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Matrix of Dalit Feminism in Bama Faustina's *Karukku* and *Sangati: Events*

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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: Patriarchy, Hegemony, Marginalization, Dalithood, Feminism.

Introduction

Patricia Waugh says

Women writers are beginning to construct an identity out of the recognition that women need to discover, and must fight for, a sense of unified self-hood, a rational, coherent, effective identity. As male writers lament its demise, women have not yet experienced that subjectivity which will give them a sense of personal autonomy, continuous identity, a history, and agency in the world. (6)

Bama Faustina is considered as one of the most distinguished Dalit fiction writers in Tamil. The theme of Dalit consciousness is carried out immensely in all her works. Bama's texts have seemed to be worked on the victimhood of Dalits. She heatedly criticizes the practice of untouchability in the caste ridden Indian society. The agency of Dalits has been powerfully presented in all her writings. As an activist writer, she forges close ideological affinity with feminist thought. Women and Dalits are both oppressed groups, oppressed on account of their birth. Bama foregrounds the affinity between the two groups and uses feminist strategies of representation, rereading and historicizing the oppression of Dalits in her narrativization of Dalit experience. She repeatedly points out in her writing that Dalits would have to support themselves and affirm their difference from the dominant castes as an approach of self-affirmation. She seeks to represent women by tracing gaps in literary history, underlining difference as a principle of assertion even if it is located as a social disadvantage to the group. Bama aggressively affirms her Dalit identity and refuses to be accommodated into mainstream literary circles. Dalit writings in Tamil and Bama's in particular employ feminist thought and modes of resistance. Her works embrace a more confrontational framework as they break the shackles of upper middle class matrix that often

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attack literary discourse. Feminism or feminist aspect deals with society in general and woman in particular. 'The Woman', 'The Dalit' and many other groups are marginalized, hegemonized, downgraded and have been put sidelined in dictionaries. This type of literature fights against the division of labor. Feminism comes under the category of postcolonial studies which focuses on marginal. Patriarchy is considered to be the big rival of women literature. Male dominance in society always means that out of public sight, in the private, a historical world of men with women, men are sexually dominating women. So division of labor resulted in the relegation of women and domination of the other sex. This is the crucial fact of history in *The Golden Notebook* by Doris Lessing. She says: "Russian revolution, Chinese revolution, they are nothing; the real revolution is the revolution of women against men" (qtd. in Ridout 73).

As an exponent of Dalit Feminism, Bama has found in *Karukku* the right space to articulate the travails and sufferings of Dalit women. *Karukku* thus enjoys the unique recognition of being one of the first radical feminist discourses by a Tamil Dalit woman. The English translation has enabled *Karukku* and *Sangati* to cross linguistic and regional boundaries, and reach the global readers. *Karukku* is a reflection of different themes like religion, recreation, and education, etc. Through these perspectives, Bama presents before us a clear picture of the caste oppression meted out to the Dalit Christians not only by the upper caste society but more so within the catholic church itself. As a feminist writer Bama protests against all forms of oppression and relying on the strength and resilience of Dalit women, makes an appeal for change and self-empowerment through education and collective action.

Apart from giving a scathing critique of the hegemonic ways of the upper caste communities *Karukku* also reflects the hypocrisy, inadequacy and unacceptability of institutionalized Christianity. A nagging perplexity which pervades the work is the unfathomable divide between truth and fiction within institutionalized religion-the deep rift between belief and practice. Bama shows how the church and the convent are in consensus with the society at large to keep the Dalit at the lowest ebb and that it is not only the Hindu system but the Christian organizations too that are inhuman to the untouchables. Discrimination and exploitation of children on the ground of caste continues at all levels. They are publically humiliated. She narrates episodes after episode to point out how the caste-based stereotypes are created and imposed to insult the untouchable. She seems to be exploding the misconception that sees conversion of the Dalits as a way to form an alternate identity. They have made use of Dalits who are immersed in ignorance as their capital, set up a big business and only profited their own castes (Bama *Karukku* 69). While the adolescent Bama is able to resist in the public she loses her voice in the convent school. Bama while acknowledging the governmental affirmative programmes, points out the isolationist tendencies among the school administration to humble the studious Dalits, "All the same, every now and then our class teacher would ask all the Harizans to stand up either at the assembly, or during the lessons . . . we felt really bad then . . . hanging our heads in shame, as if we had done something wrong. Yes, it was humiliating" (18). At last Bama in rage said she did not want special classes but realized she could "not get rid of the caste business easily wherever she went" (19). She lost her temper

and challenging them "head on stood her ground. I managed to get my way at last. . ." (ibid). The retrospective narrator sums up the whole situation: ". . . because I had the education, because I had the ability, I dared to speak up for myself. . ." (ibid). Soon she started taking pride in resisting. At her first place of work she enjoyed standing up to the authorities and teaching them with some skill and success. And it was in such a mood that she decided to become a nun to help those who got humiliation at the hands of nuns. But the oppressive atmosphere of the convent robbed her of her spirits and guts. She realized how the hegemonies of caste difference and discrimination silenced her. Her inarticulation and the canker of untruth troubled her, "I was filled with anger towards them, yet did not have the courage to retort sharply that I was a low caste woman. I swallowed the very words that came to my mouth, never said anything loud but battled within myself" (22). Significant to note is the fact that even after becoming self-dependent, the question of identity dogs her.

It is under the systematic and overwhelmingly oppressive system that she experienced the brutalities and hypocrisy of the religious order. Even though living like a coward she somehow managed to survive by her capability. But the spiritual impasse was notable that made her think that even after death caste difference did not disappear: "Wherever you look, however much you study, whatever you take up, caste discrimination stalks us in every nook and corner and drives us into frenzy"(Bama *Karukku* 23). Again, "Is there never to be any relief? It does not seem to matter whether people are educated or not" (24). Bama realized that the worst part of this discrimination is that the oppressed have internalized their self-worth: "This is worst injustice. It is we who have to place them where they belong and bring about a changed and just society where all are equal" (ibid). Bama gives numerous examples to show how the upper class builds hegemonies and use both verbal and nonverbal languages to maintain them.

However, Bama is well aware of the other short comings. In chapter three of the book through an account of the bloody conflict between the two low castes and through the projection of the petty jealousies she explores the socio psychological factors and the reasons why the low castes remain low. The hierarchical caste order in the social order is self-maintaining. The lower caste would like to move up but the upper caste would resist this movement and thus the hierarchies remain unchanged. The police instead of maintaining law and order play a partisan role to safeguard, and strengthen the cause of those who can fill their bellies and swell their pockets. Bama takes cognizance of the material conditions in the neocolonial setting is by subversion her plea for the economic betterment of the downtrodden, and education though rendered ineffective at times seems to be one of the most self-actualizing remedies open to them. To continue their empowerment in spite of impediments, the subaltern requires resilience which would come neither from education nor from formal religious order. While the conformist oppressive religious order orphaned her, made her a "mongrel dog" (Bama *Karukku* 67). "I could not act or speak or even eat independently" (96), "nobody was allowed to think differently or speak differently" (98). She learnt identify with the poor and understand the problematic of "Dalit poor", "poverty of Dalits" and "the poorest of the poor Dalits."(68) Her observation of the riches, greed and hypocrisy of the religious order and

experience of the poverty of their mind and heart makes her realize that even God is not with poor people, and that “we should speak up about what we believe. That is being true to oneself” (91). While the stifling system silences them, teaches them to shut their eyes, shackle their arm, “Dalits have come to realize the truth . . . they have become aware that they are too created in the likeness of god . . . urging them to reclaim that likeness” (94).

The ninth chapter is the culmination of Bama’s new vision. Though with wings clipped, she finds her self-resolved to move forward slowly, step by step. “I have courage; I have a certain pride. I do have a belief that I can live; a desire that I should live” (Bama *Karukku* 104) she concludes “it is possible to live a meaningful life, a life that is useful to a few others. I comfort myself with the thought that rather than live with a fraudulent smile, it is better to lead a life weeping real tears” (ibid).

Karukku with the projections of intersections of gender, caste and class and a collectivist discourse is a critique of the hegemonic western feminism while being a critique of the hegemonic caste system as a peculiar Indian situation that crosses the boundaries of religion. This autobiographical piece of writing as a speech act is a bare, bald but bold account of a Dalit woman’s struggle against the hegemonic structures. The work is structured into nine chapters representing gestation, pregnancy and labor, as the narrator forms a new identity by drawing a new vision, and thereby may fit into the gynocentric model. However the issue of sexuality that the mainstream western feminist thought is so obsessively occupied with is markedly missing and there is no undercurrent of suppression or repression even. Though the autobiography has several stories embedded in the narrative as a pointer to the patriarchal oppression of women, Bama’s chief preoccupation is to expose the patriarchal order that works through social institution of family, police, system of education and church. Thus this writing does not deal with the theory of patriarchy which puts the father at the centre of the family and culture but actually writes about the fathers rendered vulnerable by social institutions more powerful than the family. Therefore the gender critique is embedded in the critique of caste which happens to be the critique of the hegemony of class. As such any translated work of a woman writer from the so called third world is an effort to carve out a space at varied levels: at the level of a still colonized sphere within the decolonized world and at the level of post colonization.

Dalit movements dominated mostly by men had a tendency to sideline issues concerning Dalit women. The Dalit women were compelled to voice their misery doubled up due to caste and gender discrimination. This gave the rise of Dalit Feminism. Dalit feminism has been described as a “discourse of discontent,” “a politics of difference” (qtd. in Tomar 4) from mainstream Indian feminism, which has been critiqued for marginalizing Dalit women. Dalit feminist discourse not only questions Indian feminism’s hegemony in claiming to speak for all women, but also the hegemony of Dalit men to speak on behalf of Dalit women. Uma Chakravarti observes:

Dalit feminists have analysed this as the three way oppression of Dalit women. “(i) As subject to caste oppression at the hands of the upper castes; (ii) As labourers subject to the class-based oppression, also mainly at the hands of the upper and the middle castes who form the bulk of landowners; (iii) As women who

experience patriarchal oppression at the hands of all men, including men of their own caste. (qtd. in Sivanag “Dalit Literature”)

In such a scenario, Dalit women like Bama, Baby Kamble, Urmila Pavar and many more Dalit women writers themselves are taking the pen to articulate and record their experiences of hurt and humiliation subverts centuries old historical neglect (by the elitist nationalist discourse) and a stubborn refusal to be considered as a subject. As an exponent of Dalit Feminism, Bama has found in *Karukku* the right space to articulate the travails and sufferings of Dalit women. *Karukku* thus enjoys the unique recognition of being one of the first radical feminist discourses by a Tamil Dalit woman. A Dalit woman is a Dalit amongst the Dalit. She is thus doubly oppressed by her caste and gender. In Bama’s case, her position is further endangered by her existence as a Dalit Christian. Bama has to face degradation because of being a Tamil woman too. The Tamils were considered inferior and a Tamil Parayar was the lowest of the low and held no esteem.

In *Karukku* Bama presents the dual aspects of female characters i.e. their potent portrayal as well as meeker one. She describes how the entire village is saved by women against the infuriated police. All the male characters survive just because of their wives: “the women managed to hide their men and save them” (Bama *Karukku* 33). At the same time, Bama also describes how the low caste women are under double patriarchy and bear the double burden. The narrator’s grandmother works as a laborer to a Naicker family. Bama observes: “She’d rise before cock-crow at two or three in the morning, draw water, see to the household chores walk a long distance to the Naicker’s house, work till sunset and then come home in the dark and cook a little gruel for herself” (42). The low caste women are used as bonded laborers. They do hard labor from dawn to dusk but do not get wages in proportion to their work done: “. . . at the rate they worked, men and women both, every single day, they should really be able to advance themselves. But of course, they never received a payment that was appropriate to their labor” (47). Bama’s *Karukku* thus points out the unequal wages for men and women in the Indian rural economy.

Bama in *Karukku* details that Dalit women are compelled to go for hard labor, suffer discrimination of wages and are sexually abused frequently. At the economic exploitation, Bama pleads: “Even if they did the same work, men received one wage, women another. They always paid men more. I could never understand why” (Bama *Karukku* 47). At one place, Bama also points out the discrimination based on gender. The girls of Dalit community do not get opportunity to get education and as they remain confined to the four walls of house doing household chores: “It was always the girl children who had to look after all the chores at home” (45).

Bama also describes how Dalit women are physically abused in the patriarchal order. She describes one incident in which Udan, blower used to beat his wife like a beast and nobody comes forward to save her: “. . . everyday he’d drag his wife by hair to the community hall and beat up her as if she were an animal, with his belt. Everyone came to watch. But nobody could go near and separate them” (Bama *Karukku* 52). Bama admits the fact that it is very difficult for a lonely woman to survive in the patriarchal society. They are sexually abused in every nook and corner. The women

always remain unprotected in our society:

If a woman so much as stands alone and by her somewhere, all sorts of men gather towards her showing their teeth. However angry you get, however repelled by their expressions and their grimaces, even to the point of retching what can you do on your own...We are compelled to wander about, stricken and unprotected. (102)

Though Bama doesn't include any incident of sexual exploitation of women, she is conscious of the extreme sense of insecurity that women suffer from and this exclusion might be a conscious effort of the writer to be silent on such issues that would divide her community further.

As such Bama's gender consciousness constitutes the peculiar aspect of Indian feminist response. Bama's experience as a woman and her observation of the experiential reality of women that includes the issues of girl's education, wife battering, sexual exploitation and humiliation, women labor and wages, her restricted movements, the burden of motherhood etc.-all construct her feminist vision while at the same time her work seems to be highlighting the resilience, strong motivation and unfaltering spirit of women to overcome all the hurdles and survive through solidarity in the most unpatriarchal condition without male protection and man's earning. Thus Bama's autobiography takes up the problematic of Dalit both as a noun and adjective. Most significantly her feminist vision has the otherness as the primary attribute of self-fulfillment. *Karukku* explores the wounded self and dark territory of Dalit consciousness which accept their subordinate state in society and tries to subvert that subjugated consciousness into a strong, self-sufficient and respected one. It subverts the Dalit consciousness that accepts the lower caste people as untouchables, contemptible, polluted and inferior.

One of her significant Novels *Sangati: Events* an account of Dalit women experiences of the joint oppression of caste and gender faced by them; is in a sense an autobiography of a community. Feminism or feminist aspect deals with society in general and woman in particular. 'The Woman', 'The Dalit' and many other groups are marginalized, hegemonized, downgraded and have been put in dictionaries as periphery. This type of literature fights against the division of labor. Feminism comes under the category of postcolonial studies which focuses on marginals. Patriarchy is considered to be the big rival of women literature. Male dominance in society always means that out of public sight, in the private, a historical world of men with women, men are sexually dominating women. So division of labor resulted in the relegation of women and domination of the other sex. As an exponent of Dalit Feminism, Bama has found in *Sangati* the right space to articulate the travails and sufferings of Dalit women. *Sangati* thus enjoys the unique recognition of being one of the first radical feminist discourses by a Tamil Dalit woman. The English translation has enabled *Sangati* to cross linguistic and regional boundaries, and reach the global readers. It is a reflection of different themes like religion, recreation, and education, etc. Through these perspectives, Bama gives us a clear picture of the caste oppression meted out to the Dalit Christians. As a feminist writer Bama protests against all forms of oppression and relying on the strength and resilience of Dalit women, makes an appeal for change and self-empowerment through

education and collective action.

The novel *Sangati* is a rare, remarkable and native novel reflecting the stories of paraiya Dalit Christian community. *Sangati* connotes events or happenings. The novel has interrelated stories in which we find unforgettable protagonists. Laxmi Holmstorm opines, "Sangati moves from the story of individual struggle to the perception of a community of Paraya women, a neighbourhood, group of friends and relations and their joint struggle" (). Thus the story of the novel is woven in such a manner to describe the autobiography of a community. The novel describes the real life stories of challenge, choice and change. In this autobiographical novel, the stories not only describe sorrows, tears, sexual harassment and restless labor of Dalit women but also their subordinate nature and their eagerness to face problems in life. Their hardships of life are overcome by their self-confidence. Thus, as a whole, this novel portrays the Dalit feminist picture before our eyes. It plays significant role in contributing both to the Dalit movement and to the women's movement in general. *Sangati* echoes the voices of many Dalit women. They share the experiences of their daily lives. In fact, Bama's mother and grandmother used to narrate the stories. *Sangati* is, in fact, the outcome of these narrated stories. Through this novel, she throws light on various aspects such as economic inequality, authority of men, traumatic situation of women, child labors, helplessness, bitter experiences and ceremonial occasions. The observation and experience from the childhood and the questions which provoked in her mind about the problems of Dalit women inspired her to present the novel more meritoriously exposing the Dalit characters and their difficulties. All the twelve chapters in the novel are important in revealing the miserable and the restless conditions of Dalit women from the childhood to the old age. The first chapter begins with a lovely idiom, "*Munavadupponnu Muthamellamponnu*" (Bama *Sangati: Events* 3). It means the joy in the birth of a third female child is equal to the showering of gold. This has become true in the life of Bama. Since she is the third child in family and now she is being considered as precious gold in the field of feminist writing.

The central character in *Sangati* is Velliayamma, the grandmother of Bama. She is introduced in the novel as a social worker especially attending deliveries without expecting any benefits. But ironically the upper caste women did not invite this expertized lady because of caste discrimination. After the disappearance of her husband Goyindan, she lived independently and brought up her two daughters. She worked restlessly till her death. She had close contact with Bama and opened such experiences. She deliberated and described the prevailing customs and rituals of her community. It helps her to acquire more knowledge about the historical situations from her grandmother's time to her age. The old lady has converted into Christianity. As a result of it, Bama's mother Sevathi studied up to the fifth class. The burden of the family is always carried by the helpless woman even if her husband is living or left or dead. It is conveyed through the life of Vellaiamma. The episode of Marriamma in the beginning chapters creates deep feelings for her as she stands as an example in undergoing the hardships of Dalit woman in every stages of life. Her reckless father lives with other woman. He does not take care of his children. His cruelty and sexual harassment causes the death of his wife. He represents the life of a husband and a

father in every Dalit family of that village. Marriamma as a motherless child takes care of her two sisters and earn restlessly in order to feed them. One day, while working she fell in to the well and was hospitalized for months. But poverty compelled her to work; she went into the hill to gather the firewood. She was attacked by an upper caste landlord, Kumara Swami Ayyah. In order to defend himself from this proscribed deed, he himself complaint against Marriamma and Manikkam. This case was brought before the community panchayat. The male dominated panchayat, which could have given justifiable verdict, gives more prominence to that upper caste man. The leaders of this panchayat raised the questions only to Mariamma and reprimanded her more. They were in want of her moral audacity to repel the landlord's nastiness and snobbery. Therefore, they always tried to defend the interest of the landlord, sometimes at the cost of Dalits. This is an example of feudal sham which was worked to ensnare especially the Dalit women. The poor Marriamma was insulted publicly which injured her future and made her to suffer throughout her life. She was compelled to marry a wicked young man, Manikkam. Through this event of Marriamma, Bama shows how Dalit woman miserably suffers, when she has careless father and an irresponsible husband. In another incident, Mudaliyar's educated son misbehaves with Paralogam, who hides the event out of fear. These incidents are quoted to illustrate the cruelty of the upper caste people and show the intersection of caste and gender.

Some of the Dalit women such as Shanmuga Kelavi tried to resist the oppressive nature of the upper caste men. Kelavi revolted for the essential resources, but in her own humorous way. She was caught up while swimming in the well that belongs to Srinivasa. She tried to escape from the supposed punishment humorously responding, "Ayya, the well water is not at all good, and it is all salty" (34). She also exhibited revolt by urinating into Srinivasa Ayya's drinking water pot, when he rebuked a little boy for touching the same pot unintentionally. It appears shabby but it is her way of revolt in order to meet the brutal means of protesting. Likewise during election, claiming the car for her return journey and reluctant to vote anyone are some of the actions of her protest.

This autobiographical novel also brings out the discrimination on the basis of sex and gender. When a girl child is born, there will be curses but when a male child is born there will be applauses. In general, it is perceived in all the communities. But Bama also talks about the nuisances of Dalit women relating to health. Dalit women are not able to get proper to get food and drink. They never go to the hospital even at the time of child birth. Thus, she portrays the vulnerable position of women in *Sangati*. Coming of age ceremony and marriages in paraiya Dalit community are described through several characters from the old age to the modern. The people, who are economically better, celebrate the coming of age ceremony in a grand way. In this novel, a group of wedding of five couples at church is described in detail.

In paraiya community parisam system was existed. It means a monetary gift given by the groom's parents to the bride. But now the dowry system is practiced imitating the upper caste. "Tali" (Bama *Sangati* 5) is not important among the paraiya Dalit women and they have the privilege of widow re-marriage. But it is not conceivable in the case of upper caste women. The predicament of Kuppusami Nayakkar's

daughter, who is made to suffer as a widow, is one of the examples. In Dalit communities re-marriage tried to bring some solution. But Bama does not say the widow re-marriage is the ultimate solution. A girl has no individuality of her own. She is socially imprisoned or she is kept in the web of masculinity from which she cannot come out. Thus Bama brings out the gender issues in a very powerful manner.

Bama discusses the problem of widowhood and socio-economic stability of a woman. If she does not work and she does not earn, she has to depend on others for their livelihood. People believe that the Christianity is a religion of freedom and brotherhood. But in paraiya community, a girl or a woman is not allowed to choose the life companion. Once she is married, she has to live with the husband though he is worthless till her death. Bama portrays some couples in the quarrel scenes. In the sheer liberty, the Dalit women pick the quarrel with their husbands for the wages or for the equal responsibilities. A woman has a longing to have a better domestic life. She does not want any inequality between herself and her husband. The Dalit women have the feeling of insecurity. They are threatened in many ways both inside and outside the world. When a Dalit woman is deprived of some kind of love in a family, then she wants to take it in one way or the other form.

In Bama's opinion, education is the only way to eradicate the casteism and poverty. It is appreciable that now Dalit are awakened and enlightened through education and they are aware of their responsibilities. After completing her education, Bama finds it very difficult to face the life as a Dalit woman. House owners, neighbours and even colleagues disturbed her with several questions. Her courage and confidence prepared her to go against the challenges in life. She includes *Sangati* with a message, "we must bring up our girls to think in new ways from an early age. We should educate boys and girls alike, we should give freedom to girls" (Bama *Sangati* 102).

In short, Bama comes out as a most challenging Dalit feminist raising voice against all kinds of exploitation against Dalit women and vehemently advocates for their rights.

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