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Bama: Through a dalit womanist lens

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Within the class of Dalits, the worst affected are the women, who constitute almost half of India's 160 million Dalits, comprising about 16% of India's total female population, and 8% of the total population. They are weighed down by the triple burden of the oppressive hierarchies of caste, class and gender and therefore, the carving of a certain emancipatory alcove for Dalit women in Indian society is of prime importance.

The 'Otherness' of a Dalit woman is the impact of the centuries-old isolation and seclusion modeled by the patriarchal and Brahmanical values at all levels in society, which in turn causes the high level of structured and domestic violence experienced by every Dalit woman throughout her life. Thus, even among women, she is perceived as the 'Other'. She belongs to the 'lowest' category manifested in her condition of social, physical, economic, and political vulnerability. While these women have to bear the brunt of poverty and the social stigma of caste with the Dalit men, they also have to withstand the patriarchal power which makes them vulnerable not only to domination by the upper castes, but also by the very same Dalit men. Hence, they become the sites also of the sexualized forms of oppression. Dalit women have to face the paradox of being regarded as polluted and untouchable and yet get exploited in the most intimate sphere of social relations.

Raj Kumar, an eminent scholar, in his book, *Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste Nation and Identity* explores the marginalized and exploited conditions of Dalit women through written autobiographies. Dalit women are the worst "victims of various forms of caste, class and gender oppression both at home and outside", states Raj Kumar^[1]. However, there is still very little comprehensibility of the political, ideological, economic and religious seclusion of Dalit women. This is particularly true of their experience in the mainstream feminist movements, wherein most of them feel disenchanting and estranged.

All the more, religion, since time immemorial, has been an exorbitant vehicle in suppressing the lower castes. *Manusmriti*-fuelled Hindu religion has equated the untouchables to animals and refused to lend the menstruating women even an ounce of respect. It is due to these interpretations that the 'outcastes' and especially Dalit women have failed to become an integral part of the society. The norms of pollution and purity have been so firmly ensconced and ingrained in the Indian system that a Dalit body has annexed the meaning and dimension of filth, and these norms of pollution and purity become even more prominent in the case of Dalit women. Moreover, Hindu religious traditions institutionalize the use and exploitation of Dalit women for sexual pleasure or entertainment of men placed at a higher position in the caste hierarchy. And these practices legitimize to an extent the violent forms of oppression like rape and forced prostitution on women belonging to lower castes viz. *devadasis* of South India. The *devadasi* system of South India is one, where, even after the understanding and validation of the criteria for pollution and purity, religion itself has been used to sexually exploit the bodies of the *devadasis*, technically members of untouchable families, that too by the Brahmin priests.

In the case of caste-based conflicts, violence often takes the form of targeting Dalit women. Teaching a lesson to Dalit men involves many times a violation of their apparent 'property' albeit, the bodies of Dalit women. In them is said to reside the honour of their fathers, brothers, husbands, and the larger patrilineal group.

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¹ Raj Kumar. *Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation and Identity*. Orient Blackswan. 2011, pp.224.

Thus the idea of 'showing Dalits their place' by humiliating them often takes the form of sexual violence against Dalit women. A number of instances from different parts of the country show Dalit women becoming the target for upper-caste violence when they dare to protest the violation of their rights. All the more, Dalit women are sexually exploited by the upper caste men because to them they are lacking of morals and therefore, deserving of such treatment.

However, the violence faced by urban educated girls at their workplaces and that faced by Dalit women while working in the fields are both unfairly clubbed together under 'Violence on Women', with more funds being spent on the former. What comes across is a deficient willingness among feminists to acknowledge the wide gaping difference between the violence faced by middle-class women and the structured and more vigorous violence faced by Dalit women. There should be therefore, an honest examination by feminist movements about whether they can give these two groups of women equal partnership or not. There is also a need to groom capable women from underprivileged Dalit sections for leadership. Because the fact remains that Dalit women have been more serious victims of patriarchy than other women and still suffer snags even to a harmonious existence, let alone the fulfilling gratification of their human rights. Under these occurrences, it is not commonplace to see a Dalit woman in a position to lead, be it at domestic or professional level. It is in fact inconceivable to the majority that a Dalit woman should have power or decision-making authority. Hence, even if she manages to reach such a stature, it proves to be very defense-less position; as a danger of physical abuse always looms large.

What is clearly needed is an articulation based on the consciousness of the Dalit women themselves, keeping in view their experiences of mortification, denial, and segregation by virtue of their gender, caste, and class. An effort should be made to deconstruct the rigid polarities between the upper and lower caste; and men and women within the Dalit framework. In the Indian context, caste, class, and patriarchy are undoubtedly the three hierarchal axes of social arrangement which are very crucial for the understanding of Dalit women. Caste subjugation, gender suppression and class exploitation, all are interlinked together. Caste uses gender to construct caste status, power relations and cultural differences and thereby oppresses lower caste women. Thus, three interlocking systems of caste, class, and patriarchy create a multidimensionality, simultaneity, and intensity of oppression, which is destructive to the experiences of Dalit women. Therefore, to develop a Dalit feminist theory and to define this state of being through Dalit female language is of utmost importance; which however, the mainstream feminist movements fail to do. And this is what makes it a fertile field for research.

This exclusion of Dalit women from mainstream feminist movements is in fact a good thing, says the feminist scholar Cynthia Stephen, because "it has caused them to start building their own praxis, identity and agency, and build effective working relationships and their own platforms" [2]. In looking for a substitute, Stephen notes how the 'Black'

women in United States and Africa have had similar degrading experiences.

When we look at the struggles of the Dalit women's movement we find a clear similarity with the movement led by 'Black' American women. Both of them are in a more or less similar situation where either their interests are represented by others or they only have a token appearance in other Rights movements. Like Dalit women, 'Black' women are doubly oppressed, because they are women and because they are 'Black'. Though they had played an equal role in the movement for liberation from slavery they never got a similar status as men even after slavery was abolished. Elements of patriarchy had a strong hold on the minds of 'Black' males and they demanded a secondary and subservient position for women. The movement which started against racial discrimination gradually started serving only the interests of 'Black' men. It is generally assumed that since white women initiated every movement against male domination, 'Black' women had no interest in liberation. But this is not the complete truth as it is quite evident that they were no less aware of sexist oppression. They suffered more than any other group of females. Scholars have tried to put rather more emphasis on their struggle against racism and not enough on their participation in the women's movement. As Bell Hooks argues, "while White women's organizations could concentrate their attention on the general reform measures, Black women had to launch a campaign to defend their 'virtue' [3]. In this way we can see that Indian Dalit women suffered a fate similar to that of their 'Black' counterparts. They have little or no influence while struggling for their rights and rightful social position.

Moreover, in American society, there are three major circles of reality which reflect degrees of power and powerlessness. There is a large circle in which 'white' people, most of them men, experience influence and power. Far away from it there is a smaller circle, a narrow space in which 'Black' people experience uncertainty, exploitation and powerlessness. Hidden in this second circle is the third one, a small dark enclosure in which 'Black' women experience pain, isolation and vulnerability. These are the distinguishing marks of 'Black' womanhood in 'White' America.

The 'Black' woman thus faces the reality of triple-subjugation of class, race and gender. According to Alice Walker, the term "'Black' Feminism' does not fully describe the triple-subjugated condition of 'Black' women. Hence she has expounded the concept of 'Womanism' saying, "I just want to have words that describe things correctly. Now to me, "'Black' Feminist' does not do that. I need a word that is organic, that really comes out of the culture that really expresses the spirit that we see in 'Black' women. And it's just...womanish [4]. In her widely popular work *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983) Alice Walker describes her concept of Womanism poetically as, "Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender [5]. While 'Black' Feminism benefits the privileged 'Black' women, especially those in the academia, Womanism addresses issues of masses of 'Black' women doing all kinds of menial

³ Bell Hooks. *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. New York: South End Press Collective. 1981, pp.165

⁴ Alice Walker. *In Search of Our Mother's Garden's*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace. 1983, pp. 185-211.

⁵ Ibid.

² Cynthia Stephen. "Feminism and Dalit Women in India". *Countercurrents.org*. 16 November, 2009. Web. <http://www.countercurrents.org/stephen161109.htm>

work. The word “womanish” stemming from the ‘Black’ folk expression, “you acting womanish” signifies that the woman in question is “responsible”, “in charge” and “serious”. A “Womanist” is a woman who prefers and appreciates “women’s culture” and “women’s strength”. The Womanist takes pride in being ‘Black’ and female. Womanism repudiates the conventional White norms of beauty and glorifies women with “big legs, big hips and ‘Black’ skin”^[6].

As explicated in Walker’s words and reproduced by Gerry Bates, Womanism when defined as a consciousness incorporates “racial, cultural, sexual, national, economic and political considerations” whereas Feminism places sole priority on women; also, Womanism is a phenomenon pertaining to “outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior”^[7]. A Womanist is a survivor, one who appreciates other women, forming bonds with them through their empowerment, and one who through education, instructs “members of the sisterhood about the twin evils of racism and sexism and the necessary paths to take to triumph in light of the presence of these destructive forces”^[8]. Taking cue from this, critics like Cynthia Stephen and her predecessors felt the need to reject the oxymoronic term Dalit Feminism for a strong and liberated idea of Dalit Womanism^[9]. Though this term is not that well known in India, it deserves to be endowed with its own ideas captured from its own political and geographical experiences, just as African Womanism is impregnated with its own connotations.

The Womanism for the Dalits, therefore, is ought to be wholly based on the lives, experiences, and consciousness of Dalit women, and one of its urgent agendas is to send a signal to the higher caste people to put an end to untouchability. It also empowers Dalit women to hit back if their male partners hurt and humiliate them. Dalit Womanism recognizes and praises Dalit women who carry out their responsibilities without expecting any reward. It celebrates a woman’s individuality, along with family and motherhood. It aims at subverting the conventional norms of social and religious hierarchy. Dalit women are asked to jettison conventional values of female beauty and create for themselves a new and natural image of womanhood. It is concerned with eco-friendliness and the safeguarding of native culture. It encourages Dalit women’s use of words as weapons.

Thus, Dalit women are gradually attempting to speak out their traumatic experiences as well as theorizing their pain, their anger in their stories, novels, memoirs and autobiographical writings. There is a pressing need to examine and evaluate Dalit women’s historical experiences from the critical angles of caste, class, and patriarchy, with a movement towards a revolution in field of work, wages, and family life.

However, till date, Dalit women have been misrepresented in Indian literature and Indian English literature. Most of the upper caste male writers are biased towards Dalit women. They are portrayed merely as the victims of the lust of the higher caste men and never as rebels to fight against the

injustices perpetuated upon them. Even in the writings of the progressive writers such as Mulk Raj Anand, Premchand, Omprakash Valmiki and so on- Dalit women are either molested or raped by the upper caste men. By depicting such pictures, writers gained sympathy for the victims but such routinely kind of treatment is not enough. They have completely ignored the fact that Dalit women can also resist and fight back like any other victim of social oppression to guard their dignity. Thus, in these literatures, a Dalit woman is never a fighter rather always a victim.

Unlike Dalit men, only a few Dalit women have written their autobiographies, or their narratives of pain. Most of them have been written in regional languages and they have rarely been translated into English. The position of Dalit women is as marginalized in Dalit literature as it is in their community. Education gave them the chance to narrate their voices of distress and sorrows in their autobiographical writings and the contribution of Dalit women writers to Dalit literature is significant. From the onset, the writings of Dalit women represented their own experiences and burning indignation.

Even though atrocious patriarchy is a major issue discussed repeatedly in Dalit womanist discourses, the viewpoints of some Dalit male intellectuals are contradictory. The famous Dalit social activist Kancha Ilaiah compares patriarchy in Dalit community with that of Hindu community and regards former as more democratic^[10]. How can any oppressive structure be democratic at all? Dalit womanist discourses not only question the mainstream 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. In such scenario, Dalit women writers like Bama, Urmila Pawar, Kaushalya Baisantri and many more themselves taking pen in their hands; and articulating and recording their experiences of humiliation and hurt subvert the centuries-old neglect as a subject.

One of these women writer, Bama Faustina (1958) is the most distinguished Dalit woman writer in Tamil. Her autobiographical narrative *Karukku* was the first Dalit Tamil text. Bama is the pen name of Faustina Mary, who belongs to a Roman Catholic family owing to her grandfather’s conversion from Hinduism to Christianity in a vain attempt to escape caste oppression. Primarily, her ancestors were from the Paraya, a Dalit community and worked as agricultural labourers. She has been using her pen as a powerful weapon to fight for the rights of her people, the Dalits. She is regarded as one of India’s newest and most challenging voices.

Bama’s stories demonstrate how the material reality of different groups of women can lead to very different perceptions of the nature of political struggle. Bama’s pen is like a sharp-edged weapon to cut the weeds of untouchability and patriarchy which have thickly grown over the centuries in the ancient land of India. Most of the women in the works of Bama emerge victorious breaking domestic, social, religious, political and sexual shackles which so far have been like millstones weighing on them. They have transformed themselves from passive, battered, voiceless females into self confident, assertive, modern women who compete with men in all spheres. They have marched ahead from erasure to assertion and from being

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Gerri Bates. Alice walker. A Critical Companion. Westport: Greenwood Press. 2005, pp. 99.

⁸ Ibid, pp. 100.

⁹ Cynthia Stephen. Op. cit.

¹⁰ Kancha Ilaiah. *Why I am not a Hindu*. Kolkata: Samya. 1996

victims to victors. This victory is the ultimate goal of Dalit womanism. According to K. Geetah and K. Srilatha: "The first of its kind in Tamil, *Karukku* was not only the first Dalit autobiography but achieved a specific identity, having written by a Dalit Christian woman...As an exponent of Dalit Feminism, Bama has found in *Karukku* the right space to articulate the travails and suffering of Dalit women...The English translation has enabled *Karukku* 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 gives 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^[11].

Then we have *Sangati* (1994), Bama's autobiography that explores the idea of transformation of rejection into resistance. In *Karukku*, there was more emphasis on the relationship between the self and the community but on the other hand, *Sangati* is based on the community's identity. The autobiography talks about the Paraiya community who are doubly oppressed. Women are presented as wage earners and it is upon them to bear the burden of the family and on the other side men can spend their money slavishly. In addition to this, women are vulnerable to sexual exploitation and harassment. Therefore, the autobiography creates a Dalit womanist perspective and explores the impact of discrimination suffered by Dalit women. 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 brothers; and women fighting back. *Sangati* is primarily about a community's identity; not about the single self. The autobiography explores the female subjugation and subordination in a great way. Bama professes about Dalit womanism in an interview as follows:

All women in the world are second class citizens. For Dalit women, the problem is grave. Their Dalit identity gives them a different set of problems. They experience a total lack of social status; they are not even considered dignified human beings. My stories are based on these aspects of Dalit culture...the hard labor they have to do all their lives. Other problems are the same for all women...Dalit women have to put up with a triple oppression, based on class, caste, and gender. They die in order to live^[12].

Bama gives a terrible picture of the female subaltern and the marginalized. They work hard both outside and inside. They become real animals and work restlessly. No one cares for them and they become mechanical in every corner of life. On the other hand, her autobiography *Sangati* also has its theme of growth, decline, culture, and liveliness of Dalit women in the Tamil Paraiya community. Throughout *Sangati*, one can see the rebellious nature of Dalit Paraiya, and the hard work they do both at the domestic and professional level. Bama herself stands for Dalit womanism and the emancipation of the Dalit Paraiya community. In her autobiography *Sangati* she exhorts Dalit women for action thus:

"We must take up the challenge ourselves. We must be strong. We must show by our own resolute lives that we believe ardently in our independence. We must never allow our minds to be worn out, damaged and broken in the belief that it is our fate. Just as we work hard so long as there is strength in our bodies, so too, must we strengthen our hearts and minds in order to survive^[13].

The autobiography *Sangati* encapsulates the author's experience of working within a heterogeneous and oppressed society and the series of several interconnected anecdotes, experiences, news, and events as narrated in the book, form an autobiography of a community. What needs to be seen is if Dalit womanism, that is, a reassertion of the rights of Dalit women works out in the autobiography; and if it does, how so.

The third and the most pertinent text in her oeuvre that is relevant here, is Bama's *Vanman* (meaning Vendetta) published in 2008. This piece of literature is very different from her other works because here she doesn't sing about the agonies of the subaltern rather loudly raises her voice and strongly asserts the need for the unanimity and camaraderie of the oppressed for a successful fight against the oppressors. We have as the setting a Tamil Nadu village Kandampatti comprising on the margins, two Dalit communities Parayars and Pallars, one Christian and other Hindu, respectively. As becomes clear from the title of the novel, there exists a communal feud between the two downtrodden communities. This blood feud of course is taken advantage of by the upper caste inhabitants of the village. Bama shows Dalit women becoming instrumental in bringing about a compromise and agreement between the two communities, after much destruction has been wrought. She displays surprise at the resilience of the Dalit women in the face of violence, which was least expected but in the psyche of Bama.

Therefore, one can conclude that Bama's oeuvre proclaims what real woman power is and what it can achieve. It is packed with pathos but the thread of humour running through it softens the harshness of the circumstances. Bama's Dalit women are unique in so far they do not hesitate to resist tyranny in any form either at the familial or social level when they are not loved and respected as human beings. I hold the view that Dalit womanism fashioned by Bama in her work boldly opposes the dominant culture and challenges traditional evaluative norms. The seminal purpose of Bama's fiction is to empower Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular to take up their rightful place in the process of building an egalitarian society.

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¹¹ Imtiaz Ahmed. Dalit Assertion in Society, Literature and History. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan. 2012, pp. 144.

¹² Sharankumar Limbale. Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies, and Considerations. New Delhi: Orient Longman. 2004, pp. 116.

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