



THE SUBALTERN CAN SPEAK IN THE SELECT WORKS OF BAMA

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to focus on Bama's selected writings in reference to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's critical theory of postcolonialism, Can the Subaltern Speak? Being a Dalit woman, she discusses the issues of Dalits, especially women's problems, in her writings like Karukku and Sangati. Many of the problems of a Dalit woman converge on the caste system. In a detailed fashion, she depicts the cramped lives of Dalit women through the characters. Meanwhile, she also portrays their strengths and her life as an example of empowerment. Her mission is evident in connection with the literary sphere and social issues. She has opted for literature as a powerful medium to protest social evils. She discusses how she has attained her self-identity through her literary contribution. With the help of individual identity, Bama has given a voice to her peripheral group and battled seriously to free them from the grips of the caste system. Bama's discussions, characters in her works and her mission of life together prove that a Dalit woman can speak.



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There were a lot many examples of subjugation in different spheres of life in different parts of the world. The source of suffering in England is classism, racism in America, and casteism in India. Along with this, one more aspect that receives excellent

attention everywhere and all the time is gender bias.

As far as Indian English Fiction is concerned, it has also contributed a lot to delineating all facets of the life of humans and even the issues in its birth land. Literary

discussions and literary expressions about local caste issues by Idayavendan, Abhimani, Unjairajan, Vedivelli, Marku, Bama and P. Sivagami unveil inherited slavery, all kinds of exploitation, ill-treatment and so on. According to one of the literary critics, Srinivas Iyengar, a caste system is the root cause of intimidating democracy and weakening unity in diversity.

Bama's novels discuss a strong-rooted problem, casteism about gender. Once, it was a neglected area of discussion. Only a few male writers, other than Dalits like Mulk Raj Anand, voiced the conditions of Dalits in the name of untouchables or outcasts or paraya but not Dalit women's issues. Anand's observation regarding untouchables is limited because he showed only the protagonist Bhaka, who belonged to a low caste, and his daily activities, his interaction with the people around him and his suffering in the process in an empathetic manner. To a large extent, Bhaka represented the people of his community but not the whole. Sohini, Bakha's sister, is the only woman character in the novel, *Untouchable*. Her portrayal was dealt with on a surface level. In fact, Women's issues were a neglected area of discussion. Whereas now, without hesitation, women writers, with their subjective experiences, have voiced every subject concerning women.

According to *Can the Subaltern Speak?* by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, no speech is possible in the subaltern position. That position makes people disempowered; their voices cannot be heard, and the heard utterances cannot be encoded and left as meaningless utterances. Hence, the people in that position cannot create their own identity to meet their needs and follow their interests, especially for not having the appropriate agency or medium to carry from one channel to another. In a typical scenario, Spivak's

constructive argument has a great value, and to a large extent, her argument cannot be thrown aside. However, agency or medium can be made, and ways to empowerment can be found. Bama's life and her writings mirror the possibility of subaltern speech.

Faustina Mary Fathima Rani is Bama's full name. She is a Tamil Dalit feminist writer of the modern era. In Tamil, 'Fa' is written as 'pa' and pronounced as 'ba'. The blend of two letters from each word is Bama.

Karukku is her autobiography, the first autobiography in Tamil Dalit literature. *Karukku* is a frequently studied and researched text in academic circles and in colleges, not just for its style but also for its content, which narrates the atrocities against the Dalit community. *Karukku* is a Tamil word which means Palmyra leaves. Its saw-toothed edges on both sides seem like double-edged swords. Her memoirs reflect her miseries and her community's woes as well as the bright sides of their lives and detail the daily lives of Dalits, their tastes, religions, festivals, entertainment sources, living style, games, culture and beliefs.

Sangathi is Bama's second novel. The title means news full of interrelated daily activities in the Dalit community. In this work, she deals with her personal life events with the association of the three consecutive generations of women in connection with family and society. In this novel, she rejects Dalit women's passive self-image in Dalit literary discourses and celebrates their self-pride and dauntless spirit. In other words, she shows that Dalit women transformed from mute objects to strong and expressive.

The Dalit women are triply marginalised in Indian society because of the overlapping structures of caste, class, and gender. Caste and class are interlinking

aspects, especially for Dalits. Their caste is a significant hindrance to making money, but their services are cumbersome and demanded ceaselessly by all sects of people for scavenging, cleaning, farming, etcetra. That is the reason the women from that caste are marginalised threefold.

Bama discusses sandwich issues, especially caste + gender + class issues in *Sangati* in a gripping alive fashion. The state of the sandwich problem is just like a spider's web. It causes a person annoyance and throws him/her into despondency or passing the way without a goal. Mariamma *In Sangati* lost her mother, and her life was an example of victimisation in triple-fold marginalisation. She was not allowed to take education from an early age. She was subjected to sexual assault by an upper-caste man, Kumarsami Ayya, when she went to fields to gather firewood. In Panchayat, Ayya manipulated that Mariamma had had an illegitimate relationship with her cousin. He made her feel shame and pay a dear price as a penalty.

Bama's work challenges the Dalit and feminist discourse paradigm by analysing the overlapping structures of caste, class and patriarchy regulation in an attempt to subvert them. According to her, Dalit women can create freedom and enjoy it. Their individuality is one of the appreciative traits. It helps them to live as they are. Their existence is mask-free and clear to them though it is hard. Therefore, they work out the things and identities that they need. These traits (creating personal and emotional space/freedom and individuality) are not found in their upper-caste counterparts. In Karukku, her name was unidentified until the end of her narration. However, her response to it has created an indelible mark on the literary firmament and contributed to establishing her self-identity too.

Bama mentions a point in connection with the fights and quarrels of men and women in the Dalit community - if men show muscle strength, women reveal their tongue's sharpness. This particular approach for these women helps them to relieve psychological strain. Sebasthiamma, Rakkamma, Kalliamma, Susaimma. Bhakkiyam, Velliamma, and Mariamma are rebellious characters of this kind in the fiction of Bama.

Dalit women do not have a practice of performing pada puja (worshipping the husband's feet). Many of the castes in Hinduism follow pada puja. They treat their husbands as superior to them. However, in the case of Dalits, women shower their love and affection but never feel men are their superiors. They do not let themselves go down in a dispute with their husbands. They opt to give equal retorts to their men is quite common. Kancha Ilaiah states that Dalits are more democratic than the followers of a patriarchal system.

Bama has stated the reasons behind their cries, shouts, bawls and curses. After having the tiresome work of the day, their bodies cannot support them to have a sexual life. With partners' force, they do it but feel discomfort. In her observation, Dalit women are 'the worst sufferers'. In reality, they are receiving a negligible amount of ill-treatment from their men folk but more from men and women of the upper caste masters. In *Sangati*, it is shown as, "The position of women is both pitiful and humiliating, really. In the fields, they have to escape from upper-caste men's molestations. 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)

Exploitation can be exercised regarding physical labour, sexual abuse, feelings and emotions. Besides not giving support to a

victimised woman, women of upper caste do not conceal their aversion to seeing them and dealing with them. Following the essential etiquette like giving respect to a person or honouring one's self-respect is a healthy habit of humankind. It finds rare in many of the upper caste people. She accuses society in *Karukku* of their rude and impassive responses toward Dalits. They treat Dalits are not human beings.

Bama, in her novels, shows that Dalit women are stronger and more self-reliant than upper-caste women, especially in financial matters, problem-solving and decision-making areas. Mostly they meet their financial expenses on their own. They never like to hide their skills. They like to deploy their art fruitfully. They never show their back to take up the challenges. They never escape from their responsibilities. In *Sangati*, Vellaiyamma, Bama's grandmother takes complete responsibility for rearing up to her two daughters after her husband left forever for Sri Lanka in search of a job as a tea plant labourer. They look after their children and do daily chores apart from their outside business. They are always close to nature. Coming to the upper-class, women rely on their men for the need for money, for taking up a subject, vocation, or avocation. In fact, their every action is controlled by their men.

Bama used the positive elements of her life journey to shape her personality from marginalised to the mainstream. She has employed education and her experiences as a stock resource to address issues of Dalit women. She wishes to see the condition of Dalit women be uplifted with education. She believes that education makes a woman courageously face the challenges in her life and solve the problems. Her keen observation of individual and social aspects has contributed to a solid aspiration of

constructing a society free from vices like exploitation, humiliation, and inequalities. She also calls for her women to uphold their rights. She has given a voice on behalf of them to solve their issues like no identity, inequality and disrespect.

Lakshmi Holmstrom has described Bama's approach to life in her introduction to *Karukku* to *Sangati*, "...she will have a chance to change things to redress the balance from humble acceptance of oppression to staking a claim for justice". In Bama's own words, it is comprehended that what is essential to a subaltern is to get access to education. It can open new avenues to surmount social discrimination and economic challenges.

Conclusion:

Bama's life journey from an ordinary woman to a literary person exhibits how position can be made. She has created her own identity. Through literary expression, Bama makes the whole world aware of the strengths and weaknesses of Dalit women, all facets of their lives and their expectations from society. Plenty of readers' responses, scholars' research and social changes about caste, class and gender are signs of the subaltern voices being heard. This approach of Bama acts like a powerful medium or agent to address the problems of Dalit women.

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