

Dalit Consciousness in Bama's Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Dalit literature is now a distinct stream of the literature of India that has contributed an altogether fresh experience, 'new sensitivity and vocabulary, a different protagonist, an alternate vision and a new chemistry of suffering and revolt. The singular identity of Dalit literature is exhibited through its rebellious collective characters, the Dalit writers' distinct experiences, their use of folk-language and their selfless commitment to the liberation of human being and alone all the influence of B. R. Ambedkar's thought. The unique feature of this literature is its collective aspects because the experiences described in Dalit literature are social so they are termed as collective and character, despite, the expressions of individual appear to be that of a group. The stories in the novels discussed here shows that Bama has depicted well the real sufferings of Dalit people who suffer endlessly throughout their lives at the hands of upper caste people. Ultimately, her consciousness finds that the redemption of Dalits from all these tortures and exploitations can be have only by proper education and thereby attaining high financial status.

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Dalit literature is now a distinct stream of the literature of India that has contributed an altogether fresh experience, 'new sensitivity and vocabulary, a different protagonist, an alternate vision and a new chemistry of suffering and revolt. The singular identity of Dalit literature is exhibited through its rebellious collective characters, the Dalit writers' distinct experiences, their use of folk-language and their selfless commitment to the liberation of human being and alone all the influence of B. R. Ambedkar's thought. The unique feature of this literature is its collective aspects because the experiences described in Dalit literature are social so they are termed as collective and character, despite, the expressions of individual appear to be that of a group. Due to the persistent claims of Dalit writers, Dalit literature has now attained an autonomy as well as it has now become an artistic portrayal of the sorrows, trial, tribulation, degradation, slavery, ridicule and poverty endured by the Dalits. Each and every human being has a natural desire to obtain liberty honour, security and freedom from intimidation by the powerful elements of society and these values are now being articulated in a peculiar literature called Dalit Literature. Rejection and revolt are the two major themes of Dalit literature that have been expressed in different forms in Dalit literature to produce a peculiar effect on the entire community.

As the Dalit Literature has played a major role in the process of social convergence, a number of creative geniuses have emerged from different strata of society. The literary horizon of Indian English Literature is expanding and it will continue to flourish till the inequality, disorder and injustice exist in our society. In the present hour of ours, the advancement of Science and Information technology, the pains of a peculiar individual section have become a concern of entire community, so the reappraisal of ‘the badly off’, ‘God- forsaken’, or ‘the underdog’ or ‘the slum dog’ are attaining new definitions, discussions and delineation by both academics and critics along with society.

The paper focusing the issues of ‘Dalit’ and its history, aesthetics, controversies and consideration will not only open new vistas of knowledge among the scholars and society but also provide an intellectual feast to the general scholars of literature by developing in them an insight towards this peculiar but equally important and genuine branch of Indian literature and thought. Besides, the paper dealing with the issue of the Dalit and its movement will confer the scholars a new vision looking at the life-affirming literature of the Dalit society and people so that they may respond creatively as well as compassionately towards it.

Bama Faustina Soosairaj is a teacher, novelist and especially a Dalit feminist. Her fictions particularly focus on gender and caste discrimination which is basically practised in Hinduism and Christianity. Her motif behind writing on such themes is only to share the exploitation, injustice and gender discrimination practised upon Dalits. Up to now, Bama has written five fictions namely *Karukku* (1992), *Sangati* (1994), *Vanmam* (2002) and *Harum Scarum & Other Stories* (2006). Besides this, she has also written ten short stories also. Her first autobiographical novel *Karukku* brought her much fame because in this novel she delineated the experiences of Dalit women of Tamil Nadu who had to suffer for no fault from their side, except that they belonged to Dalit community and she also won Crossword Book Award in 2002. Her consciousness for Dalits is in no way far from gross realities and traumas of their lives, it is rather a heartfelt urge to show the world as to how and in what kind of the life circumstances the people of a particular community live only for being the part of the Dalit community.

Her first novel *Karukku* received much acclaim across the nation. The word ‘*Karukku*’ means ‘palm leaves’ which are sharp edged from both ends and thus the society in which these Dalits live is a double edged weapon for them because they have to suffer from all sides and they cannot prove themselves guiltless because they live in the society full of enemies. The novel gives a

detailed description of the terrible experiences of Dalit men and women who are ill treated everyday by upper caste people. She knows well that howsoever economically empowered these people may be, but they are discriminated and ill treated in almost all walks of life daily by these sheer upper caste people. Bama, in one of her interviews says about Dalits:

It is a struggle. It hasn't started now. We have been resisting from the beginning. Now because Dalits are politically more aware, educationally a little better off, these become threatening to the oppressors. Dalits want change, whether it is in religion, politics or in literature, but their oppressors don't want it. When they want to celebrate their freedom and assert themselves, upper castes want to oppress them again. That is what Bhima Kaoregaon is about. Una showed that a cow is more important than a Dalit life. It shows that they are treated less than animals. (Dutta)

She finds that Dalit people can empower themselves by educating themselves and getting a better employment. In the novel, she shows a Dalit Christian woman being tortured by Church. She was not allowed to sing in the church and her children were not permitted to study in the schools for Upper class children which were equipped with better facilities. But the Dalit women attempt their best to resist all these pressures and involve themselves in creative facilities. There are also some instances of exploitation and sexual harassment of Dalit women. There is also an incident of serving pakoda to a Naikar employer by a Dalit which shows how the Dalits are differentiated in the society. Bama as a child finds it amusing:

An elder brother of our street came along from the direction of the bazaar. The manner in which he was walking along made me want to double up. I wanted to shriek with laughter at the sight of such a big man carrying a small packet in that fashion...The elder went straight up to the Naiker, bowed low and extended the packet towards him, cupping the hand that held the string with his other hand. Naiker opened the parcel and began to eat the vadais. (Bama 15)

The writer as a child finds it foolish and thinks that how could those pakodas be dirty if they are properly wrapped in banana leaves. Bama's consciousness of Dalits remained very original from the very beginning of her life as she faced discrimination at school, church, markets, public places and everywhere where man can go. She tells her own story:

All the time I went to work for the Naikers, I knew I should not touch their goods or chattels; I should never come close to where they were. I should always stand away to one side. These were their rules. I often felt pained and ashamed. (Bama 51)

The novel is full of such kinds of incidents in which the novelist herself had been the victim of this shameful caste system.

In her another novel Sangati, Bama has delineated the series of mal treatments with Dalit women who become the protagonists. The novel becomes interesting when each woman exploited and mistreated coins a new plan to come out of the trap of upper caste people. Dalit

women are doubly tortured because they are women, so they have faced pressure from family if they decide to retaliate or take any kind of action against them. Girls are not allowed to play games of boys, they are destined to lead their life in a trend only, i.e. Getting married, begetting children and all that. Surprisingly, girls are considered as temporary members of the family, so they are not thought of to be the object of special or even regular care. This way the life of Dalit women is very panic. Bama details:

Why can't we be the same as boys? We aren't allowed to talk loudly or laugh noisily; even when we sleep we can't stretch out on our backs nor lie face down on our bellies. We always have to walk with our heads bow down, gazing at our toes even when our stomachs are screaming with hunger, we mustn't eat first. We are allowed to eat only after the men in the family have finished and gone, What, Patti, aren't we also human beings? (Sangati 29)

In one of the stories in the novel, a lady named Essaki, the only sister among seven brothers falls in love with a Vaman boy. She elopes with him because she knows well that her family would not permit them to marry. Later on, she is searched and her brothers kill her mercilessly when she is full pregnant and they slaughter her and takes out her baby of her womb and slaughter it mercilessly. For them, women are only a bit above the animal like Mariamma and Thaiy who are badly treated and beaten regularly by their male counterparts. Sonya D. Choudhury says:

Centuries of history, folklore and economic deprivation may conspire to heap every imaginable burden on the woman and yet Bama finds herself amazed at the survival capabilities of Dalit women - their spirit and energy as illustrated in their loud quarrels." (Choudhury)

In her third novel *Vanmam*, Bama castigated the life story of Dalit community from the very different angle. Here, she not only shows the events of exploitation and injustice of upper caste people over Dalits, but here she also casts light on the conflicts among Dalit communities themselves. The novel shows the lack of unity among these Dalits which empowers the upper caste to exploit them more. *Vanmam* brings to light the story of Kandampatti village of Tamil Nadu where Parayars were caring and mild people, while on the other hand Pallars were very crafty and selfish and both the groups are exploited and dominated by the upper caste Naikers. These Dalits are cast out as trash, after using them out of their lives. Though, they live a normal life and they work only to lead their families out of poverty and starvation. The starvation and exploitation have truly led them to grim question of survival. The Parayars are considered the lowest people and they are very inhumanly treated. Bam reflects, "Those were the days when they worked in the landowners' houses, clearing cow dung. They did whatever lowly job they

were asked to do, and brought home only stale kanji and pickle to stay alive. But, in his parents' generation, how much everything had changed!" (Vanmam 6)

In this novel again Bama points out the exploitation by priests of the church who get their shoes licked from Dalit people before entering into the church, thought these churches are made to create solidarity, peace and justice among mankind. The tenderness of women is forgotten when they are brutalized by family or police officials.

Bama's fourth work *Harum Scarum & Other Stories* is a collection of short stories which show that Dalits are dependent on upper caste for their life and living and apart from this they cannot revolt against their atrocities. In the story 'Red Chilli', she gives the story of a Dalit woman called Pachayamma who after having a clash with Gangamma, she again has to go to her fields for work. Such miserable condition of Dalits who are neither empowered by education nor has any other skill to find a suitable employment, is better described in the story. When Pachayamma is caught in stealing cotton from her landlady's field, her husband chides her saying, "Etha, do you have any brains? If you have to steal, steal without getting caught. You've been to the station and back for the sake of some stupid cotton. Idiot woman!" (*Harum-Scarum Saar & Other Stories*. New 40) And Pachayamma revolts saying, "Ei...don't speak like a fool, machan. The village people are gossiping without a thing, and you also join in! Show me one woman in the street who has not stolen something. You said you're going to work, but here you are." (*Harum-Scarum Saar & Other Stories*. New 40) Her another story, 'An Old Man and Buffalo' bespeaks the story of a Dalit who finds a distinct method of revolt. Malandi, a boy tells the story how his father was abused by landlord and then he found a very interesting way of retaliating against the landlord. The landlord who ill-treated his father, the boy called his buffalo with that name and then rode on that and shouted, "Elay, Kovaala, go east, da! Come here, da! Go there, da!... I will even shit on the landlord's cattle." (*Harum-Scarum Saar & Other Stories*. New 102-103) Dalit women are also exploited at the hands of the men of their own community and Ponutthayi is a Dalit woman who fights for her status, equality and livelihood and become a role model for Dalit women. She is thirty-five years old woman and mother of four children. When her husband leaves her, her mother chides her saying:

He is going to get some other woman and live with her, and she will harass your children. Listen to me! Made of stone or made of grass, for a woman her husband is everything. Instead of lying at his feet, you are lying here. (*Harum-Scarum Saar & Other Stories*. New 69)

Thus, the stories in the novels discussed here shows that Bama has depicted well the real sufferings of Dalit people who suffer endlessly throughout their lives at the hands of upper caste people. Ultimately, her consciousness finds that the redemption of Dalits from all these tortures and exploitations can be have only by proper education and thereby attaining high financial status. She has also attempted to change the whole scenario of male hierarchy typically prevalent in Dalit community.

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