CHAPTER 5

INGRAINED OPTIMISM
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5.1 Introduction: Quest for Identity

The oppression suffered by the Black and Dalit communities has relegated them to the very margin of society. The realities of poverty, ignorance, oppression, and ultimate alienation are so compelling that they force a community to strike back. Women, the most oppressed community in the history, had begun to activate vigorously to become the most articulating community who could subvert conventional norms. The women of the marginalized groups found a platform to redefine their identities and recast their images in new moulds through their writings. Marshall, the black writer, believes:

> It is the writer’s great contribution to create new images that will overcome the negative psychological images we have because of our history. I don’t think the political thrust can be really effective until there is a new thinking on the part of the black woman (27).

She felt that nothing would really change until the black people learn to see themselves in positive terms.

Under the rubric of post-colonial studies, there is an attempt to retrieve histories that have been silenced or erased by both colonial and nationalist powers. Any woman writer, who celebrates female culture, resorts to the act of writing by making women the primary figures and central actors of the entire discourse. Women demand the ideology of self-definition and self-valuation where they break the patriarchal pattern of representation and also try to make
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room for women with and within their script. They picturize oppression they had suffered and then try to emerge out of it with optimistic vision and ideas. The women writers of the marginal groups get the opportunity to share freedom with their compatriots.

Black and dalit literature are marked by commonalities like revolt and misery since their agenda is to attain freedom and equal status in the socio-economic, cultural and political space. That they are destined to be victims of social evils does not necessitate that they could be annihilated forever. Their bitter experiences of oppression would harden them to arise with redefined force and strength to fight it out. They prefer to address themselves as proud survivors rather than as victims. The positive energy within their community propels them to fight against any force that is detrimental to their development.

Black male writers like Ralph Ellison and Amiri Baraka created in their writings female stereotypes who came painfully close to the white American concept about Black women and their slick generalizations about the black women’s experiences thrust them into a perpetual state of invisibility. The earlier women novelists who preceded Marshall did not make any effort to replace these negative stereotypes with positive ones, nor did they insist on self-definition and self-evaluation which was very essential for analyzing the consciousness of their own self-defined standpoints in the face of images which rendered them as the objectified big ‘other’, as dehumanized creatures drifting through darkness without any definite center of existence. Lacking self-
identity, they formed the shadow images of whites whose aspirations were not to be themselves but replicas of their white counterparts. Christ, the feminist critic, holds that the images and symbols imposed on the oppressed and the women produce “a lack of awareness that functions to reinforce the status quo” (22). The black woman writer must necessarily recreate and change history because it is she who has suffered the triple brunt of oppression and knows America better than America knows itself. The works of Angelou is a clear demonstration of black women’s determination to revise history, to carve out a place, to establish a unique presence for themselves, to announce to the whole world their existence as “a person and as a presence, as someone autonomous and as someone responsible to a community” (Cudjoe 7). She affirms her positive attitude, her optimism and spirit of liberation in her works.

Angelou’s life is a paradigm which informs black women in America that a search for autonomous survival assigns them the power of conscious choice. They are not victims but resilient survivors. Her experience with men and her community has helped her to develop a greater sense of self which psychologically equipped her to reject or accept values of life in order to determine a life for herself. Having tried various jobs in various places, she first chose to become a singer and later a writer. These experiences taught her to face life squarely and establish her identity in the American society. Angelou steps out not for personal survival alone but for the emancipation and the survival of her black sisters and the oppressed ones in general.
In the Indian context, Dalit women on the other hand dared to break all the strictures of society only for survival. Bama said that her desire is to bounce like a ball that has been hit and not to curl up and collapse because of the blow. The characters in her novels even in times of trouble, boredom and depression have an urge to demolish and overcome the troubles just for a happy existence. The spark of optimism in her led her forward to acquire all the self-confidence and self-respect that enabled her to leap over threatening adversities. Her narratives are focused not only on the sorrows and disillusionments of Dalit women but also on their optimism and strength, which would not allow life to crush or shatter them, but to swim vigorously against the current. They were aware of their oppression and conscious of the injustice done to them that they wanted to resist. It is essential that the Dalit writers have the consciousness and commitment to their society which would guard them against being misled. Bama as an individual gains her experiential journey from a sense of impotence to a sense of dignity and shows how she struggles to come out of the cultural schizophrenia usual to the dalits. She becomes her own text and makes an earnest attempt to show the socio-religious slavery stamped upon the hapless population by ‘Varna Vyavastha’ and narrates how the caste-based religious-social institution is being detrimental to women. Vehement protest against patriarchy is the open agenda of her writings. She manifests all the characteristics of a Dalit writer whose “pen is like a sharp axe with which she is cutting the weed thickly grown over the centuries in this ancient land” (Waghmare 20). Bama’s writings celebrate dalit women’s subversive strategies
to overcome their oppression. She hopes through her writing to influence the dalit women readers to shape their lives positively. Her works also emphasize on empowerment of dalits through education.

Dalit literature is condemned by critics as literature of lament but lately they are occupying the central place in the creative core with a focus shift. This new paradigm is characterized by the call for self-realization and self-identity. Their use of folklore legend, myths, swearwords etc. draw their narratives closer to everyday life. Dalit writers argue that their works require an alternative aesthetic paradigm that comprehends Dalit lifestyle and experimental realities. The violence and oppression that pervades their lives invariably invades their literary expression and they trounce hegemonic, traditional, mainstream literary and aesthetic parameters and surge ahead to formulate a fresh, alternative, innovative, radical and optimistic literary idiom.

It is with the slightest humiliation that Bama now addresses herself as paraichi but rather with a proud awareness of her ethnicity. After crawling through the dark labyrinths of sufferings, she has now emerged out into the bright light to stand erect, to discover her true ‘self’. Interestingly, parallels may be drawn with Angelou who underwent traumatic experiences of being black and a woman trapped in double invisibility, to evolve out of it by challenging the euro-androcentric world. If Bama has taken pride in her dalitism, Angelou feels the same in her blackness and her African culture.
5.2 Self Examination and Self Revelation

That the blacks and the dalits suffer oppression is the hard reality. This oppressive reality forms the matrix of their rising against the oppressor. The works of the marginalized need not necessarily succumb to sympathy, generating traditional writing, but it could be about their self-examinations and self-realization and the enlightenment they obtained which demand the acceptance of revealing the truth that they are human beings who ought to live or have the right to live like any other person. Hence, instead of blaming their fate and community, there is an effort in their works to celebrate and publicize the values of their hidden culture. They believe that their culture or any culture for that matter is not inferior and each one has its own myths, traditions and history, and through their works make an effort to reclaim their lost culture and tradition. The essence of African-American personality is found in their spirituals, Jazz, Blues, poems, plays, short stories and novels. Even though there is a perpetual identity crisis in their literature, it has also revealed the core of optimism that they would overcome someday. The dalit women writers in India have raised their voices with the intention to be heard. They forge their identities in little crucibles of poems, plays, short stories, novels, chants, folksongs, and autobiographies.

The fabric of Angelou’s texts shows a loud protest against the manifold oppression of black society and the multiple problems its women face. But such multiple oppression is not confined to anyone class or community, and
that it is universal is evident from the oppression faced by the dalits in India. The subordination of women based on falsehood of gender implies a truth about women which is outside culture, outside language and meaning, and a question of nature. What was radical about the work of Angelou and Bama was precisely their break with the myth of a known and knowable nature that could be invoked in defence of specific political practices. The construction of feminine subculture, a form of writing which is essentially different from men’s, paradoxically shares the same difficulty as it takes ‘culture’ for ‘nature’. The two writers belonging to different cultural spaces emphasized different trends to analyse the injustices of patriarchy and women’s resistance to them while at the same time both identified specific pressure points for change. The strategy taken by the colonized was to turn the negative identities ascribed to them into positive self-image. To create a positive self-image, it was imperative to analyse their position in the society, domestic conditions, and religious situations. They were able to acquire strength and a positive mind set to create an identity that questioned inequality and exploitation. Angelou and Bama underwent such self-examination at a particular stage in their lives, when they suffered the most and it generated an operative force of revelation and self-realization.

Though the social and cultural milieu of the two writers differs, there is a unifying node in their attempts towards self-identity and self-assertion. So, if it was ‘Black is Beautiful’ for the Blacks, ‘Dalits are Dignified’ becomes the slogan for the Dalits. Negritude celebrates all that have been identified as
negative and inferior by the colonizers. Angelou feels that even if one cannot get rid of discrimination, one could “put positive things in there along with the negative” (Angelou Interview). Bama calls for change thus, “We who are asleep must open our eyes and look about us. We must not accept injustice of our enslavement by telling ourselves it is our fate, as if we have no true feelings; we must dare to stand up for change” (K 25).

5.2.1 Black Power

Whites in America communicated messages of inferiority to black women and offered them no emotional or economical support from society. They often lacked support even from black men which equipped them with strength and boldness. But, unfortunately, many black women had accepted the self-demonizational teaching of Europeans as the answer to their beliefs in their worth. That they were destined to self-oppression was hard to be erased from their thought processes and hence they remained unaware of their identity. They could neither wait for a deliverer to impart enlightenment, nor could find one and own it. The people of African descent were in need of constant, progressive, forward and free thinking growth. Their ancestors for thousands of years had been speaking aloud but they had been ignored. Many black women fought persistently over the years to resist the negative gender roles, sexual abuse, and economic domination they had been forced to accept. When Angelou published I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, she was hailed as a new kind of memoirist, one of the first African-American women who were able to
publicly discuss their personal lives. Till then, black female writers were marginalized to the point that they were unable to present themselves as central characters. The self-revelation in her writings had led many other women writers to “open themselves up without shame to the eyes of the world” (Cudjoe 8).

_The Caged Bird_ opens with the poignant halting voice of Marguerite Johnson struggling for her own voice beneath the vapid doggerel of the yearly Easter Pageant, “What you looking at me for?/I didn’t come to stay” (Cage 1). These two lines prefigure the entire work. “What you looking at me for” is the painful question of every black girl made self-conscious and self-doubting to a White world critical of her very existence, the claim that she didn’t come to stay increases the irony as the entire work ultimately affirms the determination of Marguerite and symbolically all the ensuing survivors of the Middle Passage to stay. To stay in the White man’s country is to affirm life and the possibility of redemption, despite the circumstances of their coming through slavery or the efforts to remove them by lynching or make them invisible by segregation. Angelou graphically picturizes the scene wherein the little girl Maya, hurrying from the church trying to beat the wetness coursing down her legs, hears the beneficiary murmurs of the old church ladies, “Lord bless the child” and “Praise God” (Cage 3). But she understood later that in spite of the humiliation, they survived the painfulness of life by the tender stabilities of family and community.
Angelou through her works narrates how black girls grew up observing their community at work, in the church and among the Whites, to imbibe whatever was taught and instructed. But the hopeful black girl unconsciously questioned and analyzed the segregation, racism, and behaviour of the Whites and the Blacks. Even at a tender age she understood the human quality of the blacks and their fellow feeling towards their community. On the train ride down to Arkansas, Angelou and Bailey received the sympathy of the Blacks. She remembers, “Negro passengers who always traveled with loaded lunch boxes felt sorry for the poor little motherless darlings and piled us with cold fried chicken and potato salad” (Cage 4). She persistently demonstrates the bonding in the African-American community which tries to protect them whenever needed. The Black community life was opened to her when she stayed with her grand mother at Arkansas. Her grand mother’s store was full of laughing, joking, boasting, and bragging black cotton pickers who were optimistic in the morning that they would be the champion pickers of the day but returned in the evening as defeated men, weighed down by heavy work and low wages. Angelou witnessed how in spite of the grumbling they were always ready to face another day of trying to earn enough for the whole year. This was proof of the optimistic urge of the blacks to survive. Angelou commented, “I speak of the black experience, but I am always talking about the human condition - about what we can endure, dream, fail at and still survive” (McPherson 10).
Angelou’s Momma was insulted by the white girls who came to the store; she only sang and called them all ‘Miz’. Angelou was furious but her inability to react made her cry. She found to her surprise that Momma was happy because whatever the contest had been out there, Momma had won by remaining poised and unprovoked. Angelou took the rake and erased the smudged footprints of the girls. She worked on a design of a large heart with lots of hearts growing smaller inside, with an arrow piercing the smallest heart from the outside rim. This symbolic design lightened the heart of both Momma and Angelou and they found the bond much tighter. The little black girl could express her love and support only in this way because she remained helpless inside the store when the naughty and indecent girls insulted Momma. That incident had made her think why her grand mother had to be so patient:

Why couldn’t she have come inside the sweet, cool store when we saw them breasting the hill? What did she prove? And then if they were dirty, mean and impudent, why did Momma have to call them Miz? (Cage 26).

Angelou understood the strength and tolerance of the black woman in spite of insults, and thus learnt their power. Angelou’s rape was also a demonstration of the violence of black female and the loss of her voice. But it was the cultured and proud Mrs. Flowers who transformed her, and brought her into life by retrieving her voice. Her recovery from the trauma following the rape signalled her growing sense of self-acceptance and her discovery of her own poetic voice. She wrote about such experiences to prevent them from happening to
other girls and that anyone who had been raped might gain understanding and not blame oneself for it as she did.

Kinship concern is another important theme which offers strength and positivism in Angelou throughout her life. This bond has helped her to think hopefully and survive any drastic situation. The concept of family in Angelo’s work must be taken into account, the manner in which she and her brother had been displaced by their parents. Growing alone, Angelou felt solace in the company of her brother Bailey. She loved him so, “… if there is going to be hope and a hope of wholeness is the unshaking need for an unshakable God. My pretty Black brother was my Kingdom come” (Cage 19). She placed the personal with Divine and achieved hope. After the brutal physical assault on her by Freeman, it was Bailey to whom she disclosed the matter. It was the threat of Bailey’s life that kept her silent about the matter. He was always with her to instruct, to teach, to comfort, to play and to be idolized.

Bailey and Angelou shared the bitterness about parental neglect but the pious, strong and able grandmother brought them up as dignified black children. This enterprising woman moulded the shy, silent child into a strong woman of wisdom with the help of Mrs. Flowers who treated her kindly and opened the world of books to her. It was Mrs. Flowers who instructed, “Language is man’s way of communicating with his fellow man and it is language alone which separates him from the lower animals” (Cage 82). That was a totally new idea to her and that made her think when she fell into a
catatonic silence. She taught, “Words means more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning” (Cage 82). With the help of Mrs. Flowers, Angelou was able to overcome her muteness and the process of regaining the voice is a symbolic coming back to normalcy and hope. Without her, Angelou might not have come to the limelight and thereby influence other black women.

Angelou’s relationship with her Momma lasted until she married Tosh. Being a disciplinarian and a religious woman, Momma brought up her grandchild in those frameworks. Crippled Uncle Willie was a Sherwood Anderson, grotesque but loving as a father to Angelou. Momma and Uncle Willie accepted her after the rape and the resignation of the community encouraged her to relax. To be satisfied with life’s inequities was a lesson she learnt from them. This gave her the boldness to face life and shed the feeling of insecurity and alienation. Going to meet their mother Vivian Baxter was like being driven to Hell and their father was like the delivering devil. But the meeting of the mother shocked her, “To describe my mother would be to write about a hurricane in its perfect power or the climbing, falling colours of a rainbow” (Cage 49). Her mother’s beauty literally assailed her and she was a powerful and honest lady full of surprises but with all her jollity she had no mercy. Angelou remembers the boldness of Vivian when a business partner of her called her ‘bitch’. She had the audacity to shoot him twice; although the partnership was dissolved, they retained admiration for each other. Vivian was exposing the children to certain facts of life like personal hygiene, proper
posture, table manners, good restaurants and even tipping practices. Angelou was able to understand her mother as an individual and found her to be a firm believer in self-sufficiency. When Angelou decided to work, her mother supported her with one of her usual terse asides, “That’s what you want to do? Then nothing beats a trial but a failure. Give it everything you’ve got. I’ve told you many times, ‘can’t do is like don’t care” (Cage 225). It meant that there was nothing a person can’t do and there should be nothing a human being didn’t care about. It was the most positive encouragement she could have hoped for. Angelou applied for the job of conductor in the street car and Vivian believed that they wouldn’t accept coloured people on the street car. Angelou became furious and disappointed but gradually ascended the emotional ladder to haughty indignation and finally to a state of stubbornness. After a long struggle with determination, she wanted to break the restricting tradition. She was hired as the first Negro woman conductor on the San Francisco street cars. During this period of strain, Vivian and Angelou began their first and lasting mutual adult admiration and mother-daughter bonding. Angelou remembers, “She comprehended the perversity of life, that in the struggle lies the joy” (Cage 228). The bond between the mother and the daughter lasted through and beyond Angelou’s tour of Europe in 1954.

Motherhood is a prevailing aspect in all of her works. When Angelou became a mother at a tender age of seventeen, her mother took care of her and her baby. But conscious of the responsibility, she thought that she was unfair with her mother. She decided to quit the house and take a job to “… show the
whole world that I was equal to my pride and greater than my pretensions” (*Gather* 8). This determination to survive made her take up different jobs. Wherever she went, Guy, her son, was with her. He filled the lacuna left by her brother Bailey.

Angelou analyzed her life and the life of her son before and after her marriages. While examining her life with Tosh or Make, she discovered that she had selfishly offered her life to them not once considering the future of her son and this revelation prompted her to put an end to her marriages. She felt no regrets about such short-lived marriages because the self-revelation had saved her from demonic personalis and they proved to be right decisions. She believed that “… life love the person who dared to live in” (*Heart* 4) and as Blacks said, “Follow your first mind” (*Heart* 182). The disappointment of the end of the show business created an instant need to find a job, “I had to find a job, get my grits together and take care of my son. So much for show biz, I was off to live real life” (*Gather* 138). Angelou exhibits her strength by her refusal to self-pity. For survival, Angelou worked in a shop owned by a White woman Louise Cox, but she suspected the friendliness of the white women and she grew vigilant. She examined the intension of the white woman who offered her records, “She couldn’t have been seeking friendship after all she was white and as far as I knew, while women were never lonely, except in books. White men adored them, black men desired them and black women worked for them” (*Singin’* 6). She kept Louise under constant surveillance and after a couple of months found that there were no threads of prejudice. She felt grateful for the
job and her first introduction to an amiable black-white relationship. The common thread running through all her work is the theme derived from the lessons of her life and the lives of the black women for whom she speaks. For Black women the sickness of racism was doubly hard, not only because “they must bear up under conflicting internal impulses, but also because they must shoulder it alone” (Elliot 7).

5.2.2 Dalit Struggle

Bama’s writings celebrate dalit women’s lives, their art, their humour, their resilience and their creativity. There is an interrogative and self-reflexive nature of discourse which renders a significant pointer to contemporary social and political reality. She dreams of the oppressed dalit community getting united and fighting for their rights as the Blacks did in America. Her works break the tradition and propose a new order. Karukku was not originally intended to be published. She was disappointed and disoriented after leaving the Convent. She said, “I even thought that I was unfit to live in this society” (Interview Personal). When she lamented about her condition and the cruelty of the society, the Church Father Mark suggested that she write it down as she felt it. It was the encouragement and advice of Father Mark that instilled new strength in her and also identified the writer in her. The outcome was Karukku. It traces the development of Bama from an ordinary village girl to a dalit woman committed to fight for the cause of her community. During this formative period her individuality had undergone a total transformation. She could
overcome her identity crisis through self-introspection which led to self-discovery. Bama writes:

It was a very personal endeavor that helped me resolve certain tensions in my life. When I left the convent, I didn’t know how life would be! I had no hopes or dreams or any expectation even. My only aim was to get a job first in order to survive because I had no one to take care of me (Littcrit 110).

Her constant self-questioning, courage and dignity while facing the impossible odds, hurt and anguish undergone during the process of self-discovery, caused her to recreate her life experiences for the readers. Though at first she was dejected and disappointed, later, she regained her strength to face the adversities boldly.

In Karukku, Bama remembers and recreates her dalit experiences as a child and the revelation of being an untouchable woman in society. The innocent child who hadn’t yet heard people speak openly of untouchability queried, “What did it mean when they called as ‘paraya’? Had the name become that obscene?” (K 13). This can be seen as the first step in Bama’s efforts for re-description of her situation. But now she is least humiliated when she speaks about her caste or calls herself a ‘Paraichi’.

Bama felt proud of becoming first among the Harijan pupils of that district in the SSLC exam and she was least embarrassed to be singled out as Harijan. She writes her unforgettable moment thus, “I was even pleased 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 progresses” (K 18). She learnt to think positively even while encountering humiliating experiences in life. It offered her undaunted urge to proceed confidently. The sufferings of the hapless dalit children in the convent inspired her to serve them in some possible way. She thought, “Why should I not become a nun too and truly help these people who are humiliated so much and kept under such strict control?” (K 20). This desire haunted her so much that she eventually resigned the job of teaching and entered a religious order. Joining a Convent as a Tamil dalit woman invited further agony for her. Bama expressed this anguish about caste discrimination time and again in Karukku. She was sent to a Convent in North India and was shocked to find that “…many in the convent did not even know what was meant by dalit. And those few who knew had an extremely poor opinion about dalits; they spoke ill of us” (K 99). Her sufferings continued even after leaving the convent. Her exit from the Convent signifies the resistance she showed against the Holy Order and the society. The hypocrisies of the church were a new revelation for her:

Nowadays now that I’ve left the order, I am angry when I see priests and nuns …How long they will deceive us, as if we are innocent children. Dalits have begun to realize the truth. They have become aware that they have been made slaves in the name of God (K 93 - 94).
Though she endured mental agony it was an individual achievement. She holds up her own life as an example for other dalit women to follow.

If in *Karukku* the tension is between the self and community, in *Sangati* it is the community that voices the sufferance. Her thoughts and self-examinations are a means to analyse her experiences which ultimately call for progressive action. The optimistic exploratory structure of the book as a whole seeks to create a dalit-feminist perspective. Bama comments, “*Sangati* grew out of the hope that the dalit women who read it will rise up with fervour and walk toward victory as they begin their struggle as pioneers of a new society” (S IX). She acknowledges her positive vision in these words. *Sangati* accommodates more than thirty five characters and other than delineating oppression it foregrounds the need for recognition and awareness that peaceful home and happy family are central to the social structure and it also informs the cultural identities of a community.

Bama as a writer-narrator in *Sangati* professes to record a series of conversations held between her and her mother or between her and her maternal grand mother and other women in the village. The narrative pattern of the novel is a deliberate negation of accepted fictional tradition. This is achieved by decentralizing the significance of the central character using multiple dalit female protagonists, each having definite importance. They all are bold women who mock the paradigms of power politics and andro-caste centric hegemonic structures. The various domestic and social life experiences
of the marginalized women are examined by the author-narrator and presented through her works. Her grand mother, Velliyamma kizhavi, whom she calls Paati was described as a strenuous worker, a brave woman who had reared her two daughters single-handedly following her husband’s desertion within four years of marriage. When enquired how she managed to live in a society of oppression, hatred and fear, Paati replied, “I’m an orutthankai pattini, I’ve slept with only one man. I won’t allow any other fellow anywhere near me” (S 8 - 9). This shows the girth of the old woman who taught Bama lessons in life which helped her later to encounter the problems in the society after deserting the Convent.

When Bama ruminated about Mariamma-landlord-Manikkam incident, she was simultaneously sorry and angry and with indignation questions the plight of dalit women: “Why were women pushed aside always and everywhere? The question kept on churning inside me” (S 28). An impatient Bama accosted Paati and enquired why Paati had not reacted in the village council but Bama was disappointed with a negative answer, “Does that mean that whatever men say is bound to be right? And that whatever women say will always be wrong?” (S 29). Chaffing within she argued with her patriarchophilic Paati about the rights of women and commented, “It’s you folk who are always putting us down” (S 29). Paati understood that education had invigorated Bama with such ideas and warned her to stop dreaming as she believed that nothing was going to change just because she had learnt. But
Bama being optimistic still believed that women could voice their problems once the light of knowledge is kindled within them.

Caste hegemony and patriarchal social structure seek to control dalit women’s sexual life and conduct. Bama in her works tries to analyze the cause of the quarrels which were common scenes in dalit colonies at dawn or at dusk. Women work hard equally as men to take care of the family and the drunken men came home to torment their wives physically. The loud shameless commotion created by these men and women in the colonies always troubled Bama. She writes:

The women never got a proper night’s peace and quiet after working hard all day. They had to please their husbands whenever they demanded it so that they got any rest. Neither their bodies nor their minds felt rested when they woke up. Promptly they vented their irritation by quarrelling with everyone they met (S 67).

The language they use was full of expletives, quite often with explicit sexual references. Bama suggests several reasons for the violence in their language and its sexual connotations. In chapter six of Sangati, for example, she delineates variegated experiences of exploited women and acknowledges that sometimes a sharp tongue and obscene words is a woman’s only tool to sham man and escape from extreme physical violence. She also reflects that such language might have grown out of frustration or lack of pleasurable experience or it might be the result of the internalizing of a patriarchy based on sexual
dominance and power. Bama uses the raw language used by various women in her colony. Rakkamma’s husband abused her in a vile and vulgar way and was about to hit her. She screamed and shrieked, “Ayyayyo, he’s killing me…” (S 61). The husband wild with fury threatened to pull the guts out of her. She reacted thus, “Go on, da, kick me, let’s see you do it, da! Let’s see if you are a real man. You only know how to go for a woman’s parts. Go and fight with a man who is your equal and you’ll see” (S 61). With a long and loud spat “thuu”, she retorted with the sharpness of her tongue when he showed his muscular strength. Bama is equally depressed seeing how a woman’s body, mind, feelings, words, deeds and her entire life were often controlled and dominated by man. Bama noticed that in her village many women died at childbirth or soon after due to lack of medical help, poor health and insufficient diet. Their men had no hesitation to go immediately for a remarriage. As for birth control, men refused it and believed that they would lose their strength and women believed that they could not take hard work in the fields. Bama ponders, “If they can’t work, how will they eat? As it is, the families keep going only because of the women. So the question they ask sound reasonable to me” (S 36).

However Bama’s ingrained optimism forced her to expel such doubts and thoughts hopefully, “…but if only we were to realize that we too have our self-worth, honour and self-respect, we would manage our own lives in our own way” (S 68). She compares the dalit women and upper caste women and found that the upper caste women are also often suppressed like the dalit
women but being fragile mentally they are unable to tolerate the oppression they suffer. But most of the dalit women, however hard they might have to struggle and undergo discrimination, survived due to the abundant will power. Dalit women challenge the domain of placelessness and marginality and try to create a definite place in the society.

In Sangati, Bama delineates the dalit women and their problems and how they fought the burden of gender oppression. In Vanmam, she deals with intra-dalit strife and victimhood of dalit women. The maligned landlords Naickers nurture and keep alive the enmity between the two communities - the Parayas and the Pallars. Bama proudly accounts how the educated Parayas were able to organize cultural activities, sports competitions and awareness campaigns to spread Ambedkar’s thoughts to their community. She also advocates political unity among dalits in this novel. Antony in Vanmam after installing Ambedkar’s statue addresses the audience thus:

‘Educate, Organize, Agitate’ is the slogan of Ambedkar. We should educate ourselves. We should gain social awareness. We are marginalized and oppressed in society … let us unite to establish justice. Let us follow the path of Ambedkar. Let us create a new world (V 74).

Despite the best efforts of Paraya youths, caste strife between the two communities does not end, but Bama concludes the novel on an optimistic note and hopes for a result-oriented future.
5.2.3. Self Seeking Writers

Both Angelou and Bama are experiential writers seeking to challenge the assumptions of white/upper caste/patriarchal culture. Instead of positioning women only as victims of the coercive power of the hegemonic ideologies, these writers offer positive subjectivities that counter and resist them. In order to envisage a change they insist on a mode of discourse which enables a critical perspective upon the past, the present, and sometimes into an emerging future. Their physical journey becomes psychological sojourn in which they recount the progression from innocent childhood to experience, to tolerance and ultimately to a compromise.

Maya Angelou, the black slave, journeys into freedom and finally back into history as an empowered black woman. It is a reverse migration of the Afro-American from South America to North America, from America to Africa and then back to America. Each of these journeys no matter how arduous had generated self-consciousness. Journeys were often perilous to the self but have provided a means for defining the self. The journey of Angelou began when she was just three and her brother four to Stamps, Arkansas, and from there to St. Louis. After a short stay but with a long memory they were back to Arkansas and then to San Francisco. The place offered various experiences, relationships, occupations and she also chanced to visit different cities. Each movement taught her new lessons in life. She moved to Africa, and to Cairo, with the activist Vusumizi Make with her son but when the brief relationship ended, they moved to Ghana. The torturous journey into the interiors of Ghana
was symbolic as she experienced the feeling of nativity. The atavistic journey revealed her slave history, identified her to the tribe to which she belonged and recreated the agony of being a black, a slave and a woman. Communicating with the tribes of Ghana in the ancestral country offered her greater psychological maturity and she said, “They had given me their affection and instructed me on the positive power of literally knowing one’s place” (*All God* 196). But soon she understood that Africa was not the place for her and she decided to return to America, “… if the heart of Africa still remains allusive, my search for it had brought me closer to understanding myself and other human beings” (*All God* 196). The ache for home is a permanent issue for all diasporic. She had got a chance to be a black woman in a black country but she with her son returned to the United States with a new, self-knowing reservation.

Bama’s journey is through a totally different path as her experience as a dalit is totally different from that of the black. The journey of Bama began when she moved from her village school to a convent school in a nearby village to attend the ninth standard. She was suddenly confronted with the rich children in the class which totally unnerved her. Self-consciously she thought, “… as for me, my community was low caste, I had no money either. All the same I thought, I would, study hard and make good. So I worked really hard” (*K* 62). Instead of withdrawing into herself, she determined to do well and as expected came out with good marks in the public examinations. Unfortunately, due to financial strains her parents could not think of sending her to a college.
When her mother understood her desire, she pawned her earrings and made money for her admission. Coming to a college was a crucial and different experience in her life, “I, firm in the resolve that I would carry on with my studies one way or another arrived at the college with just the clothes I was wearing and admitted myself into the hostel” (K 63). The painful experience of being a dalit taught her the lesson of acceptance and to fight life to the end. Bama’s journey from her little village to the neighbouring village and later to cities carrying the burden of misery, poverty, and inequality gave her experimental grounding for the future. After completing her degree and BEd, she hoped to become a teacher but the future was vague, “I consoled myself that there were any number of people who were in a worse plight than myself” (K 65).

Bama describes the plight of an educated dalit woman seeking a job where caste was a hurdle that hindered her progress. Though she got job as a teacher she was disillusioned to witness discrimination towards the dalit children in the school. This disillusion led her to become a nun so that she could teach and help the dalit children. Her journey from an ordinary dalit woman to a dalit nun was bitter and painful. She was posted in a North Indian school where they didn’t even know who dalits are. She felt useless and dejected and requested to be sent to TamilNadu. Accordingly she was transferred but had to serve in different schools where rich upper class children learnt. Her journey again proved to be futile until she left the convent after serving there for seven years which was a turning point in her life. Though she
had moved from one place to another without attaining her purpose, each journey was an experience which strengthened her and a process of self discovery not only as an individual but as a dalit woman who gathered up the collective experience of dalits. The development of the consciousness from the past history, to the present living would give shape and substance to the self in future.

The racism and casteism suffered by Angelou and Bama had awakened them to delve into the past history and culture and forced them to rewrite, reproduce and celebrate its value. The critic Willis comments, “Journey is a process both of self-discovery and cultural retrieval. It is a soul purging, body rending and highly physical means of understanding” (223). Self-discovery emerges as an active subject prepared to redefine the future. The commitment to the future and the ability to conceive of future visions can only be achieved through struggle. Both the writers underwent such a struggle to look into themselves and into the future to succeed.

5.3 Self Reliance and Self Esteem
Success in people encourages them to be self-confident. As self-confidence grows they feel empowered to face new challenges. When they equip themselves to confront each challenge, they develop the capacity to cope with whatever life throws their way. That feeling leads to further growth of self confidence, self reliance, and self esteem. Angelou and Bama climbed these steps through their life experiences that made them competent enough to cope with the challenges of life and of being worthy of happiness. They were able to
accept and learn from their own experiences and bounce back from adversities. Moreover they were open and assertive in communicating their desires and needs and were not devastated by criticisms. Angelou’s unique style of writing conveys her optimistic expectations and hopes for the human race, because she has fought vigilantly against sexism, racism, and segregation without giving up. Bama’s life experiences urged her towards actively engaging in alleviating the sufferings of the oppressed. The purpose of her narrative voice in her works is to draw out a collective response in terms of an ‘awakening’ so that resistance becomes a shared activity.

Empowerment can be achieved only through education, employment, and equality. The writers belonging to the subordinate classes are ready to reject their false consciousness and perceive themselves as real entities and reveal their expressions which are often counter cultural discourse. They constitute a positive perception so that they could build a sense of solidarity within the community. The self-earned knowledge had empowered these women writers to renounce their obedience to the phallic, hegemonic powers. They had recognized that the central responsibility of a woman is primarily to herself.

Education helps them to define their realities in a better way to the larger community. Angelou and Bama understood that the curse of illiteracy discriminates women in the social, economic and even in the academic level. That social upliftment is made possible only through education is the truth both
the writers learnt in the course of their struggle. Education creates a sense of self-awareness and employment provides identity and financial security. The legal status of woman is the same as man but often she does not enjoy its advantages. Even when her rights are recognized, traditional custom prevents their full expression in the mores. Black women have come a long way from their unequal status but the dalit women have to propel their way forward to achieve equality.

5.3.1 Dignity of Labour

Angelou learnt what it is to be hard working and self reliant from her Momma. The indelible childhood experiences with her Momma gave opportunity to witness her ably run the store, manage domestic chores, nurture her crippled son, and fostered her two grand children against all odds. To Angelou, Momma epitomized self-reliance, strength and courage. Angelou and Bailey were taught to work in the store by Momma. Momma’s tutelage in her earlier life and later her mother Vivian’s support and advice about self-help induced her to take up any job. When Angelou was wounded by her father’s girl friend Dolores, she did not want to return to mother; instead she wandered into a junk yard where she acquainted with the orphaned street children. She learnt to hunt and pick unbroken bottles and sell them as the slum dwellers did. She writes, “The lack of criticism evident by our ad hoc community influenced me and set a tone of tolerance for my life” (Cage 216). These lessons in life made Angelou understand Bailey when he wanted to be independent and seek a job. He
confidently said, “I’ll begin as a dining car waiter and then a steward and when I know all there is to know about that I’ll branch out…the future looks good” (Cage 223).

Vivian Baxter was a firm believer of self sufficiency. She liked to speak of herself as the “original do-it yourself girl” (Cage 224). She always supported Angelou in her life when she was running from one job to another. Angelou often remembered her mother’s aphorism. She believed, “God helps those who help themselves or life is going to give you just what you put in it. Put your whole heart in everything you do and pray, then you can wait” (Cage 228). At seventeen, Angelou was a mother and needed a job to survive. She worked as a bus girl, in the cafeteria as a waitress, and took the commands “… collect the dishes, wipe the tables, make sure the salt and pepper shakers are clean and here’s your uniform” (Gather 9). Though she hated the meager salary, worked there for a week and then took a job as a Creole cook in another café for seventy five dollars a week. She moved to Los Angeles in the hope of getting better employment. But there too she worked as a waitress and got good tips. Life was moving in a tempo and she had her son to look after. Her aim was to make money for a comfortable living for her and her son. It was at this time that Angelou befriended two lesbian prostitutes. Angelou made money with these prostitutes acting as the madam of the betrothal. She was a dancer and a chauffeurette at the same time. When she quarrelled with the lesbians, she ran back to Momma for courage. Then for a period of two years she found herself recruited in the US Army as a soldier.
She committed herself to show business, dancing and her son’s needs were growing. Unfortunately the career came to an end before it began. She felt desperate and helpless. But she regained her poise and decided that she would face life boldly, “I had to find a job, get my grits together and take care of my son so much for show biz, I was off to live real life” (Gather 138). Whenever she was in and out of job, she managed courageously to get another one for the sake of survival. She was too proud to depend on her mother or brother. Every time she lost her job she learnt to survive. Angelou later became a member of ‘Porgy and Bess’ music troupe and succeeded in her career as a folk singer. The world of literature was opened to her and she managed to inch a space as a star writer. She was a person who thrived on challenges that dictated her to battle her way through life, relying on no one and nothing but her own strength, intelligence and courage. She found dignity in all the jobs she did because the money offered security to her and her son. She believed in total honesty, had self vision and convictions even if it meant standing alone.

Having begun her life in one of the poorest and most marginalized communities in India, Bama had struggled against all odds to gain education and a better future for her. Born and brought up in a village, she had witnessed the women at work from dawn to dusk. Bama describes the work culture of her people in her novels, “From the time I was a small child, I saw people working hard. I grew up amongst such people... and to this day in my village both men and women can survive only through hard and incessant labour” (K 41).
Though most of them were agricultural labourers, whenever there was a draught or if the monsoon failed the women took up any job like collecting firewood, collecting cow dung to make cow dung cakes, work in the houses of Naickers or tend the cows. Bama understood the dignity of hard labour when she worked in the fields during holidays. She writes her experience in *Karukku* how after finishing her tenth class she helped her mother in the work by carrying a head load of firewood. The stunned villagers said to her mother, “…your daughter has finished her schooling at the convent, yet she doesn’t mind carrying firewood like this” (*K* 46). Bama enjoyed doing such hard physical labour whenever she could. She was not ashamed to do any menial job because, if her mother and grand mother could do it to sustenance her, then she could also do it. The work culture of the community portrayed by her in *Karukku* in detail shows not only the oppression, exploitation, and poverty of the people but also the strength and spirit of the hardworking people to survive. Bama felt proud of the strength of the dalits to work and saw the possibility of improvement among them. But she was unhappy about the disparity in the wages received by men and women. In spite of the work and physical exploitation that always crushed and weakened them, they never complained but remained cheerful by engaging in singing songs or commenting or chatting. Bama comments, “There is a community that was born to work” (*K* 47). Bama questioned the very survival of the upper caste people without the labour of the dalits. The novel *Vanmam* opens with the picture of Mekkelamma coming home after the field work, “God had created us like this and they are like that”
(V 13). The dalit women of Kandampatti village lamented because the upper caste Naickers enjoyed the fruit of their labour and led a luxurious life while they who toiled in the fields did not get enough to eat. Though the novel is about the intra-dalit strife between Pallars and Parayas, it is interspersed with the chores of the hard working dalit women. Bama criticizes the laziness of the men in the novel. She describes how the women commented on the men when they were returning from collecting fodder for their cows. The men in the village were bathing noisily in the well and Madathi kizhavi called them, “Aye, what dirt has struck in your bodies? Have you gone to dug wells? Or to cut grass? Or to plough fields? Or to work in the plains or woods to collect fire wood to help your mother? it seems you would drain all the well water” (V 55).

This simple questioning reveals the hard work done by women to take care of the family and the easy life of the young men. The women in Sangati are also depicted as hardworking. Her Paati stands out as the best example. Bama recalls, “My Paati kept on going out to work until she was quite old. Although she lived in her own, she went out and gathered firewood, lit her own hearth, and cooked and ate her kanji” (S 60). Bama also notices how the women enjoyed their hardwork and took responsibility of the family. Having grown up in such a situation, Bama did not find it difficult to do any job that had helped her to develop a philosophy that women should be independent and self-reliant.
5.3.2 Sense of Freedom

Self reliance and self sufficiency could induce self esteem but for that it is necessary to have courage, a free and independent mindset and the support of the community. The universal right of freedom to think and act accentuates the dignity in persons irrespective of caste, race, religion, or language. Instead of becoming sadomasochistic, the blacks and the dalits are slowly occupying the lacuna with their assertion and identity. A supportive, cohesive, community and familial bonding alone might reduce the damage done to the oppressed people. The lives of Angelou and Bama prove how the fortifying support of the family and community enable them to overcome their vulnerabilities and create an independent mind which would help in the formation of concrete self image. To know oneself was the best lesson they learnt in the course of their eventful lives. They were ready to accept their blackness/dalitness for independent and progressive thoughts and deeds which empowered them further.

Even as a child Angelou was unwilling to accept anything that was forced upon her. Though she was an independent child, at heart, she was forced to do things against her will. She confronted such situations with much resistance. She believed, “… life as far as I had deduced it, was a series of opposites: black/white, up/down, life/death, rich/poor, love/hate, happy/sad, and no mitigating areas in between. It followed crime/punishment” (Gather 65). This great realization and revelation propelled her to self- knowledge and self-dignity. There is a hint of compromise in the tone of Angelou in The Heart
of a Woman when she writes how it was inexplicably irritating for her to hear the black people excoriate white men, white women, white children, and white history particularly as it applied to black people, when they gathered in the house of John Kellins. She comments, “I fretted at the unrelenting diatribe not because I disagree but because I didn’t think whites interesting enough to consume all my thoughts, nor powerful enough to control all my movements” (Heart 32).

Freedom struggle for Angelou was against racism and for emancipation of the blacks. Paradigms of freedom and emancipation, a rebellious spirit to fight, and acute political awareness inspired her to form a big support group for Malcolm. Malcolm X announced a desire to create an organization of African-American unity. His plan was to present the plight of the blacks in the US and ask the world council to intercede on the part of beleaguered blacks. Stimulated by the idea, Angelou decided to return to the States from Accra to help establish the organization. When she thought of Robert Sobukwe, the leader of the Pan African Congress, who had languished for years in prison and Nelson Mandela who was arrested at that time, she wondered at the passion and the rightness of their cause. She wrote foresightedly that “… the two men would become footnotes on the pages of history” (A Song 7). But what shocked her was the killing of Malcolm X by a black. Moreover the comment of her mother about Malcolm X as “a rabble-rouser” (16) led Angelou to an attack of narcolepsy. She was disappointed because Vivian did not appreciate or understand Malcolm and his struggle for the equality of black people. When
Martin Luther King was assassinated she was intimidated and depressed. But the words of Momma, “Nothing beats a trial but a failure” (A Song 209) induced positive thoughts that helped her to write her experiences that she believed, “We had come so far from where we started and weren’t nearly approaching where we had to be but we were on the road to becoming better” (A Song 212).

Angelou and Bama refused to be stereotyped but instead with their self-confidence and resistance almost terrorized their opponents. There were instances in their lives when they had taken firm and independent actions. The power of resistance had made Angelou walk out of Tosh and Make without regrets because she felt she was affirmative. Her mother had advised, “You don’t have to think about doing the right thing. If you’re for the right thing then you do it without thinking” (Cage 246). As a prostitute, a pinch of guilt invaded her, but she soon reassured herself thinking:

There was nothing wrong with sex. I had no need for shame.
Society dictated that sex was only licensed by marriage documents.
Well, I don’t agree with that. Society is a conglomerate of human beings and that’s just what I was. A human being” (Gather 167).

But the ambivalent attitude in her refused to accept Make taking other women or her son Guy having a white girl friend above his age. She felt a sense of loss momentarily always attracted her in spite of all its adversities and animosities. Escaping into the city offered her a state of freedom and “I became dauntless
and free of fears, intoxicated by the physical fact of San Francisco” (Cage 180).

Bama’s sense of freedom is channeled in a different plane. Being an untouchable and a Christian woman, she and her community are bound inescapably. She longed to free herself from the discriminations of caste, religion, and gender. When she was in the village she wanted to go to cities, from school to college, from college to employment, from employment to service. Wherever she moved and whatever she learned, the shadows of caste and gender discrimination followed. She longed for an independent life, which would hoist her identity and strength. Bama is often inquisitive and argumentative, sometimes angry and anguished and hates the society that subjugated her. Her thoughts are reflected in the characters created by her. The dalit women in Sangati are all free women in a way because in spite of discrimination in wages they are the earners who keep the family going. But the upper caste women were neither allowed to take up a job nor were independent. She viewed these upper castes women with pity and sarcasm, “They themselves lead lives shut up inside their houses, eating, gossiping, and doing their husband’s bidding and then they treat us like this. God knows how they stay shut up within four walls, all twenty four hours of the day” (S 66).

She realized that the upper caste women are worse slaves than the dalit women because they had to submit to their husband’s hegemony and were disallowed to voice their problems because it meant to be uncultured, without
honour and decorum. According to Bama, they formed the silent sufferers while the loud mouthed dalit women who fought and quarrelled with their husbands in the open street were more free and liberated. The Hindu dalits are allowed to divorce and remarry; widow-remarriage is also permissible in their case. They are free to marry a second or even third time, so, if the husband dies widows are not treated differently in their community. The woman needs not wear a white sari to distinguish her to be a widow. Such freedom is not enjoyed by the women of other communities in similar situations and Bama writes how they have to suffer indignities like giving up their ‘tali’, ‘pottu’, turmeric and other jewellery. About the dalit woman’s freedom in this regard, Bama jeers:

Where does she have the jewellery in the first place? And where does she have the time to smear herself with turmeric, have a bath and dress herself with pottu and flowers? She runs to work at dawn and comes home after sunset. So whether her husband is alive or dead, she will follow the same routine. She might, perhaps, remove her tali. Talis are not that important among us (S 90).

Bama enumerates the courage of her classmate Pecchiamma who had to end her first marriage because her drunken husband ill-treated her. She valourizes the open and the free nature of the dalit community but Bama felt sad that Christian women do not have such freedom and she comments, “It meant a woman need not spend her entire life, burning and dying, with a man she dislikes, just because of this thing called marriage. But I also felt sad that Christian women didn’t have their chance” (S 93). Bama rebuked the custom of
the Christian priests blessing the talis chanting “... no law or Panchayat nor courts of justice can separate a wedded couple” (S 94). Bama’s argument with her mother was that the priests and nuns only frighten them and that “God created us so that we can be happy and free. I am sure that God doesn’t want us to be living like slaves to the day we die, without any rights or status, just because of a cord around the neck” (S 95).

Bama argued for the rights and freedom of the dalit women and appreciated their courage and valued those customs that allowed women freedom. Angelou decided to break herself free when she could no longer stand the treatment of Make or when she could not accommodate the atheistic ideas and behaviour of Tosh. Both believe in free and independent life where there should be no liabilities. Both the writers build their ideologies based on the concept of freedom from all bondages.

5.3.3 Writers with a Difference

The optimism in Angelou and Bama has infiltrated into their writings which heralds a new approach in minority women’s discourse. The writings of both these writers are based on distinctly feminine themes of empowerment and self determination. The power of determination, freedom, and equality are imparted to the community through their writings. They advocate self-reliance and self-esteem to the women of their community so that they could create an identity for them and their community. The hope and optimism inherent in the writings of Angelou and Bama makes them different from other writers of their clan.
Other distinguished black women writers like Morrison and Walker had focused on the experience of black girls growing to maturity in the racist, sexist society of America. The women in the novels of Morrison and Walker often fail to gain the positive perspectives that are expected from a black community. Even though Morrison was fostered with assertiveness and a positive self-image from childhood, such assertiveness fails to appear in the women of her novels and they are found to struggle for survival as long as they could. Many of them inevitably succumb under insurmountable odds and they become heroines only because they suffer and not because they succeed. Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* tries to survive in the euro-androcentric America but is doomed to fail in the end. Each member of the Breedlove family falls and fails. The men become impotent and women repressed until they finally obliterate themselves. Unlike Angelou, Morrison’s black experience is a continual suffering which rarely leads to growth and heroism. Morrison’s Pecola thus becomes more of a ‘victim than a genuinely tragic figure’ (Otten 23).

Walker’s argument in *In Search of our Mother’s Garden* incorporates her concepts of family and heritage on the shaping of the individual personalities and perceptions. Through her works, she challenges the new generation of African-American women to eliminate cultural, societal and economic boundaries and express themselves through art. She reminds her readers of the evils of slavery, of the racial injustice and sexual and verbal abuse that persisted even after emancipation. But her women characters are
never able to be themselves; they constantly live in fear of men or are morally under their control. Their frustration sometimes drives them away from their family as Margaret in *The Third Life of Grange Loveland*. Walker creates a multiplicity of permanently maimed and damaged souls within the family structure who feel no pressure for responsible living or assume exemption from the demands of responsibility. There is only occasional optimism or hope. Christ comments, “More pervasive in Walker’s fiction is despair; women who commit suicide, men who maim or kill or people who allow themselves to become animals” (108). Angelou differs from Morrison and Walker in the optimistic vision and reformatory future in her writings. Angelou’s poem ‘And Still I Rise’ has become an anthem of affirmation. To quote her:

You may write me down in history,

With your bitter, twisted lies

You may trod me in the very dust

But still, like dust, I’ll rise.

Women’s dual oppression of gender and caste forms the focus of writing in dalit literature. Sivakami in *Pazhiyana Kazhidalum* portrays the dalit leader’s corruption and manipulative politics prevalent among empowered upper caste politicians and advocates the need for an organized educated dalit youth. She projects the domestic violence of dalit women. In *Aanandayee*, the theme is female sexual exploitation and exposes the oppressive patriarchal system that is evidently unjust to women. Though Sivakami prepared the ground for dalit women writers in Tamil, both her novels had not discussed
dalit identity or self-reliance. The creative writings of other dalit writers are also about sexual harassment, discrimination and caste. But Imaiym among men writers adopts a moral, bourgeois stand regarding sexual assault on dalit women. He holds them responsible for their conduct or for what befell them without taking into account the unjust, oppressive, casteist, patriarchal structure within which they are located. Bama while highlighting the oppressive condition of dalit women never forgets to expose the ingrained optimism in them which would empower them and reinvent the question of feminism in order to integrate the dalit women.

5.4 Self Assertion and Self Identity

Self esteem and self identity are inevitable components of the self. Owen, the theorist, defines self as “… an organized and interactive system of thoughts, feelings, identities and motives that stems from self reflexivity and language, people attributes to them and characterizes specific human beings” (206). Self esteem may be the positive or the negative attitude of the person towards self. Self esteem creates self respect and a feeling of worthiness while at the same time acknowledges the personal faults and inadequacies intending to improve them. According to Stryker, the sociologist, “… identities are ‘parts’ of self (constituting) internalized positional designations …. (that) exists in so far as the person is a participant in structured role relations” (60). In this sense, one’s identity is tied to specific social networks such as family or broader social gatherings such as community, ethnicity or gender.
Education and income have salutary effects on self-esteem across all racial, casteist and ethnic groups. Illiteracy is a curse to both blacks and dalits especially the women. In spite of the emphasis laid on equality of genders, women still remain obliterated due to illiteracy. The subaltern illiterate are conditioned to believe that the injustice suffered is preordained and inescapable. Education and employment are the two pillars which place one high in society. Education creates a sense of self-awareness, and employment creates self-identity and security. Angelou believed in Martin Luther King Jr. and his speeches inspired her to take part in the Black Civil Rights Programme of which emancipation was the slogan. Bama on the other hand conformed to Ambedkar’s ideology which insisted on education and love within empowerment ethics. The writers like Angelou and Bama learnt and taught humanitarian values to all, and their writings become the vehicle for conveying the concepts of liberation and equality to the reader. The autobiographical mode of writing of the two writers cannot simply be witnessing, but it calls upon the readers to react. The writer narrator is not a single individual but a representation of the community, race or caste to which they belong. Bama’s unequivocal statement, “… there are other dalit hearts like mine” (K xiii) is relevant in this context. Angelou also used autobiographical form to subvert the usual ways of writing about women’s lives and identities in a male dominated society. She reconstructs the black woman’s image throughout by taking many roles, incarnations and identities to signify multiple layers of oppression and
personal history and to show her resistance to the system that had tried to obliterate them.

5.4.1. Reaffirmation of Black Roots

The strategic line of attack taken by the colonized was to subvert the identities ascribed to them into positive self-images. Negritude therefore meant celebrating all that had been identified as negative and inferior by the colonizers. But an account of self-identity has to be developed in terms of an overall picture of the psychological make up of the individual. In her autobiographical volumes, Angelou had displayed her pride in her black skin or her black kinky hair, which proclaimed her race and her identity.

Angelou disliked calling them names like nigger that might be convenient for those who called because it indirectly meant lack of identity. In her Caged Bird, she writes with rage how Mrs. Cullian insisted upon ‘re-naming’ Marguerite to ‘Mary’ which carried forward the enslaving technique designed to subvert identities. Angelou observes, “… every person had a hellish horror of being called out of his name” (Cage 91). But Mrs. Cullian was exercising what she believed was her prerogative as a white person to establish who a black person would be, to call a black person by any name she chose. Outraged by him, Angelou dropped down and broke the favourite glass wares of Mrs.Cullian. Mrs.Cullian was shocked into recognition of black personhood.
Angelou also explains the evolution of her name Maya Angelou. Marguerite is a French word for daisy. But her brother refused to call her Marguerite and always addressed her ‘Mya sister’. He further shortened the appellation to ‘My’ and finally to ‘Maya’ (Cage 57). Angelou is a corruption of her Greek husband’s name Tosh Angelos who shared her love of jazz, representing black music and English literature. But their marriage failed because he wrapped them in a cocoon of safety which was like a cage, a veil against reality. But after her divorce, she joined the Purple Onion cabaret as a dancer and the dance coach Lloyd conferred the name Maya Angelou and all complimented him for choosing a divine name. In Greek, Angelou means ‘messenger’, and may be Angelou figured Tosh as her messenger who brought her forth from the cage or a veil. Interestingly, if the origin of the name Maya is examined from an Indian perspective, it means ‘veil’ and is synonymous with the power to create illusion as the Goddess Maha Maya as explained in Vedanta. This inter-relatedness in meanings in the Indian and western syntax draws interesting parallels in cultural-linguistic roots. Angelou’s identity was suppressed behind a veil of illusion in her marital bondage with Tosh and after the divorce she abandoned the veil to indulge in creating activities like art and dance. She claimed, “Art would be my shield and honesty my spear” (Singing 58). This made her at the same time jubilant and apprehensive, “I had a new name. I wondered if I’d ever feel it described my, myself, or me” (Singing 96). But the name was significant and it offered her a new identity from that moment onwards. Earlier, she had been variously called Rita, Reet, and Reetie,
with each little job but it did not always hurt her or create an identity crisis. But her son Clyde suffered an identity crisis regarding his name and he was undecided as to which name he should adopt. He wanted his family to call him Rock, Robin, Rex, and Les whenever he thought the name suited him. At an early age of ten, he came upon the name Guy and wanted Angelou to call him so. Angelou lovingly said, “He was my wonderful, dependently independent son” (Singing 269). After meeting some Africans along with Make, Guy reconsidered changing his name because “Johnson is a slave name. It was the name of some White man who owned my great-great-grand father” (Heart 139). Angelou understood the conflict within him and his yearnings to make himself known by his ancestral name. Since Angelou had married an African, he believed that he could establish himself as an African and get rid of the English name.

Angelou was singled out among the other black women by Make and persuaded her to go to Africa with her son. She knew at that time that no one was responsible for her life except herself and that no man can try to persuade her by offering the security of her son’s protection, “I was responsible for Guy only until he reached maturity and then he had to take control of his own existence” (Heart 142). She painfully understood that the worst injury of slavery was that the Whites took away the Black man’s chance to be in charge of himself, his wife and his family. But when she visited Africa, she felt as if she had regained her lost identity. She could identify herself with the place beautifully than an African woman. The atavistic collective unconsciousness
within her forced itself out as present consciousness and asserted itself as her identity. She wrote:

Since we were descendants of African slaves torn from the land, we reasoned we wouldn’t have to earn the right to return yet, we wouldn’t be so arrogant to take anything for granted. We would work and produce, then snuggle down into Africa as a baby nuzzles in a mother’s arms (All God 19).

Angelou had a few hallucinatory experiences in Africa which further defined her identity. She narrates her visit to Cape Coast Castle and Elmina Castle which had earlier been holding forts for captured slaves. The captives had been imprisoned in dungeons beneath the massive buildings and while watching them she felt the thick stone walls reiterating with old cries. She was instantly plunged into pangs of self-pity. She concretized the shapes which appeared in her imagination and she visualized the pathetic scene as part of an internalizing exercise:

Children passed tied together by ropes and chains, tears abashed, stumbling in dull exhaustion, then women, hair uncombed, bodies gritted with sand and sagging in defeat. Men, muscles without memories, minds dimmed, plodding, leaving blooded footprints in the dirt. The quiet was awful (All God 97).

None of them yelled out, it was rather a vision of a silent pageant signifying the voicelessness of the captive slaves. Angelou thought, “They were the legions,
sold by sisters, stolen by brothers, bought by strangers, enslaved by the greedy
and betrayed by history” (All God 98). She could experience the pain of the
ancestors and the anguish shared to transform her into the real African woman.

This sense of oneness with the Africans unburied the tribal in her. Angelou narrates an incident related to this experience which shocked and bewildered her. When she went to visit a town, Keta in Africa, with friends they came upon a bridge and Angelou had an inexplicable strange feeling of fear that she asked the driver to stop the car, “I only knew that the possibility of riding across that bridge so terrified me that had the driver refused to stop, I would have jumped from the still moving car” (All God 299). She got down and walked across the bridge and the others followed her. Her friend Adadevo explained with astonishment that centuries ago passengers in Palanquins used to stop their ride and got down to walk across. It was because in a crisis, only people on foot would hope to reach the other side because the bridge was infamous for being so poorly built that it always faced threat in floods. The mystery was that Angelou had no inkling of the bridge’s history. Adadevo also explained about the town which was encroached by the sea and the people displaced. Angelou felt as if a beloved relative died and she was surprised to find herself in tears. She wonders, “What did the bridge and the sea’s encroachment on Keta have to do with me?” (All God 201). It was the embedded racial memory that caught her unawares and affected her so deeply. More surprises awaited Angelou. An Ewe woman misunderstood her to be someone who had died and started lamenting as a mark of grief. The woman
also produced a photograph of a woman who resembled the grand mother of Angelou which literally shocked her. Angelou had a strange feeling of nativity after this experience which reasserted her African lineage:

There was much to cry for, much to mourn, but in my heart I felt exactly knowing there was much to celebrate…. Through the centuries of despair and dislocation, we had been creative, because we faced down death by daring to hope (*All God* 207).

Angelou always wanted to bring African culture into the American continent and assert the fact that her ancestral culture is never inferior. She always felt proud to be identified as an African descendant. Even as a child, her grand mother had taken care to preserve some of the African traditions. When her mother cut a bob and straightened her hair, Angelou felt as if she herself was skinned and made bare that she felt ashamed of lost identity. She considered her kinky bush like hair as a marker of the African-American identity. Though she was always bothered about her looks, she was not ready to sacrifice her identity for her looks. She eagerly learnt ‘Tut language’ and ‘Time-step’ dance which had its ground in Africa. After her sojourn to Africa, she had created the ‘Black. Blues. Black’ as a symbol of black identity. That was a song flung up to heaven to shout out that they were audible and visible. Angelou made herself wonderful and different by singing folk songs, calypso, blues and of course ‘uh, uhuru.’ She understood that music could create changes in the mind of people. She grew to become a prolific writer of poetry and her volume ‘Just give me a cool drink of water Fore I Diie’ (1971) was
nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and she herself was chosen by President Bill Clinton to recite her poem ‘On the Pulse of Morning’ during his inauguration ceremony in 1993, a rare opportunity given to a Black-American woman. She used this chance to reveal herself, assert and establish her black identity as an African in the American. Angelou through her writings brings out the existential anxiety the blacks suffered once but she affirms the identity creation of the blacks whether they live in Africa, their home land, or in America.

5.4.2 Reclamation of Dalit Culture

Bama’s mode of self-assertion and identity is linked with that of her community both of which cannot be separated. She represents the entire dalit community and hence the narrative is porous, diffusing between the individual and the collective where the common woman metonymically stands for the community. As an avant garde dalit woman writer, Bama sculpts new moulds of female characters in relation to the culture and community they live in. she acknowledges her culture and celebrates it. Many detractors would like to insist that dalits lack culture. Bama questions this argument by consciously bringing in cultural values in her writings. Even painful experiences of untouchability offer possibilities of reclamations of culture, offered to dalit readers and it calls for celebration. The cultural reaffirmation defined by women writers like Bama insists that the dominant world culture defines all the female culture traits as negatives but are proud of the female centered features like emotion, intuition, love, upholding of personal relationships etc and stresses the essentiality of the
human characteristics whereby there is a conscious acceptance of the positive ingredients of woman’s existence.

It is apt to define Bama as a creator of feminine aesthetics, since her stories and novels consist of ideas produced by women that clarify a standpoint of and for women. It is an aesthetic which assumes that women possess a unique perspective of their experience and express commonalities of perceptions shared by women as a group that demands the ideology of self-definition and self-valuation. Inherent in this aesthetic is the idea that women be the center of the entire discourse, the hub of all activities as in the novels Sangati and Vanmam.

In Sangati, Bama has tried to highlight the dalit culture and art forms which contribute to create a positive cultural identity of the Dalit, especially the woman. It is not a story of oppression alone but also of optimistic spirit and strength of Dalit women who understood their feminine power - the events associated with women are celebrated in the community. Bama describes many occasions where women become the centre of action. She describes a ‘coming of age ceremony’, when the girl is made to sit in a little hut like room for sixteen days. She is taken care of by the women who cook food for her, gather around her, sing songs and offer her gifts and throw a grand celebration. She need not go to work these days, but can stay indoors enjoying leisure time. This was an occasion which showed harmony and co-operation. The girl’s uncle had to donate clothes and big cooking vessels. These gifts are offered to the girl as
‘siir’ about which Bama comments, “When they saw the procession, people would talk about the size of the siir gifts and wonder whose daughter was getting all this” (S 16). The gifting ceremony is often accompanied with a song. Paati described the situation:

On Friday morning, at day-break
She came of age, the people said.
Her mother was delighted, her father too-
Her uncles arrived, all in a row-

…………………………………
Shake her hair dry and comb it with gold,
Toss her hair dry and comb it with silver,
Comb her hair dry with a golden comb,
And women, all together, raise a Kulavai (S 17).

Ululation followed after every four line. The song reflects the hopes and desires of the dalits who had not even a proper square meal a day. They had included in their songs what they wished and longed for, thus making it rich and exotic. Bama writes “… from birth to death, there are special songs and dances. And it is only the women who perform them - Roraattu (lullaby) to oppaari (dirge) - it is only the women who will sing” (S 78). Bama is astounded at their spontaneity because they could create four-lined verse instantly to suit an occasion, “I really don’t know how they could make up songs in an instant quick as anything” (S 77). The women sang while they worked which gave them relief from the hot sun or the tedium of the work or even the hunger.
Bama reproduces such instances in *Sangati* where the dalit women create songs to suit the occasion. When the women were set off to weed the groundnut fields, one of the women covered her head as the Muslim women do. Arokkya Mary made up a song to tease her:

> Along the path the flowers spread
> So many beyond measure
> Help me pluck them, Muslim girl,
> I’ll share them with you (S 76).

In the same way after the betrothal ceremony of Ranjitham, the women who worked with her made up a song teasing her because her prospective bridegroom was darker than she was:

> Handsome man dark as a crow
> More handsome than the blackened pot
> I have given you my promise
> You who can read ingilissu⁶ (S 77).

The dig in the last line was at the bridegroom who had studied up to the eighth class and hence could read some English. The women mocked another man who took a mistress after he got married.

> Eighteen sweet paniyaaram
> You handed to her, across the wall
> But whatever you might give away
> You still are my husband (S 77).
Another song was about a man who walked off in anger after making fuss over a mere trifle:

As we cleaned one teeth
In the spring by the river,
Is it because I spluttered over you
You haven’t talked to me for eight days? (S 77)

The hard working women always sang songs and laughed and teased one another, while weeding, transplanting rice, cutting the crops at harvest time or doing any hard work. Bama remembers that their songs ranged from lullabies to dirges. With a pang of nostalgia, Bama recalls, “When I hear the older women sing, I could feel myself being overcome by sleep. Their songs were so bewitching (S 78).

The dalits have elaborate wedding ceremonies and customs where the custom is for the bridegroom to offer dowry to the bride. Bama elaborates on the ceremony in Sangati. The bride and groom are taken to the well to draw water. The groom draws up the water and the bride pours it in to water pot carelessly so as to spill the water. This is a deliberate trick to keep the bridegroom at his task as long as possible. Then the same is repeated by the bride; when the pot is full, the groom lifts it up, places it on the girl’s hip and they return home. Witnessing such a custom as a child, Bama had not understood the significance of this custom but later she acknowledges, “Perhaps it is supposed to be symbolic of a married life in which both would do
all the jobs equally” (S 86). Another custom is to drop betel leaves into the well and predict the number and sex of the child they would have by observing the number of leaves that fell face down that indicated the number of girl children and that floated face up stood for number of boys they would have. The child birth was usually attended by the women of the village, and after delivery, the women returned to field work in five or six days. When there was a death, women sit by the corpse, sing dirges and prepare the body for the funeral. There was no rule as to what should be done by women and what by men. Everyone did everything. But Bama complains about the changing customs among the educated lot who try to imitate the upper caste rich people. Bama feels, “Why should we lose all the better customs that are ours and end up as neither one thing nor the other? (S 89). The freedom enjoyed by the women in the community is highlighted and Bama believes that at least such equality exists among them. The positive cultural identity gives impetus to resist the upper caste and upper class norms.

Bama juxtaposes feminism and casteism which stand in clear testimony that she is a writer with a difference. She does not separate gender and casteist identities. She argues for the liberation from the casteist and the gender oppression, both caste and gender themselves are seen as liberating points from which to construct a language or to create a literature that is political in form and subject matter. “Language is to communicate. I specifically or adamantly use my people’s language. So if I have to write about my people it has to be in their language,” says Bama (Bama Interview). She uses the Tamil dalit dialect
for narration, argument and comments. She has rejected the validation of standard language because she wants to express herself in the language of her people. Moreover, voicing one’s experiences in one’s mother tongue gives greater sharpness to the expression. *Karukku* was written in a spontaneous style which she chose not to correct because it was an outpouring of her heart immediately after coming out of the convent and she found her own voice and style and created an identity for herself and her community. In *Sangati* and *Vannam*, she used the colloquial dialect of her community especially the women’s tongue. By introducing such dialects through her writings, Tamil ascends much further in its colloquial approach. This is a striking departure from traditional literary norms and she challenged the critics who blamed her for using abusive language in her writings. Most of the dalit women, being illiterates, they speak colloquial Tamil to communicate and the narrator belonging to the same community could only express herself in uncouth, open, unliterary style. She had included the ‘vulgar’ and ‘obscene’ language of the marginalized and gave reasons for the violence in their language and its sexual nature. English and French translations of her works testify the acceptance of Bama internationally. She presented the agony of the dalit community to the Western readers, but was unhappy at the same time that she couldn’t present her people’s rustic language because the language, the dialect of the paraya women, lost its punch when it was translated. When questioned about the French translation of *Sangati* in an interview, Bama replied:
It was well accepted by those people. I would say those people accepted it more than what we accepted in India…. By translating it they are able to know about dalit women and the conditions of dalit women (Bama, *Interview* Personal).

Vernacular language of the common people, rituals, customs, and beliefs are important to dalits. Language is a part, product and vehicle of culture. In the case of dalit women, it is not only used for communication but also as a weapon for self-defence. Whenever a dalit woman was disrespected and ill treated, her sharp abusive tongue worked as her defensive mechanism to silence the men. Holmstrome observes, “Such a language is a woman’s only way of shaming men and escaping extreme physical violence” (*S XX*). Bama reflects that such language may have grown out of frustration, lack of pleasurable experience or the result of the internalizing of a patriarchy based on sexual dominance and power. Bama’s characters in *Sangati* are such women. The violent and abusive Raakkamma fought with her husband shouting obscenities and curses, “… how dare you kick me, you low-life? Your hand will get leprosy...” (*S* 62). The abuse even reached the level of lifting up her sari in front of the crowd gathered there. This shameless exhibition of hers was justified by Bama thus, “I realized that she acted in that way because it was her only means of escape” (*S* 62). Sammuga Kizhavi pisses into the landlord’s mud pot of drinking water after cursing him for disallowing dalit women from using his well. On another occasion, Bama writes about Kaliyamma who drove away her violent husband by taking recourse to verbal obscenities, abusive speech
and exaggerated protestations. In *Vanmam*, the Pallars and Parayas abuse each other and entangle themselves in the web of hatred, unaware of the mechanics of the landlords. Though women face the butt of ill treatment from their husbands, they prove stronger and mightier than their counterparts when the men depend on them in crisis. Bama picturized the women in *Vanmam* as brave and supportive wives who subvert the police repression through their bonding by hiding their men when the police raided the village. Rosamma comments, “You’ll do all such things and run away. It is we who had to suffer the police and the pallars. This is a miserable dog’s life” (*V* 134). The women enhance their self esteem and self identity and thereby actualize the potentialities of the community. The literary mapping of the many faces of the women presents an aggressive protest against dalit women oppression. Voicing their problems loudly, they assert themselves and threaten the patriarchal, societal or cultural assumptions.

### 5.4.3. Writing the Self

The primary aim of autobiography - to define one’s personal identity - is paradoxically directed towards coming to terms with the world. Stilz states:

> The repeated correlation of the two unknown quantities in the elliptic venture of autobiographical writing promises an approximate solution at last. The self emerges through resistance, or in other words the self is the thing which ultimately does not dissolve in the description of the world (162).
The life writings of the subaltern women are synonymous with the writing of the community whether it is black or dalit because the writers find their identities situated within structures that reject their femininity, race and sexual preferences. Autobiographical writings of Angelou and Bama express the oppression suffered by the self and the community and the resistance put in to defend them which always come in terms of their community. The focus on the self functions as a catalyst which accelerates the black or dalit issues and brings forth the values and validity of the community. Autobiographical writings of these writers demonstrate that there are many different ways of writing according to the oppression or the situational crisis encountered by the subject. It becomes both a way of testifying the oppression suffered and empowering the subjects through their cultural inscription and recognition. The discourses of writing of Angelou and Bama express commonalities and dissimilarities too. They show a sharp bildungsroman where the subjects undergo a moral and psychological transformation from childhood to maturity. Bama recalls her childhood and the oppression suffered by her and her community in her *Karukku* and gradually grows to maturity where she shares her tale of pain with the readers and it also becomes a powerful critique of Indian Civil Society itself. Maya Angelou employs serial autobiographies to show her growth from childhood to a matured woman. She employs a personal style engaging elements from both fiction and fantasy, and a powerful commentary on the life of the Black-Americans and their culture. A moral transformation and psychological development can be traced in both writings.
Both the writers have adopted a confessional style in order to recover their true self which acts as an internal code of self assertion. The humiliation meted to the self is viewed not as a quest for true self but as violation of social and moral code. The self is constructed in the political domain of violence and resistance. Hooks, the Black critic for instance, has argued for the political importance of “honest confessional narratives” by black women who are struggling to be self-actualized and to become radical subjects “in order to provide texts which affirm our fellowship with each other” (59).

Angelou’s first autobiographical work *The Caged Bird* speaks the story of a childhood marked by the bitterness and pain of segregation and prejudice. Gradually, the self gained strength and courage and the enormous pride in her race instilled by her grand mother helped her to stand firm in all adversities. From her mother and grandmother she learnt never to let anyone impose their authority on her or take advantage of her or treat her with disrespect. The deep rooted pride in the race formed the armour to preserve her self-respect. In all her works, she has confessed that she had drawn her strength from her grand mother and mother. Similarly, Bama also has been inspired by her grand mother who played an integral role as Bama constantly interacted with her to elicit the details of her grandmother’s generation unknown to her or which belonged to her previous generation and thus offered Bama a graphic description of her community and herself. Bama confesses about her personal sufferings at home, in the school, in the convent and she constantly questions and contemplates which provides emotional sustenance and moral refuge.
Their works become a testimonial of witnessing. The narrators are at the same time the victims of discrimination and also the witnesses who recount the trauma. Their works enlist the readers as a witness to this trauma. The victims become the primary witnesses who move from seeing to voicing. Their experience of events in their lives at a particular time and their narration of it years later, makes them victim/witness of the rendered experiences. But they also bear witness to other sufferings and in the course of their narration, they move from individual to collective to experiential testimony. Secondary witnessing/testimonial proposes “… the possibilities for solidarity and affiliation among critics, interviewers, translators and the subject who speaks” (Kaplan 116). Thus the writing is both confrontational as well as subversive for it brings literature into direct encounter with the issues of caste, race, gender and religion.

Angelou and Bama suffer from dual identities of being black and female, and dalit and female respectively. But in their writing, there is an evolution of the self that has been trapped in such double invisibility and overcome the challenging forces of dominating white or upper class and male world. The betrayed self yearns to redeem others and hence sets out to serve them. Angelou showed a deep commitment to the cause of the blacks and her fiery enthusiasm for liberty made every medium she chose the most suitable for her mission and every activity the most meaningful. She involved herself in the liberation of the blacks with Malcolm X and Martin Luther King and formed a social and racial commitment through her writings. Bama felt the need to
expose the traumatic condition of the dalits in India and create awareness among the dalits and others. Dreaming of creating a liberated dalit community, she became a nun and unfortunately was unable to serve them due to the discrimination in the church. Education and empowerment are the twin foci she deals with in her works. Bama’s oeuvre is a courageous exercise of exorcism of oppression.

Angelou’s prose is like a song as she pours out her turbulent story into words, at once lucid, frank and enchantingly simple. The works have a chronological structure, utilize first person narration and focus on personal development and enrichment of black culture and community. In spite of the freedom and continuous fluctuation in the serial form of writing, there is wholeness or completeness in writing. She begins with I Know why the Caged Bird Sings and ends with A Song Flung up to Heaven. It becomes symbolic, because like the caged bird’s song the blacks also had raised their voice to be heard though under bondage and as the song had reached the heaven however oppressed they are they believe that they would reach the destined heights. In the last book she begins the first lines of the first autobiography and thus attains the wholeness through her writing. The titles of all her autobiographies are song-like. In the first volume, The Caged Bird sang its resistance to oppression. Gather Together in my Name or Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry like Christmas are significant as they too demark her identity as a black woman even in troubles and her fascination for music and her success as an artist was a merry time like Christmas. The title The Heart of a Woman is taken from a
poem by Georgia Douglas Johnson. The work focuses on her political activities particularly with Martin Luther King and Malcolm X and her short marriage to Vasumzi Make, an exiled South African activist. In the fifth volume All God’s Children Need Travelling Shoes, she experienced the joy of being black in the black country but realized that no matter how much she loved Africa, the roots of her ancestry, it is not her true home which made her return to America. The last work A Song Flung up to Heaven sings out that blacks are visible, audible and acceptable.

*Karukku* as testimonial life writing enables Bama to share her tale of pain so that personal testimony becomes accurate historical witnessing of a social structure of traumatic oppression. Bama historicizes *Karukku* thus, “The story told in *Karukku* was not my story alone. It was the depiction of a collective trauma of my community whose length cannot be measured in time” (Bama Interview). So the individual self and the community, the collective, overlap in the narrative. The narrative in Bama is the collective ‘our’. The opening line of *Karukku* is “Our village is very beautiful” (K 1). When she describes the community she never uses ‘my people’, instead she writes: “…most of our people are agricultural labourers” (K 1). When she wants to give details of her personal experiences as a dalit woman, she uses the first person and soon moves from ‘I’ to the ‘We’ narrative which suggests how the individual follows from the community. When she moves from one to another, she extends her identity, her ‘self’ into the world. Thus *Karukku* expands the boundaries of identity construction from the singular ‘me’ to plural.
Another significant marker in her writing is the anonymity of the narrator. The narrator is not mentioned or called by the name though there is an omnipresence in the novel that suggests a crucial occlusion or elision between the personal and the community. The use of pseudonym is common to atrocity narratives. However the name of Bama, the real or the pen name, is not referred anywhere in the narrative and it suggests that the ‘names’ are less important than the social identity as dalit or woman, Tamil or Christian. More importance and attention is given to the socio-cultural and political structures within which Bama the writer functions and lives. However, the personal is not completely effaced since the unnamed narrator often foregrounds personal humiliations, sufferings, feelings, joys and sorrows. Description of an event or episode is accompanied by a subtle blending of personal thoughts and concern about her community. Atrocity victims are often called upon to show evidence of torture and suffering almost as though the scars are texts that speak the language of oppression. In these works, Bama successfully achieves conjoining singular corporeal pain with collective oppression and sufferings. Her *Karukku* also suggests survival tactics to re-enter the socio-cultural, linguistic and political structures that are responsible for their abuse. She disturbs the boundaries between bodies, individuals and groups when she states:

> In order to change this state of affairs, all dalits who have been deprived of their basic rights must function as God’s word piercing to the very heart. Instead of being more and more beaten
down and blunted, they unite, think about their rights and battle for them (K XIII).

With the erasure of traditional autobiographical writings Bama becomes innovative and inventive only to expose certain shocking aspects of our society. As Holmstrom comments, Bama’s narrative is “not comfortable reading” (K XII), but her writing generates a whole new aesthetics. It becomes aesthetics of the testimonial where the distinction between private and public breaks down, pain moves outward from the narrator to the dalit community and things and events which cannot be written about are recorded. She writes within a dynamic where silences are increasingly pierced by loud voices of Dalit women.

5.5 Conclusion: Recapturing the Self

The writings of Angelou and Bama show a sharp deviation from other oppressed writers in that they become spokespersons for their entire community they represent and their objective is not only to draw the oppression suffered by them but also the optimism and hope ingrained in them. There is a strong framework of self-analysis throughout their work which leads to self-evaluation. Both these writers articulate the angst of earlier generations of women, including their own ancestors, thereby throwing light on the patriarchal hegemony of these times. They also use these subtexts to show how the younger generation derives strength and optimism from those experiences. The significance of these two writers from the marginalized communities is in their
refusal to be considered inferior to any other subject-group and in the reaffirmation of their specific cultural values and traditions.

Education has paved the way to achieve emancipation and empowerment to both blacks and dalits. Through their writings, Angelou and Bama reveal how education has allowed them more freedom and how they learnt the lesson of self-reliance which according to them is the first step towards empowerment. This urge to learn and earn drove Angelou from one job to another and in all constraints she decided to offer the best education to her fatherless son in the best school. Though she was forced to leave school, there was an urge to read, to understand, to write and to experiment literature which prodded the creator in her. The self esteem and self assertion lead to create an identity not only to herself but also to her black community. She had used herself as a focus to show how one person, that too an ordinary woman can make it through hard times.

Bama too, like Angelou, asserts that only education can bring upliftment to the Dalit community. She explores the richness of their culture using their specific language, local dialects and vernacularized narration that represents the Dalit community. She tries to stabilize their identity through the process of self creation even under extremely oppressive conditions. She is able to carve out a social vision and a message of hope for the dalit community.

Thus the Black and Dalit communities are universalized by Angelou and Bama respectively through their writings. There is a collective communication
and co-operation which translates into positive action in the writers and links the two different communities with their plural voices that call for restructuring their positions in the global literary space. There is a formulation of resistance as collective and personal practice which shapes the community and self with new strength to reclaim whatever is repressed, ruined, and obliterated.

Notes

1 Oruttankai pattini - Tamil word which means a chaste woman born for a man.

2 Cowdung cakes - Cakes made of cowdung which are dried and used as fuel.

3 Narcolepsy - A condition characterized by brief attacks of deep sleep.

4 Talis - An ornament tied around the neck of the bride by the bridegroom. It is a ritualistic act signifying the bond between the two.

5 Siir - Betrothal gifts given to the girl by her uncles when she comes of age.

6 Ingilissu – It stands for English.

7 Atrocity narratives - Narratives of the victims who reveal their experiences. They awaken the sympathetic moral sense of the broader public; both victims and perpetrators are healed through the telling of stories of suffering or confession.
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