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From Silence to Voice: Epiphanic Realisations in Bama's *Karukku* and Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir*

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Abstract:

Dalit women's autobiographies chronicle lives shaped by multiple forms of marginalisation while articulating a distinct Dalit feminist sensibility that transforms personal experiences into acts of resistance and testimonial history. *Karukku* by Bama and *Coming out as Dalit* by Yashica Dutt are examples of this trajectory that challenge institutional religion, patriarchal control, socio-economic oppression and cultural norms that silence Dalit women, denying their voice and subjectivity. Both the narratives foreground moments of epiphany that function not merely as self-awakening but as an intersectional political consciousness. This self-realisation transforms embodied oppression into collective resistance. The close study of these seminal works enables the paper to argue that such epiphanic moments entitle the narrators to choose a redemptive path and articulate their resistance. The article further employs an intersectional framework proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw to analyse how caste, class and gender intersect to intensify their marginalisation. Bama and Yashica Dutt expose the systemic discrimination, exclusion and humiliation through regional dialects and nonlinear narration. The findings reveal that, despite emerging from two different socio-geographical and temporal contexts, the shared struggles of both writers within a patriarchal and casteist structure shaped their literary expression into a powerful means of reclaiming agency, pursuing healing, and confronting defiance.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Epiphany, Bama, Yashica Dutt, Dalit Autobiography.

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Introduction

Dalit literature emerges as a counter-discursive space where these 'outcastes' document their sufferings to challenge caste-based silencing. Early Dalit literature used to highlight men's oppression permeating from 'womb to tomb', forgetting or suppressing the gendered realities of Dalit women. Rajkumar, in his essay 'Beyond the Margin: Dalit Women's Autobiographies', writes that ". . . even Dalit women can fight back like any other victim of social oppression to guard their dignity . . . Thus, in Indian literature, whenever there is a portrayal of a Dalit woman, she is never a fighter but always a victim" (219).

Eventually, Dalit women recognised the importance of challenging dominant literary and political paradigms through their writings. Long marginalised within India's mainstream feminist discourse and upper-caste literary practices, they began to assert their gender-specific concerns and share their perspectives. They utilised autobiographical narratives to depict sexual exploitation, forced labour, religious discrimination, and caste-based patriarchy. Over recent decades, these voices have reclaimed, affirmed and challenged structural violence, making autobiographies raw and honest acts of response, breaking silences imposed by caste, gender and systemic exclusion. By highlighting their experiences of layered marginalisation, Dalit women's writings promote intersectionality in the pursuit of liberation and social justice.

This paper examines the autobiographical narratives of Bama and Yashica Dutt, exploring how intersectionality and moments of personal awakening are shaped by the distinct socio-political realities influencing their lives and experiences. Published in 1992, Bama's *Karukku* emerged as a landmark work in Tamil Dalit literature, gaining recognition as the first autobiography by a Tamil Dalit woman and later receiving the Crossword Award. Its publication coincided with the growing influence of Ambedkarite ideology and the

increasing visibility of Dalit movements in India. It chronicles Bama's journey of self-realisation as a Tamil Dalit Christian woman and her eventual leaving the convent. The milestone not only brought forth the sufferings of Dalit Christian women but also unmasked the caste discrimination within the Catholic Church in contemporary society. The lived experiences in colloquial Tamil, conveyed through oral narrative devices, make it distinct from other forms. Available in English and several other languages through translation, the work vividly captures the realities of rural working-class life while incorporating collective voices and communal storytelling traditions. Published in 2019, nearly three decades after *Karukku,* Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit* reflects a transformed socio-political landscape characterised by heightened caste awareness among younger generations, the emergence of anti-caste student activism, and the growing use of digital media as a means of challenging caste-based discrimination and asserting Dalit identity. Written in English and aimed at urban and global audiences, Yashica Dutt's autobiographical account traces the experiences of a journalist who concealed her caste background for years. Through a process of self-recognition and acceptance, she ultimately rejected the upper-caste identity she had adopted and openly embraced her Dalit identity. Through its contemporary narrative style, engagement with media culture, and incorporation of global references, Dutt's work situates questions of caste identity, internalised stigma, and social justice within a broader transnational discourse on marginalisation and self-representation.

Although both autobiographical works address caste-based marginalisation, they differ in their historical contexts, authors' social backgrounds, linguistic choices, intended audiences, modes of dissemination, and the responses they have elicited from readers and critics. Nevertheless, their stories of pain and oppression share a common focus on the interconnected issues of caste, class, and gender, emphasising the inequalities inherent in the social system and paving the way for the concept of intersectionality. This framework helps

in identifying various interconnected forms of discrimination in these texts by providing valuable insights into the trauma experienced by Dalit women hidden under the layered patriarchal injustices present in Indian society.

Intersectionality: a tool to understand discrimination as a whole

In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw opined that intersectionality refers to the interconnected social stratifications that operate simultaneously to privilege or disadvantage individuals based on their social tags. He asserts in the essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" that "in race discrimination cases, discrimination tends to be viewed in terms of sex- or class-privileged Blacks; in sex discrimination cases, the focus is on race-and class-privileged women" (140). Similarly, intersectionality in Bama's *Karukku* and Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit* is projected through bold articulation of the layered oppression perpetuated by the hegemonic caste system, violence in private and in public, domestic atrocities, patriarchal dominance, etc. Bama writes about how the violence against women in the domestic sphere is normalised because the men have to bear some of it outside the home. Taking the incident of Uudan, Bama recalls how he would drag his wife by her hair to the community hall and beat her with a belt like an animal. Yashica Dutt also mentions how her father would drag her mother from the kitchen to the back of the house in their room and beat her. Sharing that once the slap of her father punctured the eardrum of her mother, she opines, "Domestic violence against women is not limited to Dalit families. . . But Dalit women... are at the bottom of caste, class and gender hierarchies. Their lower class, female gender and lower caste make them more vulnerable . . ." (6). Besides abuse, violence and rape position Dalit women as the site of sexual exploitation and caste-based humiliation in the patriarchal social system.

Bama states that in her community, a Dalit woman is not allowed to watch films, roam around or walk down the streets without covering her face. If anyone does so, she would be openly shamed, attacked or even raped by the upper caste. Dutt gives an account of other Dalit women in society and tells how they are sexually harassed at the workplace. The supervisors, sanitary inspectors and contractors force them to work the night shift and behave in a perverted way. She questions the system where patriarchy and caste interchangeably take the authoritative positions to make decisions for women. Yashica critically exposes the system that entitles upper-caste men to have physical and sexual ownership over Dalit women. Particularly disturbing is the sexual violence inflicted upon young Dalit brides on their wedding night by upper-caste men.

Their exploitation on the economic front, despite being a hard-working community, is also due to the intersectionality of caste and gender. Bama reflects on the hard work of Dalit women, from getting up early at two or three, doing household chores, walking long distances, working till late, cooking, handling drunkard husbands, etc. Struggle with hunger, poverty and gendered disparity is amplified by their caste-based identity. Dutt also recalls how her hungry, poor mother worked hard to run her household:

> Dalit women who go door to door, cleaning dry latrines by scooping human excreta into cane baskets and carrying them on top of their heads to sewage dumps, are the worst affected. During monsoons, the rainwater seeps through the porous baskets, percolating human filth through to their hair and clothes. They often get paid in leftover food and clothes . . . earn as little as Rs. 30 a day. Some Dalit women make between Rs. 10 and Rs. 50 per house. Dalit men . . . are paid up to Rs. 300 per day. (42)

The complex and layered nature of caste-based oppression in India also intersects with religion. Caste hierarchy persists across religious structures, including both Hinduism and Christianity. Bama in *Karukku* challenges the caste and religious hegemony and unveils the hypocrisy: "There seemed to be one God within the church and another outside. I was extremely bewildered by all these different versions of God" (106). Yashica Dutt says that to dilute the marks of Dalitness, her mother even negotiated with faith as, "Hinduism has been another way for her to get closer to an upper-caste identity - the deeper her knowledge about Hindu rituals and traditions, the more easily she could pass as Brahmin" (50). She further admits that "The discrimination and abuse that Dalits faced before conversion followed them even after they turned Christian . . . The caste system invaded Christianity, following the same patterns of exclusion and discrimination as it did in Hinduism" (17).

Looks become yet another axis linking her 'darker skin' with impurity. Dutt claims that "The bias against dark skin affects both men and women, but in our patriarchal set-up, it is women who suffer its consequences the most" (27). She remembers how her mother used to try every new ubtan to prevent her from being mocked, and she would "quickly and wordlessly scrub it off when someone noticed that I still had some of my 'Dalitness' sticking. . ." (30). The use of the word 'sticking' really hits the readers with a realisation of the never-ending trauma Dalit women go through. Thus, despite the differences between Bama's *Karukku* and Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit*, the intersectional framework reveals how the multidimensional injustice and pain suffered by Dalit women transcend passive acceptance and reach moments of epiphany.

Epiphany: a moment of realisation

Epiphany, a literary concept prominently associated with James Joyce, is a sudden moment of spiritual or intellectual revelation that transforms perception. However, when

applied to narratives of marginalisation, epiphany extends beyond individual cognition to encompass social, political and embodied dimensions of collective awareness. The chosen texts also present epiphanic moments not merely as an abstract awakening of the spirit but as catalysts for change in the narrators' lives, signifying a pivotal transition from passive acceptance to active resistance, from internalised shame to valiant self-assertion. The epiphany in both works is collective, situating the arousal of socio-political consciousness and the desperate urge to combat the power structures of caste-based discrimination.

These authors transform these realisations into opportunities for gaining voice and agency. *Coming Out as Dalit* is set in an urban, English-speaking environment characterised by the politics of concealment and revelation, whereas *Karukku* originates from a rural, Tamil Christian background shaped by religious hypocrisy. However, the epiphanic moment, which signifies the transition from silence to carefree vocal declaration of Dalit identity, is significant in both autobiographies.

Epiphany in *Karukku*

Bama in *Karukku* shares her first epiphanic visceral moment when, as a child, she encounters the concepts of 'caste' and 'untouchability' for the first time. While coming back from school, she "wanted to shriek with laughter at the sight of such a big man carrying a small packet" (15) of vadais for the Naicker, holding it by its string. But later her brother explains, "Everybody believed that Naickers were upper caste, and therefore must not touch Parayas. If they did, they would be polluted" (15). This incident marks Bama's first epiphanic rupture, where everyday practice reveals the internalised logic of caste hierarchy. She noticed that the tag 'Dalit' brought with it humiliation and exclusion at school, contemptible behaviour on the bus, unequal pay for labour, forced traditions, hunger and violence. In her later life as a nun, she realised that the church, a place of divinity and equality, also

hypocritically practices caste hierarchy. Her personal experiences at the convent dismantled her illusion that the convent is a place of faith and justice:

> The convent too was a well-endowed one. And the Jesus they worshipped there was a wealthy Jesus. There seemed to be no connection between God and the suffering poor. Neither the prayers that were said morning and night, nor the daily Pusai, showed any evidence of that connection. I could not make it out at all. I found I had to search hard to find God. (106)

She recognises the deceit of the Church as the same convent walls, which were supposed to protect sanctity, become a physical prison that punishes Dalit women by making them work silently and incessantly. As a result, the Church's universal teaching falls apart before her, exposing itself as yet another exclusive system masquerading as Holiness. Hence, to escape from the site of casted bodily labour, Bama decides to leave the convent, rejecting and liberating herself from the past. It marks a radical moment of enlightenment, in which faith is reinterpreted not as compliance with institutional power but as a commitment to justice and truth. This disillusionment inspired her to write *Karukku,* through which she reclaimed her respect and identity. The text itself functions as a sustained moment of realisation, an ongoing 'cutting' (karukku) through layers of social conditioning.

Epiphany in *Coming out as Dalit*

On the other hand, *Coming out as Dalit* locates the epiphany against the backdrop of covert social expectations, the deliberate masking of caste identity, and the systemic invisibility experienced by Dalits in urban environments. Amidst the elites, there is a tacit pressure to pass as 'upper caste' in social, educational and professional arrangements. Dutt recalls living a dual life, concealing her Dalit identity:

> Until I came out as Dalit, I passed as an upper-caste Hindu. As I mentioned earlier, passing refers to an elaborate posturing by mimicking . . . Black Americans often pass as white by dressing, speaking and gesticulating like white Americans to escape systemic racism and violent oppression. Dalits in India have been passing as upper-caste Hindus . . . adopt elaborate lifestyle changes, changing their last names, moving cities, following rigid Brahminical traditions . . . (7)

The pain and dilemma of living a dual life and the perplexity of surname is revealed in the lines: ". . . it puzzled me that my father and grandfather did not share their last name . . . 'Nidaniya' - a typically 'Bhangi' last name . . . he was forced down from the horse he was riding during his wedding procession at sword-point by caste Hindus in Jaipur." (xii) She admits that "I cared enough to lie about my caste and to create elaborate backstories to protect that lie. I conveniently forgot the last name my grandfather dropped to allow him to pass, almost 60 years ago" (xviii). The exhausting, constant struggle of living with a scared Dalit's heart in a pretentious upper-caste body to escape institutional biases planted the seeds of epiphany in Dutt. The turning point came with the tragic institutional murder of Rohith Vemula, which acted as a catalyst for her emotional and intellectual rupture. She reflects on how her convent education, urban upbringing, and long-standing desire to distance herself from caste had led her to suppress or avoid acknowledging this aspect of her identity. She confronts:

> He made me 'come out' to the people I grew up hiding from, wanting to fit in with. He made me recognise that my history is one of oppression and not shame. He made me acknowledge that my great-grandfather learned to write by scrawling with a stick in the mud because the higher caste schoolteacher forbade him from holding a slate. And he made me proud. (xix)

The deliberate concealment of Dalit identity, burdened sense of shame, internalised discomfort, silence and the desire to 'fit in' suddenly awakened her:

> Within the next few minutes, I would pick the saffron colour . . . a form of resistance to reclaim a Dalit space in the preferred shade of Hindu fundamentals . . . I painstakingly worked on the site for the next two hours, stopping only when I wrote DALIT in a bold size 24 Georgia font. Underneath, I defined the word in English and Hindi as 'one who has been oppressed'. In that moment, I stopped being ashamed. I experienced something I had never felt about my Dalitness: empathy. I knew I was ready. (xvii)

An act of radical self-exposure that transforms personal trauma into a political declaration, her epiphany becomes a tool of resistance against the physical and emotional violence, serving as a collective critique of caste and patriarchy. For her, documenting her lived experiences with honesty becomes essential both as an act of resistance against caste-based oppression and as a means of achieving psychological freedom and living in accordance with her authentic identity. She dedicates her voice to her mother and Rohith Vemula and writes, "For Rohith Vemula, who lit a flame that made my silence impossible" (v). She reinforces that Rohith's struggle is not personal. Rather, it is communal and political, which encourages her and others to claim their identity and resist caste-based erasure because, unlike her, "Rohith did nothing to bury his Dalitness. Instead, he used it as a shield to stand up for his fellow Dalit students in Hyderabad University against the caste-based prejudice of members of the administration." (xv). Dutt writes about gaining voice and agency through this powerful internal reckoning:

> …He showed me that it was possible to be Dalit and proud . . . I hoped I could (in perhaps a much smaller way) do for someone else what Rohith Vemula had done for

> me. Despite the fact that he was dead, Rohith's note made me less afraid. And I hoped that somewhere, someone like me would read my note and possibly feel less afraid too. (xx)

Conclusion

Ultimately, the moments of profound self-awareness experienced by both narrators mark a journey from uncertainty towards deeper understanding, from a fractured sense of belonging towards self-affirmation, and from internalised caste-related stigma towards collective assertion and resistance against social injustice. The inward experiences of emotional and mental turmoil ripple outward, shaping their worldview and giving birth to a new critical consciousness. Epiphany in Dalit women's autobiographies serves not only as a personal awakening but also as an intersectional political consciousness that transforms embodied caste oppression into a collective force. By transforming personal experiences into written testimony, these autobiographies challenge the intertwined structures of caste oppression and patriarchy while establishing life writing as a powerful medium for collective dissent, political engagement, and the assertion of marginalised voices. These texts break the silence against institutional religion, patriarchal suppression, socio-economic subjugation and, at the top, the cultural norms that threaten Dalit women to stay quiet. Through their narratives, both writers reclaim control over their personal stories, transform painful experiences into opportunities for healing, and challenge the overlapping systems of oppression that have historically suppressed their voices and identities. These autobiographies function as both literary and political interventions that challenge caste and patriarchy. Writing becomes an epiphanic act of reclaiming voice, agency and dignity.

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