



A study of Dalit feminism in the select work of Bama

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Abstract

Patriarchy is considered to be the big rival of women literature. In association with this, exploitation or oppression of weaker by stronger is nothing new. The Indian history has been a vivacious record of conflict and dialectic between exploiters and exploited, colonizer and colonized, powerful and powerless. Dalit literature is known for its revolt and struggle of lower caste against the high class people. Dalit women are especially doubly exploited. Feminism or feminist aspect deals with society in general and woman in particular. 'The Woman', and 'The Dalit' are marginalized, hegemonized, downgraded and have been put in dictionaries as periphery. The movement dominated mostly by Dalit men had a predisposition to give secondary position to the issues concerning Dalit women. The Dalit women were bound to voice their miseries which were intensified due to caste and gender discrimination. This gave rise of Dalit feminism. Like any other great feminists like Simone de Beauvoir, Bama wants Dalit women to awake and rise for their rights. They must speak up against the discrimination. In *Karukku* and *Sangati*, she not only talks about the welfare of Dalit women but the women in general. She herself belongs to Dalit community and finds faults in caste system and held responsible upper caste for the inhumane behavior. She, sometimes, goes bitter for the upper caste women too and censures them. The present paper is a study or the analysis of Bama as a great Dalit feminist who talks about the rights and privileges of women in general and Dalit women in particular.

Keywords: Dalit, feminism, culture, community, gender, Dalit feminism patriarchy, hegemony, marginalization, Dalit hood, feminism

Introduction

The feminism of Sangati

Bama's sangati deals with the Dalits community's collective identity and not about a single self. It show how Dalit women are always the most vulnerable and Bama's attempt, as feminist do, to raise their consciousness so that they would be strong enough to believe in their own ability to lead their lives all by themselves and be independent of the irresponsible Dalit male species. Bama wants her community people not to be terrified by the upper caste oppressive tactics, and boldly face the injustice wherever they encounter. By bringing in an analogy, she says, if a man sees a terrified dog, he will naturally be tempted to chase it with a stick or a stone. But if the dog stares back, those who chase him creep away with their tails between their legs. In the same way, Bama says, "If we continue to be frightened, everyone will take advantages of us". (S 66) Dalit feminism helps Dalit women wriggle out from their men folk who try to rule over them and their pleasure. Once a Dalit girl attain puberty. She has no more freedom. The Dalit men, (mostly the father before, the girl's marriage), husband (after her marriage) and sometimes even the brother take away her freedom, and control her movements'. Dalit feminism will remind the patriarchy how sad it is to treat one's wife as his own possession with bloated egoistic notion; "she's my wife, I can beat her or kill her if I wish". (S 43)

Dalit feminism sees that even the Dalit men are not sympathetic to the Dalit women. Another issue that Dalit

feminism deals with is to empower women and thereby to enable them to give tit for tat to their male partners if the latter treat the former with disrespect. The Dalit males who do not take their women out are "stubborn donkeys". Dalit feminism recognizes and praises those women who carry out their societal responsibilities without expecting any reward. Even the childbirth was attended by the village elder woman without any assistant from any outside agency like the Gynecologists or trained nurse. In Bama's village, it is invariably Bama's Patti (grandmother) Vellaiyammal Kizhavi, who attended every childbirth. However, the upper caste people would never send for her, "because she was "parachi" (Dalit Woman). She had an uncanny knack of bringing out the children from the mother's womb. She was ready for this job time in and time out. As Bama says, "she went without complaining and she never took any money for being there"^[4]. Even for ailments the first thing the sick do is to take country medicines before going to the free government hospitals. Dalit feminism seems to encourage Dalit women using a sharp tongue and obscene words as their effective protectional cover from the patriarchy; it includes the Dalit male. Such a language is, "a woman's only way of shaming men and escaping extreme physical violence" (introduction to sangati). It may be true with regard to Dalit poetry that it is sanctified; however, the same cannot be said about Bama's Dalit oeuvre. She has evolved an idiom of her own, which is the Dalit spoken idiom as well. Bama has not made any attempt to shift to the respectable. Tamil of her native district,

which very often boasts as pure Tamil. She hasn't made any attempt to polish her language. From this incident Thayyi was an unfortunate woman whose husband was a brute and a drunkard; he used to beat his wife every day. He looked at his wife Thayyi and shouted, "you common whore, you, any passing loafer will come in support of you, your mother fucker's daughter. You'll go with ten men!" (Sangati) Dalit feminism wants the women to see for themselves where they have gone wrong with regard their treatment of both boys and girls. Points out and protests against the gender biases that her community shows right from the childhood. Bama talks about the plight of the young girls who have to take care of all the works at home" cleaning vessels, drawing water, sweeping the house, gathering firewood, washing clothes and so on" and at the same time nurture the small babies, being not in position to even attend school unlike the boys of her community. Gender roles are inscribed in the children right from their childhood. Boys are always preferred to girls even in Dalit homes; if a boy baby cries, as Bama says.

...he is instantly pricked up and given milk. It is not so with the girls. Even with breast-fed longer with girls, they wear them quickly making them forget the breast. If the boys catch an illness or a fever they will run around and nurse them with the greatest care. If it's a girl, they'll do it half-heartedly.....(S 7)

Bama probes the very position of Dalit woman who is forced to live life according to the terms and conditions laid down by the domineering patriarchy even the wages of men and women differ and men are paid more. She challenges this tendency of the patriarchal set up to dominate women in all phases of their lives. She says, "Whatever happens must be according to their pleasure and their convenience. If anything is ever arranged for a woman's convenience, they will never stand for it. They will leap between heaven and earth to prevent it. They will insist you must not cross the line they have drawn. And what have we ever gained by never crossing that line all this time". Here by articulating these issues Bama literally crosses the borders and makes her voice heard. She subverts the notion of 'silence' attributed to the Dalit women who are posited at the outer limits of the margins. Bama narrates the story of one Rakkamma who is habitually beaten up by her husband's abuses, raises her sari and exposes herself in public. She is actually defending her' self, her womanhood from the impending torture and subverting the notion of an all enduring Dalit woman. It is nothing but purely a self-defense but with that act her husband walks out leaving her alone. Bama portrays a new Dalit woman ready to react to an injustice and shows Rakkamma an example of one who has learned to cope up.

The story of Maikkanni is a revelation of the hidden strength and resilience of a Dalit girl who has to face the most awful circumstances in life right from the childhood. Bama portrays Maikkanni as possessing a sense of maturity and poise far above her tender age. With a deviant father and a mother who put the burden of a new baby each year on her tender shoulders, she is robbed of her childhood. She takes care of all affairs at home and works in a match factory. Even though her poverty demands her lead an adult life, her innocence exudes

in her description of the "super" bus journey to the town and the "cone ice-cream" and the special "shit-room". She is also a victim to the bullying and exploitation by the men from within and outside her community, at home and in the work place. Yet the streaks of rebellion and protest t the factory when one of them is called a "paraiya" and abused, Maikkanni says, "... we all stood up and started shouting the rudest words we knew. We were prepared to fight each of them to death, and we told them that." Bama feels that "Their sparkling words, their firm tread and their bubbling laughter" (74) definitely are the survival strategies adopted by the subalterns to keep them going in the turmoil of life. Bama and the girls of her community are fed on the stories of possessed women. The women are prey to the 'peys' since they went out to work in fields. The belief was that men escaped all this for they were brave at heart. Bama questions the very existence of these 'peys' and regards them as strategies by the community to wield power over women, to scare them and manipulated their movements. Bama calls for the inner strength in a woman's heart to overcome all the hurdles. In this novel a woman negotiating her marginalized status by looking up to the inner vigor and vitality within a woman, thereby drawing sustenance from it.

Even though life was hard for a Dalit woman, yes, they kept up the good spirit and filled their lives with humor and laughter. Bama marvels at the strength of a Dalit woman is able to juggle so many jobs both at home and work place unlike the men come back from work only to go away to meeting places to away their time. She exclaims, "Even machines can't do so much" (S 78). Songs were an integral part of a Dalit woman's life. Through innovative songs for every occasion, the Dalit woman adopt strategies to ward off the tensions of life, by mocking at it, meeting it face to face in a lighter vein. These women attempt articulation, their primary attempt is to protest at life's hardship by ridiculing at it on the face and this is what the women attempt by their songs. Again the incident of Sammuga Kizhavi who insist that she be taken back home in the same cart as she is brought for voting, by the party. Men themselves throw light at the changing attitude of the Dalit community towards politics and politicians. However it is also an indication of the changing attitudes of a community so long taken for granted to be naïve and an incapable of reacting and earlier deemed 'a political'. Bama also lauds the ability of Vellaiamma Kizhavi to ridicule the upper caste landlord. Here she admires the ability of her to undermine the authority of the lord by playing tricks on him.

Bama questions the male supremacy and violence by the men against the women of her community. She wonders if it is a strategy of self-gratification that the men achieve by way of wielding power and authority over their women because it was absent otherwise in their lives at the fields they have to be the slaves of their masters and once at home they let lose their frustration by abusing their wives once at home after work, he uses the opportunity to give a free rein to his fastened masculinity by way of beating and torturing his wife and imposing strict rules on his girls. Again Bama wonders why the community makes leniencies for inter-caste marriage when boys are involved but strictly prohibits girls from entering into it. Even the church and the priests are gender biased it comes to inter-caste marriages; even educated girls raise their voice

in public places are often snubbed. Bama questions these tendencies within her community. The text traces an account of the oppression unleashed by the upper castes towards the Dalit women in terms of labour, exploitation and threat of rape. Being a Dalit Woman is to constantly be on a bed of thorns. A Dalit woman has to safe guard her honor which is always insecure due to the sexual abuse fears from the upper caste men. The story of Mariamma, Bama's cousin, speaks volumes of the helplessness to assert. Mariamma becomes a victim of sexual advances by an upper caste landlord, Kumarasami. But she dares not raise her voice against the injustice for fear of social ostracizing. At the same time, Kumarasamy inverts the whole incident for fear of defiling his image by making up different story. He makes Mariamma a victim of lust, indulging in advances towards her machaan Manikkam. The panchayat singles her out, rarely giving a chance to talk her version, disgraces her imprint of all and also forces her to pay more than the boy who is also involved in it. The women are not given an opportunity to talk and are chased away. Kaliaamma's attempt to support Mariamma meets aggressive vehemence from the men folk who silence her, throughout the proceedings it is the community women who support by word and action to the landlord whom they did not have the courage to defy. Anandamma and Susaamma defend Mariamma and the later says, "...but it is only to us that they will brag. Ask them just to stand up to the mudalaali. Not a bit, they'll cover their mouths and their backsides and scared". It is an indication that the Dalit women are articulating the reality about their men and realizing that their men are imperfect. The Dalit woman questions the norms of inequality when she says, "it's one justice for men and quite another for women". Here for revealing articulating Dalit women, Bama is challenging the marginalizing of the Dalit woman too. She questions the male supremacy when she says, "does that mean that whatever men say is bound to be right? And that whatever women say will always be wrong?" At the same time, Bama also defies the internalization if this male hegemony by the women themselves when she says, "it's you folk who are always putting us down from the time we are babies you treat boys in one way and girls in quite another. It's you folk who put butter in one eye and quicklime in the other" (S 29). Bama dismantles all the notions of equalitarianism among the sexes in the church, when she describes the discriminations within the church proceedings. Women are not allowed into sarcisity, to sing or take part in the festival plays too and are consciously excluded from all the activities of the church. Bama debates the fact that "at church they must lick the priest's shoes and be his slaves while he threatens them with tales of god, heaven and hell." (Sangati 35) Bama here challenges the notions of the Christian belief in the sanctity of Christian marriage when she tells her mother, It's by calling on all this stuff about god, the promises made to him, our sins and our good deeds and heavens and everlasting hell, that the priests and nuns frighten the life out of us. But god created us so that we can be happy and free. (S 95)

Here is a Dalit woman challenging the very dictum of the unquestionable' status of all women. Here the feminism she propounds surpasses all boundaries and takes her to a position universally applicable to the entire race of women. She also

refuses to the inability of as paraiyar woman to walk out of her unhappy marriage. The communities interfere but never summons the girls nor listen to her version. Finally the husband slaps the wife and drags her home without her consent. Here Bama questions they very act of conversion to become a Christian for she says, "...had we stayed as Hindus, our women would have had the chance of divorce at least. But in everything else, we are all in the same position" (S 97). Bama destabilizes the images of an upper caste woman as an epitome of all that's good and wonderful in life. She feels that they are far more deprived that the Dalit woman for an upper caste woman" a stands and site according to his husbands' orders and below their façade of a happy life they are further dependent on their men both physically and economically. Susaamma says, "Those women submit to their men the time and are shut in and controlled, like snakes locked in boxes" (S 111). Here, Bama deconstructs the idea of an upper caste woman is unable to empathize with her less fortunate counterpart and tries in her own ways to torment her, in Susaamma's saying that, "one way or the other, it's all the same. We suffer in one way, they suffer in another" (S 111). There is a call for a sisterhood and space for bonding and concern and an attempt at erasing the internal categories of power structures. Even after giving a handsome dowry, the upper caste girls are often unhappy with their husbands. Among the Dalit it is the groom who pays a bride price to the bride. After the death of the husband, an intolerable life awaits a girl who is branded as a 'widow' and is not even allowed to take part in the activities of the society. Even widow remarriage is unimaginable amongst the upper community. The 'Thali' is not an important signifier of the marital status in Dalit woman's life. Bama says, "Thalis are not the important among us. While this indicates the triteness of this very significant strand called a 'thali' in the life of the laboring poor, it also points in one way at the liberation of the sacred thread.

Sangati strives to stir a positive image of a Dalit woman and heralds a positive identity to her who has so long been negated and discarded on the fringes of the society. The events described in Sangati go to rebuild the tarnished self-image of a Dalit. It is elevating, motivating, and inspiring for themselves. It's journey for a Dalit towards rebuilding their self-esteem. From feeling a sense of shame at being born a Dalit to sense of pride and confidence in their breed. It has succeeded in expressing a conscious so long suppressed. Every imaginable burden overweighs the shoulder of a Dalit woman. But Bama through her native express her surprise at the survival capability of the Dalit woman to live through there horrid experience. Bama's writings though their dialogic interaction with their readers have offered a wholly new cognitive argument and methodology for the betterment of Dalit population, especially the Dalit women. The oeuvre of Bama draws in historical, political and cultural dimensions also into focus and discussion. The three treats of Bama many not mesmerize readers with aesthetic imagination. But they certainly interact with the readers vibrantly. The seminal purpose of Sangati is to demolish a rather stale assumption that the Dalit should always be in them lowest rugs of society. Though the Dalits leads a self-reliant and simple life with enormous contentment with absolutely no tendency to show

off in any manner Bama is sad to note “because of our caste and because of our poverty, every fellow treats us with contempt” the Dalit woman for the matter the Dalit men do not expect a cosy and comfortable bourgeois existence, all they want is freedom, dignity and respect. Ironically, Dalit feminists are excluded from the other feminist groups, as the Dalit feminists are from the bottom most rungs of society. Bama is of the opinion that whenever there is a problem in the predominantly Dalit living villages, the police or the government will not come to the rescue of the Dalit people. She thinks, perhaps with an element of truth, that the police and the government will support only the high caste people. And so her advice to the Dalit women is, “so we must take up the challenge ourselves” (S 66). With a positive note, Bama wants her people to look ahead and work hard as usual. They have the skill and the capability. In this respect they are diametrically opposite to the high caste women; as Bama says; if they dare let them try to work like the Dalit women for a day; in her words, “they’ll collapse after a single day of it, and that will be the end of their big talk and their fat arses” (S 66). In short, Bama’s oeuvre is a courageous exercise of exorcism of oppression. The silver line that runs through her texts is that through she has had her fair share of pain, exploitation, humiliation, anguish, and restlessness, she is never better and is able to see the positive side of life; it is akin to the biblical belief that, in the borrowed expression from Maya Angelou. “There is a promised land beyond this life of bondage and oppression [...]” (S 66). Bama’s texts are powerful and convincing and life-affirming testimonies of human endurance.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper study is to highlight the harsh reality of the suppression, struggle and torture faced by Dalit women face every day of their miserable lives. The hardships of Dalit women are not simply due to their poverty, economical, status or lack of education. It is the result of the severe exploitation and oppression by the upper classes. There are many examples of brave Dalit women like Gowri and Selvarani who being quite aware of the horrifying truth and despite the heavy odds still strive to put an end to their sufferings. They ensure a bright future for the generations to come. Ruth Manorama, an active member of the National campaign on Dalit Human Rights and National Alliance of women, once stated that in a male dominated society. “Dalit women face a triple burden of caste, class and genders in which she sums up the plight of Dalit women, highlight the fact that Dalit women are a distinct social group and cannot be marked under the general categories of ‘women’ or ‘Dalits’ (News Archives). From an inter contextual critical reading, the lives of Dalit woman in India are featured by official degradation, fixed low status, permanent social stigma, inferiority, physical repression, a sense of shame, and legitimate untouchability. In interpreting the co text, Dalit feminist hermeneutics asserts the importance of Dalit women’s experience as crucial. Dalit Feminism argues for crossing the boundaries to acquire self-transformation. Women have a long way from their subjugated and oppressive condition lately and women writers reveal that the literary tradition involves the relationship between them and the society in which they live. Women’s

literary world includes and reflects their life and experience from their perspective which is totally different from that of the male. A central tenet of modern feminist thought has been the assertion that all women share a common lot. The factors like class race, caste, religion and even sexual preferences do not create a diversity of experience that determine the extent to which sexism will be an oppressive force in the lives of individual women. Other than this important aspect of gender issues, each woman is different with diverse experiences which create a unique space for each one of them.

The minority discourses of women are surfacing with unprecedented urgency in the post-colonial and post-modern context. Writers from the marginalized section of society like Sivakami and Bama have put forward a subversive ethnic, which knocks the consciousness of the hegemonic cultures concomitantly, thereby generating confidence and pride in them. This enables them to deconstruct a traditional mindset which made them oppressed and view them as equals rather those pitiful victims. The universal aspect to gender oppression is not only the historical but also global structures and process that affect the societies which in turn affect the life of women. This forms the basis for a global sisterhood. This sharing and bonding among the marginalized and subaltern groups strike solidarity and their writing become an aggressive force that contain not humiliation but celebrations. Bama focused on the identity of the Dalit women owing this evaluation as novelist. Sufferings and pain of the Dalit women in various aspects having traced. A Dalit women’s experience in the contemporary society form various prospects is evaluated in the novels which portrays the special pond that exists between the women characters. Sangati drastically give accounts of Dalit women’s oppressions based on gender and caste as well as other discriminated situations of womanhood in Tamil Dalit culture. These novels portrayed the female subjugation and subordination in great way. These novels become more feminist and have emphasized the importance of Dalit feminist stand point. Through Dalit literature, Bama tried to chronicle offensiveness of women of rape, sexual assaults, physical violence at work place, in public arena as well as violence at home. Educational disabilities of Dalit women cause another suffering. The educationally disabled because they are economically backward and disabled. Despite showing keen academic aptitude, reasons for this early drop out from the education system is poverty or to escape humiliation, bullying and isolation by classmates, society, and even their teachers. Dalit feminism speaks on the issues of exploitation, social disabilities, cultural disabilities, educational disabilities, economic disabilities and religious disabilities. This dissertation suggests that the government should take necessary action to make aware ignorance of Dalits by providing education. It is responsibility of everyone to uplift the life of Dalits men and women as a whole.

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