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Situating Dalit Consciousness with Special Reference to Bama Faustina's *Karukku* and *Sangiti*

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Abstract:

Dalit literature is a mirror to the age old tradition of oppression in the Indian caste system. It was initiated by Dr. Ambedkar whose revolutionary ideas stirred India and proposed a respectful life for the Dalits. Dalitism is concerned with untouchability, scheduled and the depressed class. The Dalit literature expresses the pathetic condition of the Dalits through various forms of literature like poetry, prose or drama. In Dalits women share a more wretched condition than the men. The men are oppressed but the female is double oppressed, even by the males of their own community.

This paper is an attempt to express the Dalit feeble condition as well as their consciousness through Bama Faustina's novel *Karukku* and *Sangiti*. Bama is of the opinion that women are discriminated on the basis of class, caste and gender. Bama herself belongs to the Dalit community and has thus in a more efficient way examined the problems a Dalit women faces. She is hopeful and proposes that education is the only possible way to erase this evil from the society.

This paper aims to explore the Dalit consciousness as well as the double oppression of the females with special reference to *Karukku* and *Sangiti*.

Keywords: Dalit Consciousness, patriarchy, oppression, resistance and feminism.

Dalit literature is a realistic mirror to the age old system of oppression in Indian caste system. It represents the groups that are marginalized, dehumanized, hegemonized and have been sidelined in the society. Arjun dangle defines Dalit literature as- "Dalit literature is one which acquaints people with the caste system and untouchability in India...It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary." Throughout the world the marginalized people have to suffer oppression i.e. more or less of a similar type, divided by slim lines like in India it's based on caste and in America it is based on race. Inequality is the main objectivity behind marginalization that results in exploitation and injustice. The Dalit groups were kept on the periphery of the society thus depriving them from the power. The years of suppression not only lead the Dalit's to express their anger but also presented themselves in literature.

The Dalit's have a long history of oppression that can well be understood from the Indian iconic epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. In *Ramayana*

when a young dalit boy has learnt meditation, the celebrated and vigilant Lord Rama curses him for this blasphemy. Similarly in Mahabharata when Ekalavya, a Dravidian, learns archery by placing the image of Dronacharya, the great master of archery, in front of him and challenges Arjuna, a student of Dronacharya. Instead of being happy, Dronacharya cannot tolerate the rising of a Dravidian and competing his student Arjuna. In order to punish him he demands Ekalavya's right hand thumb as his guru-dakshina. Such was the treatment suffered by Dalits since ancient times. They were not allowed to study, to enter the religious place and even a glance of them was considered polluting. They were also humiliating names for Dalits like dasa, raksasa, asura, nisoda, chandale and so on.

It is unfortunate to say that untouchability, the scheduled and the depressed classes are even prevalent in the modern society. Though the people are now educated and Government has banned its practice through the constitution of India, Article 17, still it is being practiced. The first generation of Dalit writers questioned the idea of India, 'says Raj Kumar, a professor at Delhi University, "They felt they weren't a part of it and rejected it. Later writers like Valmiki have a more mature approach. They engage with and explore the possibility of Dalits being a part of India. They see hope in Ambedkar's goal of annihilation of caste. The contemporary Dalit autobiography is an inclusive exercise. The Dalit's are trying to write themselves into the Indian narrative."

The Dalit literature is being swept throughout the world. The Dalit's are expressing themselves through the various forms of literature like poetry, drama, dance, music, sculpture and paintings. The Dalit's have presented the aesthetic study of their native tradition and culture. D'Cruz, the Tamil writer and filmmaker, who comes from the fishing community, said that the Dalit's voice should be scattered throughout the world through translation. Gole in *Deepstambh* (2010) is of opinion that literature should voice their community, rather than presenting the individual pain and agony. Baburao Babul wrote in Marathi, his first collection of stories *Jevha Mi Jat Chorali* in English *When I had Concealed My Caste* depicts a cruel society bringing a new momentum to Dalit literature in Marathi; today it is seen by many critics as an epic portraying lives of Dalits, and was later made into a film *Namdeo Dhasal* (who founded Dalit Panther), these writings paved way for the strengthening of Dalit movement. Bagul writes;

Dalit sahitya is not a literature of vengeance. Dalit sahitya is not a literature which spreads hatred. Dalit sahitya first promotes man's greatness and man's freedom and for that reason it is an historic necessity...Anguish, wailing, pronouncements of sorrow alone do not define Dalit literature. We want literature heroically full of life for the creation of a (new) society.

Thus we see Dalit literature is a literature produced by Dalit's in order to present their pathetic condition in front of the society and to give them a similar status in the society.

In Dalit's women share a more marginalization position than the men as on one hand they are subdued by patriarchy and on the other by the society. They face the humiliation of the upper caste as well of their own men folk. Bama, being a Dalit woman expresses this painful position of women, "In the fields they have to escape from the 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. Even when they go their own homes, before they had a chance to cook some kanji or lie down and rest a little, they have to submit themselves to their husbands.(Bama, 122).

In the Post-colonial decades the Dalit's are resisting the oppression through their writings. B.R. Ambedkar in one of his speeches speaks for the upliftment of women;

I am conscious of the fact that if women are conscientized the whole untouchable community will progress. I believe that women should organize and this play a major role in bringing an end to social evils... the progress of the Dalit community should be measured in terms of the progress made by its own womenfolk. Every women should stand by her husband, not as his slave but as his contemporary, as his friend.

(Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, speech to Dalit Mahila Federation in 1942)

The Dalit women try to reveal their painful condition to the world. Being uneducated or having an inclination to re-produce writings in their mother tongue their works are initially written in regional languages but were later translated into English. Autobiography was the best medium to express their plight. Women through this genre have expressed their agonized stories of marginalization.

Bama Faustina is one of the most notable Dalit women writers in Tamil. Her important works are *Karukku* (1992) an autobiography, *Sangiti* (1994) a novel and *Kisumbukkaran* (1996) a collection of short stories. The Dalit feminine consciousness is carried in all her works as she is severely criticizes the untouchability in the Indian society. Bama's *Karukku* voices the Dalit feminism. Bama was from paraya community and the autobiography *Karukku* revolves around life in this community. It centers the themes like education, religion and recreation. Bama, being an educated female then too she had to face marginalization and humiliation. She belonged to Christian religion that advocates equality for everyone, but for her there was no equality even from the Catholic Church. As a Dalit feminist Bama revolts the oppression and believing in her, desires empowerment for Dalit women through religion, education and society. She appeals to the womenkind;

We who are asleep must open our eyes and look about us. We must not accept the injustice of our enslavement by telling ourselves it is our fate, as we have no true feelings: we must dare to stand up for change. (Bama, 25)

Bama articulates the sufferings enforced on Dalit women. A Dalit woman has to undergo the double saddle of the society and patriarchy. In the narrative Bama presents that how a Dalit women is compelled to work hard, sexually abused and suffer low wages too. The narrator's grandmother is a labor and a over worked women, "She'd rise before cock-crow at two or three in the morning, draw water, see to the house-hold chores, walk a long distance to the Naicker's house, work till sunset and then come home in the dark and cook a little gruel for herself "(42). The Dalit women works from sun rise to sun set then too they are economically exploited. Bama says, "Even if they did the same work, men received one wage, women another. They always paid men more, I could never understand why (47). Bama also presents that how women are physically abused in their own families. Uudan physically abuses his wife in front of everyone, "... Everyday he'd drag his wife by hair to the community hall and beat her as if she were an animal, with his belt" (52). We see that how a Dalit women has to bear the inhuman behavior of the society. A Dalit woman is insecure in every nook and corner. Bama through her autobiography, *Karukku* explores the Dalit consciousness as well as gives an example to the Dalit women, to break the shackles of traditional society, get educated and let their miserable plight known to the world.

Bama's another novel *Sangiti* accounts the Dalit feminist experiences on class, caste and gender. The novel exposes Bama's own life as well as the community. In the novel Bama focuses on the various issues a Dalit female faces as gender discrimination in the male dominated society, economical exploitation and sexual harassment. Bama surveys' this through thirty five characters in the novel. She herself says;

My mind is crowded with many anecdotes: stories not only about the sorrows and tears of Dalit women, but also about their rebellious culture, their eagerness not to let life crush them or shatter them, but to swim vigorously against the tide; about the self-confidence and self-respect that enables them to leap over threatening adversities by laughing at and ridiculing them; about their passion to live life with vitality, truth and enjoyment; about their hard labor, I wanted to shout out these stories.

The feminine characters in *Sangiti* are basically land labors and construction workers who work more than the male class but are paid less. The story moves through past and present experiences of these females.

The novel discusses the feminine marginalization on the basis of caste. The central character in *Sangiti* is Villiyammaapaati, the grandmother of Bama. She is a social worker who attends deliveries without any benefits. But the upper caste women do not invite her because she is a parachi. The feminine caste marginalization is seen at a height as Bama's grandmother never wore a blouse only because the lower caste women were not allowed to cover their body completely. These women were a subject of molestation and sexual violence of the upper caste lords. Mariyama falls a prey to the high caste land lord Ayya and when she escapes this lord, the whole blame is put on her

of being immoral, that she has to suffer throughout her life. But Mariyama does not kneel down before this injustice and thus silently revolts the patriarchal caste system.

Bama also criticizes the hypocrisy of Church. In order to escape the harsh orthodox system of Hinduism, the paraiya community converts in Christianity but here also they have to face a discrimination based on class, caste and gender. Sothipillai, a paraiya shouts in anger;

It is our women who sweep the Church and keep it clean. Women from other castes stand to one side until we have finished and then march in grandly and sit down before anyone else...I went and complained to the nuns. And do you know what they said? It seems we will gain merit by sweeping the church and that God will bless us specially.

The Dalits are not only exploited socially but in the religious institutions as well. The paraiya females having realized this fact revolt against the injustice in the name of God.

Bama also presents some healthy practices in the community like the paraiya women do not have to suffer the tortures of widowhood, if they desire they can re-marry. Secondly in this community there is no dowry system rather the grooms side gives parism or the bride price. Thirdly, a paraiya woman doesn't have to decorate herself with the ornaments symbolizing her husband's they cannot afford them and lastly the funeral rituals are same for the men and the women both. They are even allowed at the graveyard and can do the last rites.

Bama has also presented the modes of resistance in the dalit females. As Kaaliamma and Raakkamma in a very skilled way protests the male domain. If Raakkamma's husband attacks her, she is ready to smack her husband back in a similar way. In an incident when Raakamma's husband hits her she shouts at him;

How dare you kick me, you low life? Your hand will get leprosy!
How dare you pull my hair? Disgusting man, only fit to drink women's farts! Instead of drinking toddy every day, why don't you drink your son's urine? Why don't you drink my monthly blood?
And she lifted up her sari in front of the entire crowd gathered there.

This is the way the paraiya women defend themselves against the violent attacks of the menfolk.

Through the novel *Karukku* and *Sangiti* Bama wants to give a message to the Dalit females that they should be independent and should not kneel down to the exploitation and repression of patriarchy. Bama is very hopeful for the Dalit females and feels that education is the only way to eradicate the problems of caste, class and gender.

We should educate boys and girls alike, showing no difference between them as they grow into adults. We should give our girls the freedom we give our boys. Then there will come a day when men and women live as one, with no difference between them; with equal rights. Then injustices, violence and inequalities will come to an end and the saying will come true that “women can make and women can break”. “I am hopeful that such a day will come soon”.

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