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Inter-textuality and Subalternity: A Study of Bama's *Karukku* and Paintings by Savindra Sawarkar

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This paper intends to study Bama's *Karukku*, an important text in the genre of Dalit women autobiographies. The analysis, however, will highlight how through experimental mode of narration Bama plays with the normative features of autobiography which is considered as a privileged high caste masculine genre thereby subverting the power structures not just at an ideological level but also at an aesthetic level. The text is indeed an experimental work of art whereby by the virtue of being a subaltern empowers the narrator and elevates her role in the society. This aspect of subversion is substantiated through Bama's exploitation and interweaving of the issue or idea of humiliation into the very fabric of the narration that brings about a novel understanding about the nature of radical Dalit discourse. Section II of this paper will look at the paintings of Savindra Sawarkar, a prominent Marathi Dalit artist and shall try to engage with some of his works that mark an important element in the discourse of Dalit assertion and mobilization through paintings.

Experimental Dalit work of art whether through textual or visual medium has made its own accord in Modern Indian literature and art. Theorists of Dalit literature such as Sharan Kumar Limbale and D.R. Nagaraj have postulated the tenets of literature by both Dalits and non-Dalit writers and how it should facilitate the work of such an art in treating the issue of caste to have a revolutionary impact that could shake the casteist framework. If Limbale calls for a serious political and social intervention through literature then Nagaraj astutely discredits the explicit use of the political and rather focuses on the subversive potential of twisted narrative scheme, vocabulary, and use of humour to inflict the same blow on the structures of tyranny. This paper shall attempt an inter-textual analysis on the politics of caste and gender by using both textual and visual medium. In the first part we shall look at Bama's *Karukku* (1992) and locate the elements of subversive modes of expression through form and content. The second section of the paper will look at some of the paintings of Savindra Sawarkar, a prominent Dalit painter to discourse about the use of painting as a medium that questions the flawed value systems of caste.

Part I

Bama's *Karukku* (1992), the first Dalit women autobiography in Tamil is an experimental work of art in Dalit literature that adopted innovative narrative strategies thereby shifting the norms of the genre of autobiography. We shall see how Bama shifts such norms to invent a novel form of life-writing for a specific purpose. Bama plays with the concept of time, anonymity, space, linearity of narrative establishing multiple positioning of the self vis-a-vis society whereby expression is not only given to an individual but also to the people of her community. Both compliment's each other and nurture each other's existence. M.S.S Pandian quotes Mark's foreword from an earlier version of the book as, "At the first sight it reads like a history of a village. From another angle, it reads like an auto-biography. From yet another angle, it reads like

a brilliant novel.” In other words *Karukku* crosses over genre boundaries. It is neither history, nor autobiography, or fiction; yet it is all of them at the same time.” (Pandian 35). This is how a subaltern position is being exploited for an affirmative action not just for the purpose of locating the self but also giving space to community consciousness as well.

The life-writing mode also treats the notion of history, myth, folk-lore, and agency with complexity. Although Bama never locates the narrative within a politically volatile atmosphere of her time yet her discourse about the Dalit rising parallels the movements of caste conflict across India. Bama’s narrative interrogates the relationship of the subject with the community and how the two come into conflict as a result of which the subject that gains experience shapes certain ethical notions about existence. Understanding the existence of a community being oppressed by the caste order also generates space to delve into the areas of experience, victimization, humiliation, consciousness, and agency. In the introduction to *Tracing the Autobiographical* (2005) Jeanne Perreault and Marlene Kadar implicates the subject in the mode of life-writing and how the reading process tends to work through shifting grounds. They state:

The question we ask in this reading process are...what do self, subject, agent, person, and identity mean, and how does that meaning get made? What have aspects of identity to do with each other? What has specific context to offer in our desire to understand how the world (society, culture, history) has made the person? What is the relation between the text(s) of selfhood, the writer, and the reader? What kinds of materials can be considered articulations of self or life? (Perreault and Kadar 5)

For Bama such kind of considerations is necessary to treat the issue caste, gender, and subjectivity. The non-linearity of her narrative going back and forth from childhood to being adult or alternating between her experience within her home, at school, at the convent, and then again her entry into her community, selectively speaks of incidents that are biographical in nature and at the same time provides the scope to critique the system and its people. Bama as a subject laments the loss of agency to her and her community in the social sphere but the very trope of life-writing that she adopts empowers her to exploit the writer-text-reader nexus. This life-writing as a practice in resistance becomes politically empowered challenging oppression and experience of humiliation at minute levels. From being an individual’s expression life narrative then becomes the narrative of the collective. Sharmila Rege in her introduction to *Writing Caste Writing Gender* (2006) makes a vital remark, “...dalit life narratives are in fact testimonies, which forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual and contest explicitly or implicitly the ‘official forgetting’ of histories of caste oppression, struggles and resistance.” (Rege 13).

Bama’s innovative use of textual strategies works in tandem with the purpose she wishes to achieve through her narrative. Whether it is paying attention to the ordinary events of life or making the experience of abuse universal in nature Bama’s intention is to affect the psyche of both the oppressed and the oppressor to morally empower the former while ethically shaming the latter. Critics have also pointed out Bama’s use of colloquial Tamil which again subversively bends the generic traits of forms.

Gopal Guru in *The Cracked Mirror* (2012) while discoursing on the concept of theory and experience raises a very pertinent point in terms of autobiographical accounts and women writing. He suggest that how upper caste female writers have eschewed the use of this genre as

revealing about one's personal details could be humiliating while lower caste women by opening up themselves about them and their community's self have reinstated the avowal of personal which is also political which has been a potential proclamation in feminist studies. In *Karukku*, Bama subtly makes entry into the discourse politically intermeshed with the personal as she recalls and pens down the humiliating experience that she had faced in her childhood. One of the instances she summons is being commented upon as Harijan, children who were "contemptible" (Bama 18). The demeaning chores that she and other children of her caste were made to do in school were to carry water to the teacher's house or watering the plants and so on. She also compares the inferior lifestyle in terms of dressing and other material aspects with the luxurious style of the upper caste children. In yet another instance she would recall how the low caste children were made to stand separately in the ground in a shameful manner. She notes "We felt really bad then. We'd stand in front of nearly two thousand children, hanging our heads in shame, as if we had done something wrong. Yes, it was humiliating." (Bama 21). The concept of humiliation that is evoked in her description brings about a very prominent understanding of the notions of space, agency, and assertion implicated in it. Gopal Guru in "Experience, Space, and Justice" underlines the very idea how the Dalit body had been entrenched within a space of symbolic hierarchical order that regulated its movement and agency. He substantiates the argument by locating it in 19th century Pune of the Peshwa rule. The Brahmins then forced the untouchables to tie an earthen pot around their neck and a broom around their waist so as not to pollute the surroundings by their spit or footprints. He further notes:

During the Peshwa rule, the notion of space compounded the sense of humiliation of the untouchables first by seeking the confinement of the latter in a social space and later by rendering the bodies legible through grafting cultural symbols on these bodies. Thus, bodies are turned into cultural space that the Brahminical system could rule over, could write on, and could regulate this rule. (Guru 86).

An instance which Bama encounters in her childhood about the spectacle of a big man of her community involved in the slavish act of doing the chores of Naicker who is made to hold the packet in a very demeaning way reaffirms the logic that Guru contented about the positioning of the body and cultural symbols implicated in an embedded sense of humiliation.

The concept of humiliation is not predicated upon self-pity or asks for sympathy from the readers or critics, rather Bama effectively uses it to subvert the conventional rhetoric of expressing caste atrocity that convey a sense of supercilious mercy. She uses the same as a tool and comes upon an understanding of the nuances of caste system which powerfully instills the ideas of integrity and social change. A little later she ruminates when she shares another instance of being singled out but for a very different reason¹, "I thought, why? Is it impossible for a Harijan to study, or what? I felt a certain pride then, a desire to prove that we could study just as well as others, and to make progress." (Bama 21).

Sundar Sarukkai's apt theorizing of the concept of humiliation supports the above analysis. She reasons out by saying that an experience cannot be subjective or private like the concept. She contends how the conceptual understanding of certain kinds of experience can pose a threat against any oppressive system or ideology. To quote him at length:

¹ She mentions that she stood a first position amongst the pupils of her community in a government examination.

Consider a person who has a particular experience. Once this person is told that there are experiences that are humiliating, it allows this person to use this concept to describe her own experiences. This means that she might actually experience the same experience she had been having earlier but now filtered through this concept of humiliation. This radically changes her perception of her experience as well as her actions. Feminism has shown how powerful these concepts can be to re-describe experiences. Dalit movements have also shown how various concepts have been powerfully used for social mobilization and action towards social change. (Sarukkai 150).

Therefore when the ethical choice has been made as to what kind of concepts should be contextualized the experience and expression of the same throws radical challenges towards oppressive forces. Bama emphasis on the concept of humiliation filters the experiences subsequently which no more remains a simple account of biographic detail but politically implicates both the reader and the writer blurring the generic traits of autobiography.

One of the ways in which Bama innovatively uses the form of life writing is through the trope of questioning and self questioning. Early in the book she mentions her decision of renouncing the world and joining the religious order with an urge to help Dalit children who have been suppressed by the nuns. But her life after joining the order comes as shock when she comes across the same casteist, exploitative, and prejudiced nature of the religious institution. She painfully relates how "...I began to understand, little by little, that in that order, Tamil people were looked upon as a lower caste. And then, among Tamils, Parayar were a separate category. Even so I continued to stay in the convent. Among those who were training with to become nuns, every single one was anxious to find out to what caste I belonged." (Bama 24). Being academically bright Bama reveals how she was always given a reputed school where children of upper caste and class came and how every time her request for doing service for the underprivileged children was being turned down by the authorities.

Bama's constant questioning of the caste order suggests her intelligent use of the form of life-writing that empowers her audience by ethically immersing them:

How did the upper castes become so elevated? How is it that we have been denigrated?...How is that people consider us too gross even to sit next to when travelling?...Are Dalits not human beings? Do they not have such attributes as a sense of honour and self-respect? Are they without wisdom, beauty, dignity? What do we lack? (Bama 27).

Gradually she realizes how the Church has created symbolic and metaphoric order with the rhetoric of fear and submission to dictate people's lives. The role of religion when operated through institutional system clearly imbibes the Hindu caste order and the narrative constantly questions such assumptions of power and hierarchy. She states:

Nobody had ever insisted that God is just, righteous, is angered by injustices, opposes false hood, never countenances inequality. There is a great deal of difference between this Jesus and the Jesus who is made known through daily pieties. The oppressed are not taught about him, but rather, are taught in an empty and meaningless way about humility, obedience, patience, gentleness. (Bama 104)

Even though Bama's subjective articulation underlines the loss of agency, power, and choice within the exploitative framework and her failure to make a substantial change in the conditions of the Dalits, her decision to leave the order and move out of institution solidifies the process of shaping a Dalit consciousness which this kind of life-writing attempts to achieve. The narrative smoothly dissolves the boundaries of the multiple genres that it adopts be it autobiography, testimonio, or life-writing and even reads like a manifesto at places which in itself is a politically subversive and empowering act. As the narrative ends her siren call for the readers (not just Dalits) urging them to acknowledge the existence of the Dalit subject as someone who has pulled off the veneer of psychological oppression from his mind and is equipped well to contest the biased conceptions born out of a casteist and gendered society. She fervently declares:

But Dalits have also understood that God is not like this, has not spoken like this. They have become aware that they too were created in the likeness of God. There is a new strength within them, urging them to reclaim that likeness which has been so far repressed, ruined, obliterated; and to begin to live again with honour, self-respect, and with a love towards all humankind. To my mind, this alone is true devotion. (Bama 109)

Part II

Savindra Sawarkar, a well know modern Dalit Painter has used its artistic expression on canvass resisting the cultural and political appropriation of the Dalits in the society. More popularly known as Savi, Savindra Sawarkar was born in Nagpur, Maharashtra, in 1956 to a Mahar family. Being a Dalit himself Savi powerfully blends the experiential, historical, and mythological axis in his paintings that not just represent the pain and anguish of Dalits but also revolt silently through the deep colors, smudgy brush strokes, performative gestures, rugged paraphernalia, and peculiar bodies. Making a mark in the sphere of elite upper caste aesthetic representation Sawarkar's aim "...is not only to achieve acceptance into the celebrated precinct of high art display, but to do so while denouncing the identities of the very social and economic elite upon whom this art world depends." (Tartakov Web).

In his paintings Sawarkar has well captured the caste and gender oppression. By depicting the traditions of the past that suppressed Dalits he parallels the past with the present that subversively posits the humiliating experience to convey the memory of hurt. Such an expression instead of depicting the conventional representation of Dalits as meek, pitiable, and imprudent allows the language of body and expression to thwart the audience's normative bearings who are engaged in the display of potent and overwhelming assertions of identities. Such assertions suggest how the Dalit body has managed to sustain itself through the wraths of history, and is still struggling with the present prejudices always fighting staunchly the system's oppression. Though Sawarkar chooses specific pictorial idiom, he says, "which draws its energy from the anguish of untouchables, from the plight of Devdasi and her kin-people i.e. the Jogtins, Jogtas, Zhulvas, Potrajs. My idiom also draws upon the tribulations of minorities in Indian society." (Sawarkar Web). His representations accumulate experiences in such abundance that stands against any kind of oppression lending the work a universal appeal. While the victimized body remains rigidly implicated in its historical and political context but the fuzzy use of canvass and use of colors in splotches almost for me breaks the boundaries to make a universal political mark.

In *Untouchable Couple with Om and Swastika*, Sawarkar represents two dark Dalit bodies against the hazy yellow background. Each male and female body is carrying pots which represent Om and Swastika respectively. Sawarkar deliberately uses the signifiers of Om and Swastika to suggest how the Brahminical cultural and symbolic order not just physically harmed the low caste but also the symbolic acculturation of the hierarchical order has been influential in intellectually oppressing the low caste which Dalits have still carried on in the 21st century. This is evident through identity crisis which they struggle from in a country where the meaning of religion, Hinduism, nationalism, and loyalty keep changing when the unsettling forces of fundamentalism tend to reignite casteist ideologies. However, the facial expressions of the two bodies sing a different story. The nose, eyes, and mouth painted in fire red are the features that stand out in their representation. The grimness of the expression coupled with wide open eyes appears as if facing the hardships with intrepidity and also suggesting the ability of the victim to come out of the stranglehold of the oppressive system both physically and emotionally. The use of the stick again enunciates the presence of the victimized being itself whose past, tradition, and culture had been silenced shrewdly by the caste Hindus.

In *Untouchable with Dead Cow I*, Swarkar represents the untouchable man carrying the dead carcass of a cow highlighting the institutionalized way in which hierarchy was created by segregating the demeaning vocations for them. The man is completely pushed under the burden of dead cow and also the symbolic burden of caste but Sawarkar by putting the lantern in his right hand makes a political assertion against caste suppression which highlights the promise of light, knowledge, and opportunities for the Dalits. Sawark also invokes the buried past where the suffering, sacrifice, and determination of the ancestors of Dalits laid the foundations of freedom, self-respect, and agency for the future generations.

In *Devdasi I*, Sawarkar represents the polemics of caste and gender. The devdasi tradition was started by the caste Hindus where women from the low caste were forcibly pushed into the service of Hindu deities and were supposed to reside in the temple premises abstaining from physical pleasure. However, it is clear how they were sexually exploited by the temple priests to gratify their sexual desires. Instead of adopting the lens of pity and helplessness Sawarkar paints the devdasi in an unabashed posture that in fact depicts the ruthless nature of the tradition. Here Sawarkar has upturned the representation of the victim and the victimized. The disproportionately big stature of the devdasi as opposed to the miniature representation of temple shown in the form of temple tomb and flag growing out of devadasi's head and the vague structure of the temple as shown being compressed between her hands, point towards the failure of any system that could long oppress a community.

In *Untouchable Woman with Brahmin*, the woman while being an untouchable can also be seen as a devdasi because of the way in which her body has been painted when compared to above painting's representation. The mark of tilak on the man's forehead suggests that he could be a priest and the exposed parts highlight the predatory nature of the devdasi system. This painting of Sawarkar establishes the complex politics of caste and gender where the upper caste male seems to be yielding power on the woman. His holding of the lantern suggests threat to the persona of the untouchable woman but the power politics are overturned as the woman takes forward her forefinger and places it near the throat of the upper caste man almost throwing a challenge lest he challenges her existence by inhumanly exploiting her. If the woman is

anguished by the role she has been made to perform the lantern again promises a way out of this situation for both the beings to come out the exploitative relation.

Sawarkar establishes the multiple links of history, culture, identity, memory, gender, and contemporaneity in his use of art to expound the discourse on caste. He states, “I am trying to make sense of the angst of my community in the contemporary world of immense uncertainties and discredited hopes.” (Savarkar Web). Both Swarkar and Bama have innovatively expressed in their work of art the immoral norms of caste eating up society’s democratic planks like a termite. The parallel treatment of the past with the present raises relevant issues that help in understanding the resurgence in casteist and gendered ideologies and provide ways to read them and counter them.

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