STRUGGLE FOR EMPOWERMENT: A STUDY OF BAMA'S KARUKKU, SANGATI AND VANMAM

Dr . B. RAJAN
Assistant Professor of English,
The New College, (Autonomous), Chennai, India

&

G. SYED SHAMSUDEEN
Assistant Professor of English,
The New College, (Autonomous), Chennai, India

Abstract

It is Remarkable to note that Untouchability is one of the greatest evils our country has been facing from the time Immemorial. The Pathetic picture of the Untouchables who are deprived of gaining Knowledge, has no right to go to the temple, no liberty to listen to the Incantations of the Vedas or great Scriptures, deprived of the right of reading and studying the language Sanskrit, which is supposed to be the richest language of the world. So one of the causes of the degeneration of Sanskrit language is Untouchability and perhaps this is why many great personalities, have given a scathing attack on the Casteist mentality of India. But in spite of their best efforts and many Constitutional Provisions, Untouchability is still seen somewhere in direct form and elsewhere in a subdued way. Dalit women are one of the most marginalized segments in the society. The condition of dalit women is more vulnerable than non-dalit women. Dalit women are suffering from multi-disadvantages this paper deals with Dalit issues like daily threats of rape, sexual assaults, physical violence at the workplace, in public arena as well as violence at home. In this paper we shall explore Bama’s varied representations of Dalit women in Karukku, Sangati and Vanam with a view to underline the interface between gender and caste significations in Dalit fiction. Bama’s intervention in Dalit literary discourse in the early 1990s made a significant contribution in the arena of gender-caste intersections in the lives of Dalits. Her works foreground the twice cursed lives of Dalit women, oppressed on account of their caste as well as gender, at home and outside, by upper caste men and Dalit men, by the state machinery as well as the family. Bama’s writing celebrates Dalit women’s subversive strategies to overcome their oppression is depicted in this paper.

Introduction

Dalit women have very few possibilities of empowering themselves in a society that keeps them out of power, privilege and dignity of self that are granted, even if, to a limited extent, to women of other castes or class. Dalit women are Saddled writer. Poverty and illiteracy in a society that looks at them with cattiest and gender prejudice. However, Dalit women exhibit enormous skill for survival and combat. They not only circumvent the restrictive code imposed upon them by upper castes or their own menfolk, they even challenge or subvert the same. They excel in music and rhythm is a part of their basic physical movement. Every aspect of their life is rendered into songs by the women. Singing
is a strategy they adopt to break free from the fatigue of hard labour, to celebrate important milestones in a woman’s life, to participate and mark their presence in social/religious functions where, by and large, they are kept away from the limelight. Their oral rendition of their life’s sorrows and joys is a parallel literCilry history, undocumented in hegemonic literary, academic discourse. Their humour, their ability to laugh and tease even while leading a socially repressed’ lifestyle bring out their innate strength, resilience and creativity.

Dalit literature, literature about the Dalits, the oppressed class under Indian caste system forms an important and distinct part of Indian literature. Though Dalit narrations have been a part of the Indian social narratives since 11th century onwards, with works like Cekkilar’s Periyapuranam portraying Dalit women life half naked and sexually exploitable and praising the killing of thousands of Dalit on “Kazhumaram” in the hands of Gnanasambandan. Dalit literature emerged into prominence and as a collective voice after 1960, starting with Marathi and soon appeared in Hindi, Kannada, Telugu and Tamil language through self narratives, like poems, short stories and most importantly autobiographies known for their realism and for its contribution to Dalit politics. It was denounced as petty and false by the then prevailing romanticism with the bourgeois sadashiv pethi literature, they ignored the Dalit issue, and the consequent social reality of appalling poverty and oppression of caste Hindus which was the result of the bourgeois character of this culture.

It is a literature produced by the Dalit consciousness. The nature of this literature consists in a rebellion against the suppression and humiliations suffered by the Dalit in the past and are suffering even in the present. An outstanding work of Dalit literature would be born only when Dalit life would present itself from the Dalit point of view.

The primary motive of Dalit literature is the liberation of Dalits. Dalit struggle against castes tradition has a long history. For example, in Kannada, it goes back to the first vachana poet of the 11th century, Chennaiah, the cobbler. The 12th century Dalit saint Kalavve challenged the upper castes in the following words,

“They who eat goats, foul and tiny fish.
Such, they call caste people
Those who eat the sacred cow
That showers frothing milk for Shiva
Such, they call out-castes”

In modern times, because of the legacy of Mahatma Phule and Babarao Ambedkar Dalit literature got impetus in Maharasstra. But before the name came into being in the 1960s, such people as Baburao Bagul, Bandhu Madhavi, Shanbarao Kharat were already creating Dalit literature. In its normal form it sprouted out of a progressive movement called little magazine which was a kind of rebellious manifestation of the educated youth of those days against the establishment.

While dealing with the trends of Dalit literature, the writer will make on humble attempt to point out the core issues of its ideology. In this context it can be said that Dalit literature questioned the mainstream literacy theory and upper caste ideologies and explored the neglected aspects of life. Dalit literature is experience based. This ‘anubhava’(experience) takes precedence over ‘anumana’(speculations). Thus to Dalit writers, history is not illusionary or unreal as Hindu metaphysical theory may make one to believe. That is why authentic and liveliness has become hallmarks of Dalit literature. Those writers make use of the language of the out-castes and upper-privileged in Indian society. Shame, anger, sorrow, and indomitable hope are the stuff of Dalit literature. Because of the anger against the old oppression, the expression of the Dalit writers has become sharp.
Faustina Mary alias Bama was born into a converted Christian family in 1956 at Puthupetty near Madurai. She was a constant witness to the hardships the Dalits especially the Paraiyas had to face. Through her literary works she reveals how caste informs and runs through all aspects of life. Bama is one of the first Dalit women writers widely recognised and translated. She is also regarded as the first black literary writer in Tamil literature.

Bama’s *Sangati* was published in 1994 and was originally written in Tamil and it also translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom. Sangati voices the community identity. The word ‘Sangati’ means events, and thus the novel through individual stories, anecdotes, and memories portray the event take place in the life of the women in Paraiya community. The novel also reveals how the paraiya women are presented as daily labour and it is up on them that the burden of running the family falls. The men on the other hand spend the money they earn as they please. In addition the women are vulnerable to sexual exploitation and harassment.

‘Sangati’ is a Dalit women history. It tells the experiences of Bama’s maternal grandmother even as it incorporates Bama’s and her contemporary’s experiences. It thus drawn as an autobiography as well as a community’s history. It stands for every Dalit woman’s history. The economic precariousness of Dalit women leads to a culture of violence, and this is a theme that runs through the book; the terrible violence and abuse of women by their fathers and husbands, and sometimes even brother’s wife fight back.

A positive image is created as well, of certain freedoms enjoyed by Dalit women; no dowry is required of them, for example widows remarry as a matter of course. There is also very strong sense of a Dalit women’s relationship to her body in term of diet, health and safety. There is one set of stories women who have worked hard all their lives, from the moment they are able to help with the care of younger siblings or with chores about the house or outside. There are other stories as well; telling of rotes of passage, coming of puberty ceremony, a betrothal, a group of wedding, and of possession and exorcism.

Bama speaks about the sufferings of women who live in Bama’s own community. This toil the fields as well as at their ‘Chalas’ (huts) is picturised here in this critical perspectives. Bama’s ‘Sangati’ drastically gives an account of Dalit women’s dual oppression on account of gender and caste as well as other discriminated situations of womanhood in Tamil literature. The book ‘Sangati’ encapsulates the author’s experience of working within a heterogeneous and oppressed society.

In the deep level of their mind she has kept black female marginalization and oppressed condition of the Dalit women in the converted Dalit Christian society. Bama clarifies her acknowledgement of the work.

“My mind is crowded with many anecdotes; stories not only about the sorrows and tears of Dalit women, but also about lively, rebellious culture their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter them, but rather to swim vigorously against the tide...about their hard labour. I wanted to shout out these stories.”(Bama p.xvi)

The economic inequality plays a major role in the life sphere of Dalit womanhood. The character presented in ‘Sangati’ is a wage earner as much as men are, working as agricultural and construction labourers, but earning less than men does. They do not even care for the family, where as women bear the financial burden of running the family, often singly. Those female are also constantly vulnerable to sexual harassment and abuse in the world of work. The power structures their society mainly concerned with men or patriarchal. The caste courts and churches are male dominated and rules for sexual behaviour are very different for men and women. She writes about the violence treatment of women by father, husbands, brothers and other higher caste patriarchal. Above all she describes violent domestic quarrels which are based on publicly.
In Karukku and Sangati, Bama foregrounds multi-layered oppression against Dalit women. She focuses on the ‘work’ that is routinely done by Dalit women both at home and outside. She explores how violence against Dalit women is legitimised and institutionalised by state, family, church and upper caste communities. Her fiction documents how Dalit women toil and get exploited at home and outside, are subjected to violent treatment by upper caste landlords, the panchayat, the police as well as by Dalit men within their homes. In her representation of Dalit women, Bama presents Dalit women primarily as workers who join the work force right from girlhood and toil through adolescence, womanhood, middle age and old age almost until their last breath. Their work goes unrecognised by their community as well as by the society at large and they are exploited at every conceivable turn. Bama’s representation of Dalit women’s life span mirrors the Dalit community’s struggle for empowerment and realisation of a dignified existence. Her fiction, through a detailed account of Dalit women’s trials and tribulations, triumphs and aspirations, thus, documents the Dalit struggle for social, economic and political empowerment.

A girl child in Dalit community is perceived as a potential source of cheap, unpaid labour. She is a surrogate mother to her siblings, thereby coming to the rescue of her mother who can take up her heavy workload at the farm outside and leave the domestic responsibilities to her daughter. A Dalit girl’s chores largely include fetching firewood, cooking, feeding, washing and taking care of younger siblings or even older brothers, working at the farm in the afternoons in return for a couple of handfuls of gram or peas, running errands, working at factories or at farms during sowing/ harvesting time and handing other wages to a bullying brother or a drunk father. This emerges as a typical profile of a girl child aged between four and fourteen. The girl child, of course, gets discriminated against right from birth. Especially if she is dark complexioned. In Sangati, the narrator observes, "The fact that I was dark skinned unlike my elder siblings was a source of disappointment to everyone at home.” She further recalls that it is a norm in her neighbourhood that a male infant is never allowed to even whimper while the female baby is left unattended for long hours. Even in matters of weaning, the male child enjoys breast feeding for a longer period compared to his female counterpart. While a girl child stays at home and takes over a horde of hard tasks: "Fetching water, firewood, mopping and washing, doing the dishes and numerous never ending tasks,” boys are allowed to eat their fill and play outside. A girl child can step out of the home only when she picks up her younger sibling and takes him out for play. Thus her stepping out too is work-related. It is a task that is ordained upon her on account of her gender. Similarly, the games that children play are codified on gender lines. As the narrator recalls in Sangati, "Boys do not let girls play their games. Girls could only play at cooking a meal, play at being married off” or even play at getting beaten up by husbands!

In Karukku, the narrator gives an elaborate sketch of the games played by children in a Pariyayar village. The boys of the colony play act as Naickers (upper caste landlords) and the girls follow suit as Pannaiyaars (farmhands). Alternately the boys would pretend to keep shop and the girls would ‘buy’ grocery from them; the boys would pose as priests, the girls would submit as sisters; the boys would act a drunken husbands returning home and the girls as wailing wives receiving the blows. Thus, even at play, Dalit girls are located in a subordinate position. In relation to the Dalit boys, the girls are placed as victims, as passive receivers who could be counted upon to legitimise the male authority (as husband, as landlord or as priest) Girls in Dalit homes are left to fend for themselves. Poverty pushes them to unprotected spaces, often in search of food. The narrator in Karukku recalls that children roam around in the streets, in the fields or go fishing in rain filled ponds. They dig up earthworms or net small fishes which they roast over a fire kindled out of trash and rags. While they rejoice over this rare picnic, they are always under constant fear of being caught and roughed up by the upper caste guard lurking around the pond. The guard would not only snatch away their catch but also break their fishing rods. Boys and girls would roam the streets together at a younger age. But boys had greater share of the fun. They are allowed to play in the pond, ride on buffaloes’ backs or hunt water snakes. Schooling for Dalit children is located within the context of their survival tactics. It is a paradox that
poverty deprives them of their right to education in a sustained, continued form. Yet it is also poverty that pushes them towards the school premises. As soon as the clock strikes twelve (the church bell at noon cannot be missed), Dalit children race towards the school to get their share of mid-day meal. The girl child in Dalit homes gets an assured meal once a day only in such a context. A meal that would enable her to struggle, fight and make a great effort to fill a pitcher of water at the village hand pump site in the evenings. Dalit girls who are lucky to attend school regularly - for instance Bama - are subjected to caste discrimination at various points in their school life. Bama recounts vividly in Karukku that she came to "realise, recognize and felt humiliated" about being born in an untouchable caste when she was studying in third standard. The trip back home from school was always an enjoyable one for Bama and her friends. They could saunter through the bazaar, watch various forms of typical rural diversions like monkey dance, snake charmer's skill, smell the aroma emanating from the various eating stalls, interact with gypsies selling beads and strings. They could also witness on occasion, magic shows, Therukoothu, puppet shows or hear party workers holding forth their leader's virtues and glory and so on. Such a fun filled trip littered with innocent joys, probably typical in any rural child's routine, however, is undulated by dominant caste's practice of untouchability that leaves a lasting scar on these Dalit girls.

In Vanmam forging of unity among Dalits is stressed upon most forcefully. Education for Bama is not limited to formal education. She lays equal emphasis on spiritual education but wants this to be free from interference from enthusiasm and officialdom. Dalits have to gain enlightenment with a political sense, rather than merely accumulate university degrees. We can conclude that Bama works within the Ambedkarite vision for Dalit empowerment. If Karukku upholds education, Sangati foregrounds organised agitation, while Vanmam enjoins upon unity among Dalit communities. Bama reiterates and calls upon Dalits to organise and help themselves, "Who would come forward to aid us? We would have to help ourselves" is her repeated reminder. In Karukku she comments,

"Each one of us has to wake up from slumber. Instead of accepting our lot as our fate, we should reject this bondage, this unjust system. We must be brave and stand up for ourselves. Break up caste barriers and biases and prove to the world that no man is inferior to another. Those who have prospered by suppressing us would not give up their hold so easily. But we need to show them their place, show them all are equal and change this society." (Karukku pg.23)

Karukku is a clarion call to Dalits to liberate themselves from bondage based on caste, religion and Bama deposits great faith in education as a possibility for deliverance from exploitative social structures.

**Conclusion**

We have come across the Dalit characters, and their struggle for survival in this paper. The solution for this social problem is in the hands of the superior class. They should not differentiate themselves with the lower class, people they should treat them as a fellow human beings, as they treat other caste people. They should unite with them, in all walks of life, and should give opportunities to them in each and every departments, so that they will get their chance, to reveal their talents, and by doing so, they can also come up in life like others, and can lead a respectable life in the society. If Untouchability is totally eradicated, the distinction will vanish and no one will consider himself superior to another. Naturally exploitation too will cease and co-operation will blossom among the peoples.

The untouchable, in spite of his being treated cruelly by the caste Hindus, yet continues to professes the Hindu religion. He worships the same God and Goddesses, but he is denied entry into the temple. This pernicious system is supposed to be sanctified by Hindu religion. Once the untouchable is allowed to enter the temple, the disgrace attached to his community will no more be there. Some historical legends like Gandhiji and
Ambedkar, have fought against untouchability in different ways. Gandhiji represents the masses of India, whereas Ambedkar represents the depressed classes of India. Gandhiji was a Vaishya and still insisted on the eradication of untouchability. Ambedkar was a Mahar and indignantly insisted on the abolition of Varna (Religion of caste) structure, thereby leveling up all castes into one unity. Gandhiji and Ambedkar were historic necessities. Gandhiji was for the independence and Ambedkar for social liberation of the depressed classes.

It was injustice, practiced by the Hindu society for long. The touchable since past to the present time have not accepted untouchables as fellow human beings. The hatred towards them cannot be removed until the society accepts them as the fellow human beings. On one hand the human rights and values are globally, seriously considered, one the other hand, in rural life this sort of atrocity against the Dalit and the deserted are going on. The Government has taken several steps to eradicate their fate, through proper legal protections. But the sad thing is that they only exist in papers, and not in actions. If the society could accept them, they won’t remain as untouchables, and no more Velutha and Bakha would suffer. In the words of M.K.Gandhi: “The Hindus are not sinful by nature, they are sunk in ignorance. Untouchability must be extinct from this world. Two of the strongest desires that keep me in flesh and bone are the emancipation of the untouchables and the protection of the cow. When these two desires are fulfilled, there is Swaraj (Independence) and therein lies my own Moksha (Salvation). “May God give you strength to work out your salvation” (167).

Reference


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