These questions are raised at the basic human tendencies, hence Dalit literature is also known as human literature.

Dangle has defined Dalit Literature, quoting Sharatchandra Muktibodh as "human freedom is the inspiration behind it.... The nature of this Literature consists in a rebellion against the suppression and humiliation suffered by the Dalits ... in the past and even at present ...." (Dangle 270).

It is not an easy task to deconstruct or reconstruct the caste-bound social and cultural order, the process requires a space of time, interventions, interactions, counter reactions, assimilation of thoughts and integration of differences to fight what Gramsci calls the 'war of position'.

The fact that fight against caste-based oppression is a tough one is accounted by Raj Gauthaman from the longevity of the practice of discrimination, he says:

In any social formation – when feudal society evolved from a tribal society – differences among individuals did exist and contradictions arose to a large extent, especially based on sex, landownership, caste, age and profession. These did not remain merely as differences. With the approval of differences that man verses woman, have's verses have-nots, higher verses lower castes, respectable jobs verses menial jobs high birth verses low birth, touchable verses untouchables – a political game of hierarchy was implemented. In some way or other these hierarchical structures are reinforced within political relations and remain an obstacle for establishing equalitarian society (Creative Forum 117)

He further believes that a transformation is possible only when the oppressed get organised and start tracing down the history of their subordination along the lines of history and hence it is inevitable for the subaltern to dig out for history, the subaltern's history:

...we can achieve social transformation from the perspective of the ostracized group of people, who may be called, the "subaltern". One would have now understood who the "subaltern" really are and how their history is different from the history of the dominant and how would it help the social transformation" (Creative Forum, 123).

Such an understanding is predominant in Bama's works, she proclaims her Dalit consciousness in her self-declarative statement: I often get angry enough to shout it out aloud: I am a paraichi; Yes I am a paraichi. And I don't like to hide my identity and pretend I belong to a different caste. (*Sangati* 121)

Bama calls herself 'a part of collective awareness', the unpleasant and humiliating experience and the unjust situation she faced in life, made her seek her identity, but she found within herself 'her-identiy, transcoding the denial to demand, weakness to strength,

discrimination to declaration, to call herself a ‘Paraya woman’ as an acknowledgment to protest, breaking the silence, Telling herself by Translating herself.

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