

DIFFERENT WORLDS, DIFFERENT LIVES A READING OF BAMA'S WRITINGS

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Abstract

For long non-Dalit writers of Colonial India as well as free India presented their perspectives of Dalits and their deprivation; an outsider's view of an inner world. The Dalits gradually broke their enforced silence and through Dalit writings, began to draw the world's attention to their world. These were outpourings of their trials and tribulations, but without the finesse of the literary norms. The more there were attempts to ignore them, the more attention they drew to themselves. The more they were criticised by the high priests of the literary world, the more they were appreciated by readers as they presented before them a world, a world of the Dalits and by the Dalits. Bama, a well-known Dalit feminist writer's works in Tamil are on the Paraiyas, especially the women who are doubly oppressed. Her writings are raw depictions of the hierarchy of castes and their conflicts, where each caste is a smaller world within a village. This paper attempts to understand the workings of the different levelsof these microcosms through Bama's writings.

Key words: *deprivation, perspectives, Dalit writing, feminist, doubly oppressed, caste hierarchy, conflicts, microcosms*

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Indian society has been largely divided into the privileged upper caste and the deprived lower caste, made up of the untouchables, the Dalits. Most of the upper caste belong to the upper class and the lower caste occupy the lowest strata of society, socially and economically. Well-known writers of Colonial India as well as free India have portrayed the oppressed world of these Dalits, their deprivation and their marginalization from mainstream society. Opportunities to education and awareness of their rights helped them see a world they were until then shut off from. Post-Independence they gradually broke their enforced silence and a new genre of regional writing began to draw the attention of the literary world. As though in answer to Gayatri Spivak's landmark posit, the subaltern spoke. These Dalit writings are mostly autobiographical or narratives of their travails and subjugation, but without the finesse of the brahmanical writings. They wrote about the perpetual violence and intimidation they faced their miseries and their lives on the periphery of the unequal social system they are part of. They are not only about victimisation, but is also a clarion call to their fellow beings to fight the oppression. The more there were attempts to ignore them, the more attention they drew to themselves. The more they were criticised by the high priests of the literary world, the more they were appreciated by readers as they presented before them a world, a world of the Dalits, by the Dalits and for the Dalits.

Bama, a well-known Dalit feminist writer in Tamil has written on the lives of her caste, the Paraiyas especially the women who are doubly oppressed. Her works portray their status in the hierarchy of castes and how their lives have to be lived within the parameters allocated to them by the higher castes as well as their religious and political representatives. Each village is a small world with many castes occupying smaller worlds and within each of these smaller worlds are the very two different worlds of men and women. Bama is the first acclaimed Dalit woman writer in Tamil to have gained global recognition, though her first novel *Karukku*, an

autobiographical narrative faced many obstacles before it was accepted by the literary world. Her narratives are based on her lived in experiences and the language she expressed them was that of local flavour, not the refined and polished language expected of literary works. This paper is an attempt to understand the lives of the Paraiyas, especially their women, and the different layers of oppression they live through, the caste discrimination, gender discrimination and the marginalized lives, as depicted in Bama's novels, *Karukku*(1992), *Sangati*(1994) and *Vanmam*(2002).

The three novels are about the lowest castes in villages in Tamil Nadu, and are about the pitiable lives and sufferings of these castes. Though they depict unending hardships they are about hope and better lives. *Karukku* is autobiographical and harps on the importance of education and how education can bring empowerment to women. *Sangati* is a string of events, mainly about the Paraiya women and their difficult lives, who in spite of tough times are able to handle these problems in their own way, protect and care for their families as well. It is about the strength of womanhood. *Vanmam* is about the intra- community conflicts and how there is hope for better times when they realise the strength of their solidarity. Bama focuses on the problems of worlds that are same, but yet so different; and each concludes with rays of hope despite their lives of utter despair.

The world of the Paraiyas (Dalits) are a microcosm in the macrocosm that is the village, where the landlords, the Naickers, the Nadars and the Naidus lord over the lower castes and dominate their lives. This situation is meekly accepted by the Dalits as they have been made to believe for generations that their lives depended on their lifelong service and unquestioned obedience to their masters. Their *cheri* (colony) is in the farthest corner of the village, next to a cemetery and far from all institutions like the church, school and the market. The higher they are in the scheme of things in the caste hierarchy, the better placed they are with regard to conveniences. Just as women have had to and still are victimised in the name of patriarchy, honour and tradition, the Dalits, on the basis of their caste are pawns in the hands of all social institutions like society, the church, the upper castes, the police and political parties.

Karukku is autobiographical and so is about the author growing up in her village, closeted within the limitations etched out to her caste. Throughout her childhood she sees the injustice meted out to the Paraiyas, especially the women, struggles with the rigid religious norms

imposed on them, especially the children, her predicament in understanding the scriptures taught and what is practised. On growing up she decides to find answers and solace in the life of a nun, but finally gives up that life in disillusionment. Despite all these struggles Bama never forgets her brother's words that education is empowering. Her studies remain her priority and she never wavers from an opportunity to excel in her studies and that is what takes her to college, far from her village. Through Bama's eyes we see the women constantly struggling, both her grandmothers work at the Nadar's house, are treated shabbily, are given only the stale leftover food and yet they look upon their landlords as Gods. She is appalled to see how the women in the landlord's house treat the Dalits, dropping food from a height and keeping distances between them so that they are not "polluted" by the proximity of the Dalits. Even very young children of the upper castes called her grandmother by name. The upper caste sat away from the Dalits in church, in buses, in school and ensured that the Dalits knew their 'space'. Her aggression at this treatment of Dalits is dampened by her Patti's words, "Without them how can we survive? Haven't they been upper castes from generation to generation, and haven't we been lower caste? Can we change this?" (Karakku 14). These words are so reminiscent of what some Dalit women tell the upper caste women in Baby Kamble's, *The Prisons We Broke*, 'You are God's own people. Don't we know that?' (Kamble 55) It is this internalised silent acceptance of domination that Bama and writers like her, want the Dalits to shrug off.

As the Paraiyas are converts to Christianity, the church plays an important role in their lives. In *Karakku* Bama mentions how the priests and nuns are constantly reminding the children of their sinful lives, and how they would be punished. The children are to be up early to attend mass, are pinched and beaten if they dozed off, the women spend money in getting fruit and other offerings during the feast, but there is never a mention of any charity from the church to the community. In *Vanmam* also there is mention of the Dalits paying homage to their landlords, the Naickers, with a rooster, vegetables, sugarcane and rice, while their own children starved. Throughout her life she is never allowed to forget her caste, although Christianity does not propagate caste system. She flinches at the memory of being branded a coconut thief, even by the priest and the headmaster, who say it is in her caste (jaati budhi) to thieve as she is a Dalit. As a student and later as a teacher at a convent, Bama is shocked to see the disparity shown to children from the upper class and caste and those from the poor lower castes. The Dalit children are expected to clean the school premises, are taunted for 'enjoying' the good food given

to them and are constantly reminded of their poverty back home. She searches for the kindness, compassion and charity her religion glorifies, but fails to detect even a speck of it.

The earlier generation of Dalits had turned to Christianity to escape the rigid caste discrimination followed by Hindus. However, conversion did not bring any sea change in their lives as the stigma of a 'Dalit' still clung on to them. Neither did they move up the social ladder, nor were attributed the equality or social esteem they expected. On the other hand, being a Christian denied them the constitutional privileges enjoyed by communities similar to theirs. Though women from other religions could get out of an unhappy marriage, the Paraiyas could not, as they were Catholics. Religion was important and feared, as disobedience or not conforming to the rules of the church was followed by threat of God's wrath and curse of the devil. *Karukku* is Bama's journey of self-discovery, which she realises after having gone through many phases. *Karakku* lays bare a totally different face of the church and its officials.

Indian women have always been secondary citizens irrespective of their caste or class, as patriarchy and tradition vehemently asserted their dominance over them. Through the three novels we find that violence against women is legitimised and that suffering and misery is inextricably linked to their lives. The Dalit women are triply oppressed, because of their caste, their gender and their poverty. Right from childhood the boys and girls play different games/roles where gender differences are demarcated and are replications of adult life. The girls took care of their younger siblings like Maikanni in *Sangati*, did all the household work, worked at factories and in the fields with older women, but the boys could play and while away their time. The women too work at home, in the fields and run their households on the money that they earn, but the men have the freedom to spend their earnings wherever they wish. They are seen as objects of lust not only by men from their own caste but also by those from the upper castes. There is no institution or personality of authority they can approach for help or support, as it is convenient for the social institutions to keep their distances from domestic and social conflicts.

Dalit women were seen as mere sex objects to be enjoyed by men of all castes, though surreptitiously. While working in the landlord's houses, fields, factories or going to the forests to collect firewood, they had to fend off lecherous men from all castes. Their harassment, molestations and rapes are hardly ever complained about, as they know they would not get any justice and they fear the repercussions. Back home they do all the household work and at night

are victims of marital rapes over which they have no say. In *Sangati*, Mariamma is molested by Kumarasami Ayya, but she manages to escape his clutches. Fearing that Mariamma may report the matter to her friends and realising the humiliation that could follow, Kumarasami spreads the rumour about a drunkard Manikkam and Mariamma having an affair. The Dalit panchayat is quick to act and both Mariamma and Manikkam are fined Rs.200 and Rs.100 respectively, although the 'crime' was supposedly committed by both. Ironically the panchayat is conducted by men only and attempts by women to even eavesdrop are thwarted by the men. Mariamma is not even given a chance to give her version. Her worst punishment is her marriage to Manikkam, as no one is ready to marry her. In the same way when the Mudaliar's son misbehaves with Paralogam, she hides the fact for fear of humiliation. No wonder Bama rues 'It is one justice for men and quite another for women.' The subjugation of Dalit women and control of her sexuality by their men can be seen as an imitation of, what Uma Chakravarty refers to as 'brahmanical patriarchy'.

As a child Bama resents the treatment meted out to her grandmother by the women of the Nadar's house. There is mention of abuse of Dalit women by upper caste women in *Sangati* too and it is ironical that these upper caste women are given no respect or attributed any dignity by their menfolk. The men seek pleasures elsewhere and physically and verbally abuse their own women. As she grows up Bama understands that these women display their aggression and assertion on the Dalit women as a compensation for their loss of power in their own homes. They are sure the Dalits will not retaliate and so they find comfort in that power. Patriarchal power play is at its highest among the Dalits too. They who were subjugated, suppressed and silenced replicate the 'patriarchal' norms followed by the upper caste, on their women. Physical abuse, caste courts without women even when the issue is about a woman, refusing to be responsible for the running of their households are how they show their 'patriarchal hold' over women.

In all her writings Bama celebrates the strength and resilience of the Dalit women. In *Karukku* her focus is on the empowerment education gives. She leaves her village to study and later to work, and stands out because of her excellence at whatever she does. However, whenever she is back in her village she is back to working in the field, helping in the housework just like any girl of her age. It is her inner strength that helps her question the partiality at the convent she teaches and the very same strength that encourages her to leave the nunnery and face a hostile

world. In *Sangati*, there are three women worth mentioning. The first is the young and pretty Maikanni, who takes up the responsibility of her house from a young age, and is a support to her mother. She leads a gruelling life for a young girl, working at home and at the factory, handling a drunkard father and having to face bullies at work but is forever cheerful. Mariamma has to live through ridicule and is the butt of crude jokes by the men of her village, ends up marrying a drunkard, meets with an accident but carries on with her life. The most colourful character is old Sannugakizhavi, quite unlike Bama's grandmothers and Velliayamma patti. She is disliked by the children and women of the community because of her abusive nature. However, she uses her brash and crude behaviour to retaliate against the set norms of the upper caste. Her eccentricity, uninhibited behaviour and her abusive nature creates a protection around her and she uses these to get the upper caste to ignore her deeds, thus getting social justice to her brethren. She is even able to get the candidate Kovalsami Ayya to take her to the poll booth and back, and is proud to announce that she had not voted for him. The women are the worst affected in the intra caste conflicts. In *Karukku* and *Vanmam* there are clashes between the Paraiyas and the Pallars. The Pallars are supported by their landlords and so have police support as well. The men are in hiding, but life has to go on and so the women carry on with their lives, supporting each other and protecting the ones harassed by the police, carrying food for the men in hiding, getting lawyers to get their men out of jail, using their wits to pacify and hoodwink the police. Bama takes pride in this resilience of the women of her caste, which she is sure women of upper caste would not be able to exhibit.

In *Vanmam* the focus moves from Dalit women to the conflicts between the Pallars and the Paraiyas. They carry on a love-hate relationship, only flaring up when instigated by their insecure landlords. They are both Dalits, but the Pallars are Hindu Dalits and the Paraiyas are Christian Dalits. They celebrate festivals, sports and cultural activities but there is a tinge of jealousy where education and employment are concerned. The Paraiyas are better educated and thus employed, whereas the Pallars are school dropouts and loiter around. The landlords realising the danger of a united Dalit force use their vile to perpetually instigate the two castes to fight each other, resulting in the loss of many innocent lives. The novel ends on a hope as the two castes jointly put up a candidate who wins the election and then they realise the strength of their unity. Anthony while unveiling Ambedkar's statue arouses the youth saying, "Educate! Organise! Agitate!.....we must unite and fight injustice" (Vanmam 101) and this is the message

that Bama would like to convey to her community. Like all Dalit literature Bama's works are protests against unjustified oppression than mere narrations of victimisation.

Using the conversational language far removed from the elitist and accepted literary discourse, Bama too is protesting against hegemony that is binding her outpourings. The conversational style, the narrator repeating stories she has heard, opining about them have all drawn readers into their lives. The use of vulgar language by men and women, mentioning body parts to humiliate and insult, the mention of superstitions, the uncouth behaviour of some characters shock the readers but show them the rawness of their life as it is. Dalit writing was received with mixed reactions. Some opine that these are lives exposed as they truly are, however some feel their miseries are exaggerated. Prof. Gopal Guru finds them socially illuminating and politically subversive, while there are Dalit scholars who find them objectionable and wonder if there is the need for 'digging out stench from hateful waste bins of the past'. Though Bama writes about the miserable lives of the Dalits, she ends each in the hope for a better tomorrow, when they will be educated, aware of their rights and become a united force to oppose the hierarchical society that has been pinning them down. She is proud of her caste, especially the women who have carved out their own identity within their small worlds. Their sufferings are still there, but they are not ready to blindly accept what is stated to be their dues, they question and want answers.. Her hope for a better life for them can be summed up in her own words in the preface of *Sangati*, 'To bounce like a ball that has been hit became my greatest desire, and not to curl up and collapse because of that blow.' There is hope in equality and peace in unity.

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