CHAPTER 6

BEAUTIFUL BLACK, DIGNIFIED DALIT
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6.1 Introduction: Recapitulation

The emergence from ‘oppression to optimism’ often becomes strenuous, chaotic and plagued with the problem of definition when the path becomes a ‘self-forged’ one. Deliberate and successful erasure of the weaker sections by the dominant groups has been a continuum across the globe. However, those impositions have also encountered interruptions of resistance from the marginalized who thereby affirm and give voice to their ‘other-ness’.

Different groups confront specific dominant power structures which they have to confront using distinct strategies, thus making each resistance unique and significant. The displacement and reclamations of two such communities - the Blacks and the Dalits - offer interesting areas of research since several commonalities could be traced in their resistance ideologies. The literary discourses of two representative writers from the black and the dalit communities respectively offer new insights into history, political milieu, and class-gender intersections, whereby both become dialogical. Hence, a comparative study of these two writers is the main concern of this thesis.

‘Inchoative Writers of Optimism’, the introductory chapter, sketches the objectives of the study, its need and significance, and the importance of the title. Both Angelou and Maya are introduced with their major publications, their achievements and their literary states in relation to their contemporaries in fiction.
Chapter two, The Genre of Literature of Resistance, discusses the theoretical framework into which these representative writers are placed. Both the writers are categorized as literary resistantes and their works are analysed using the ‘Theory of Resistance’.

‘Indelible History’ is the title of chapter three which deals with in detail the black history, development of black literature, dalit history, and the development of dalit literature, especially the fiction of Tamil dalit literature. The chapter also focuses on the genre of comparative study.

Chapter four is titled ‘Imposed Oppression.’ As the title suggests, the chapter explains how oppression is imposed on blacks and dalits, especially the women of these communities. Both writers expose oppression at three levels - societal, religious and gender.

‘Ingrained Optimism’ forms the fifth chapter of the thesis. It analyses in detail how the writings of Angelou and Bama show a marked deviation from other oppressed writers. Optimism and hope generate self esteem and self identity in these writers.

The concluding chapter ‘Beautiful Black, Dignified Dalit’ sums up all the chapters wherein the content of the thesis is revisited in terms of its stated objectives.
6.2 Resistance for Empowerment

Angelou and Bama, though from two geographical extremities, exhibit a similar approach to exploring and expressing issues that concern themselves and the group they represent. They began their literary career with the writing of their life stories and then they moved on to narrating the lives of women of their respective communities. They revealed the truth that racism and casteism are dehumanizing in their effects. Racism may be considered to be the offspring of colonialism but casteism owes its genesis to the ancient caste system invented by man. Both foreground the presence of the grandmothers who are the repositories of the histories of their communities. They play an active role in the narrative to describe the life in their communities. There is a gynic quest for self identity, self assertion and self esteem through which they gain a positive vision of how they could become empowered. The undertone of optimism attempts to transform them beyond the state of despair. Both the writers contest the neo-colonial structures, counter hegemonic narratives of liberation, and carnivalize and transform the novels into a potential instrument for the regeneration of positive social values.

The literary output of Angelou and Bama can be brought under the theory of resistance. The post-colonial critic Spivak’s controversial query ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ has been countered by Parry, the Black critic, who argues that Spivak deliberately does not give speaking part to the colonized. Parry cites Fanon who states that the colonized are constructed according to the
ideology of the colonialist (Parry 27). When the colonized denies the right to subjectivity, internalizing and refracting the images of the colonizer, the colonized is condemned to exist in an inauthentic condition.

6.2.1 Optimistic Realism

Since Angelou and Bama may be categorized as literary resistantes, their works are analyzed using the theory of resistance. In the writings of Angelou and Bama, resistance is enforced by the pressures of circumstances which draw the narrators to defend their self-identity and hopes which are inevitable for becoming bildungsroman. Oppression strengthened their spirits, and the resistance displayed by them was the best defence to counter further attacks. Writing becomes a strategy of resistance undertaken by them to fight against the unequal social order and gender discrimination. The resistance undertaken by the writers is indirectly directed to the social system which ignores the voices of the marginalized. The answering back of the subjugated is effected in the writings and both the writers have felt the ecstasy of struggle, the spirit to survive and to strike back at the adversary. They demand civil and human rights, destruction of hegemony and the active reconstruction of interrupted and interpreted histories. Hence their writings can be placed under the genre of resistance literature, which continues to wage a struggle for liberation on many levels and in many arenas.

Refuting the argument of Spivak that the subaltern cannot speak, Parry cites Pecheux and Terdiman’s counter discourse and affirms the power of
reverse discourse that could challenge, subvert and undermine the ruling ideologies to overthrow the hierarchy of colonizer/colonized. Dispensing the oppressed often becomes an inner recreative response to the violation of slavery and suppression rather than an enactment of regressive search for an aboriginal condition. The inconsistency of the power relations offers space for resistance which necessitates deconstruction of essentialist notions of culture, language and identity. Angelou and Bama delineate resistance based on their cultural, socio-economic and political conditions and hence their behavioural manifestations are different. The women in their works are represented as life sustainers who contribute to an understanding of the notion of community as an extension of self.

Oppression of the discriminated can be neutralized by the optimism inculcated within the community to oppose the world social order. Hence their narrative is not an oppression-prone one though they document it, but an indictment. There is an ideological analysis and vision of future possibilities of a discrimination free global society born out of the contemporary struggle and resistance against oppression. As Slemon has suggested, resistance is found in their texts issuing forth through their narrative style, incidents in life, and in the language they use; it is set against a definable set of power whether it is political, social or religious. What is embedded in their texts is their success in survival though in the process they suffer displacement geographically as in the case of blacks or socially as in the case of dalits in India, but there is an urgent
call for revival of tradition and culture. All the representational strategies utilized by both Angelou and Bama make their texts shimmer with positivism.

The optimistic realism in both the writers envisions attainment of empowerment through education because illiteracy and lack of exposure are considered to be factors that oppress them, especially the women of their community. Intellectual awareness, critical self reflection, and self analysis are the ways to transform their lives. Literacy and education are the strategic needs that can transform and provide potential to the blacks and dalits. Nobody can claim that by merely passing a law the social conditions of the marginalized section could be changed or that it could resolve all evils.

6.2.2. Significance of the Title

The title ‘From Oppression to Optimism through Self-spun Philosophy’ is significant since the interconnection between the two authors - in their lives, their experiences, their attitudes and in the history of their communities – is profound. A comparative reading of their fictional works reveals the disdaining discrimination committed upon them and the disillusionment and disappointment of a subjugated race/caste. The shameful atrocities are historicized which depict the cruelty of the human race. But it cannot be denied that the blacks began to revive themselves of their conditions and had gone beyond despair which led them to counter-movements against the White atrocities. The black writers and their movement influenced the dalits in India
who are oppressed in their own country by their own countrymen for being born in a lower caste.

It is necessary to place the black and dalit women in the context not only of their racial and colonial experiences but also in the experiences arising out of their femininity. They exercise their power as rebels into the world of liberation to redirect their own destiny. In the history of the world, there is nothing so brutal like slaving and bartering human beings. The physical torture inflicted upon the blacks is a black mark in the world history and it has terrorized a complete race to such an extent that they remained almost mute, unable to fight their hegemonic white masters. The reviviscence of the blacks propelled them to fight for their emancipation, identity and equality. Taking the cue from the slogan “Black is Beautiful”, the dalits in India gathered to strike communal solidarity to reveal “Dalit is Dignified.” Dalit literature reveals the lived experiences of the writers and it proves that they cannot be segregated as writers of oppression but as powerful creators who could organize themselves to empower through community bonding and take recourse to armed resistance to counter orthodox biases and traditional forms of discrimination heaped upon them continually over the years. Bonding among the dalit communities and the sisterhood established overseas to blacks helped these people to overcome their vulnerabilities and create self image.
6.3 Liberation and Celebration

Comparing the two communities, blacks and dalits, national boundaries are blurred and the writings of the ‘Third World’ get its momentum in the world literature and offers space for marginal literatures as well. The world history noted that blacks were ‘total slaves’ as they were bought and sold like animals, but they were able to buy their freedom from their masters; on the other hand, the dalits who were ‘born slaves’ were condemned even from history. Untouchability was imposed from birth that even the touch and shadow of the dalit were considered as unholy and unclean. They could never redeem themselves from this condition nor could they leave their native land. However the misery of the two communities is the same. If the American Negro is a unique creation then untouchability becomes a unique phenomenon unknown to humanity except the Indians.

The process of liberation of both the groups began with the struggle over the nature of reality. It involved the questioning of reality imposed on them and then redefining it themselves so that they could shift from the terrain fixed to them and acquire new frames of reference. When the blacks questioned and refused to accept the white world’s definitions, the power of the whites was threatened. Likewise, in India the savarnas prescribed the limits of avarna existence, the mode of their living, the level of communication with them and the impossibility of change. Although dissenting voices were raised by religious and social reformers, untouchability continued. The advent of the
British rule and the consequent resistance against the imperial rule led the dalits’ attempt to redefine their existence in social terms. The societies and literatures of African-Americans and Dalits bear considerable resemblances because the emotional worlds they inhabit are similar - constituting their pain, rebellion, struggles, hopes and desires. So when the blacks and the dalits found their voice and tried to represent their experiences, they are naturally aggressive, raw, and unembellished.

6.3.1 Bondage

Women, the most oppressed beings in history, have begun to respond vigorously to become the most articulating community who could subvert conventional norms. The women of the marginalized groups or the subaltern have found a space to express their experiences so that the world could understand their plight. Such writings need not be considered to be ‘oppressive’. They only define the cruelty of the upper class, superior race, and the rich society. Their creative outpouring indicates the coming of age of women, especially of the subaltern women’s literary tradition. Theirs is a testimonial of witnessing. The narrators are at the same time the victims of discrimination and also the witnesses who recount the trauma. Thus the writings are both confrontational as well as subversive for they bring literature into a direct encounter with the issues of caste, race, gender and religion.

The lived experiences of Angelou and Bama, especially the oppression faced by them, are dealt with at three levels - the societal, gender and religious.
But the oppression suffered by the blacks and the dalit women varies in its degree, extent and intensity.

Racism in America made the blacks believe in their inferiority. In a racist society where the blacks are dehumanized and degraded on account of their blackness, they somewhere in their fragile corners of their egos often feel belittled and inferior and are constantly haunted by a nagging sense of self-rejection. The internalization tends to submerge their consciousness and they become powerless. But Negroes had survived centuries of inhuman treatment and retained their humanity but at the same time prepared for the worst. Angelou considers racism as the salt to the tongue; it could be as dangerous as too much salt. Moreover, she considers that racism is not against blacks, but the vulgarities against any human being. Racial freedom was equated with the redemption of black manhood. But racism is more harmful to black women, as is revealed in Angelou’s writings.

The oppression of women knows no ethnic or racial boundaries and there is a commonality in their sufferings which can be related to the oppression encountered by the dalit women in India. Bama describes the caste based trauma in corporeal terms in her work. She wants her community people not to be terrified by the upper castes’ oppressive tactics but to boldly counter the injustices that come their way. She has to shout out her experiences because poverty and illiteracy have driven the dalits to the extreme that they almost accept the upper castes’ domain. She finds it unacceptable that various
institutions like school and church could promote and sustain untouchability and that economic oppression goes hand in hand with caste oppression. Like Angelou, Bama too fears that the trauma of discrimination would lead to self doubt and question their very identity. This leads to a psychological feeling of abjection that enmeshes the marginalized in such a social structure that they are constantly threatened by the hegemonic group. When they are unable to fight back the dominant group, their violence often turns against their own people, that is, to their family and other lower castes as a symbol to work off their hatred.

Both writers criticize the social system that targets black and dalit women most unjustly just because they are females. Angelou’s experiences prove that the emotional assault leads to physical ailment and a serious mental break down. The black male world suffers from inferiority complex and often vents its anger on the hapless woman. Bama documents dalit patriarchy, where women constantly undergo sexual harassment and abuse. Patriarchy works in an unjust manner that women are low waged than men and at the same time the burden of running the family is borne by women. It is a rare phenomenon prevalent in India. Untouchability also oppresses women, but strangely the tragedy our society bears is that it does not apply to sexual exploitation of dalit women by upper caste men. Religious oppression confronted by the dalits is cruel and unholy. Though the blacks have acquired the new religion, they only enjoy and offer credit to white man’s God. To Angelou, God is a real and personal friend. But the religious atmosphere in India is totally different; the
irony is that Christianity does not recognize caste divisions, but the churches in India are casteist in their dealings. Dalits have converted to Christianity to be free from casteism but dalit Christians remain untouchables because they are not included in the church choirs. They are forced to sit separately to attend the mass and the cruelest matter is the discrimination meted out even to the dead. Bama reveals how the church distorts the real image and teachings of Christ and instead preaches docility, meekness and subservience to the faithful, thus suppressing the racial and liberative teachings of Jesus. The plight of the Christian dalits is so tragic and deplorable that she grows suspicious about her community’s conversion to Christianity itself.

6.3.2. Social Equality

Comparative studies on women’s writing have proceeded to validate woman’s perceptions of life by restoring their writings to public view. They articulated the complexity of women’s demand for social, economic and political equality and a desire for a compatible and progressive vision of social justice imparted to the oppressed women. Black women writers began to create theories and develop a new movement which spoke about the combination of problems they were battling including sexism, racism, and classism. The voice of the black woman has become more audible. They write to deconstruct the negative stereotypes surrounding their culture and more importantly they struggle for literary recognition from the oppressive, dominant literary cannon.
Dalit women writers are now an important political and social force in India. Their literary and critical writings constitute a major challenge to the theories about Indian politics, society, culture and literature by intellectuals from upper castes. Dalit women suffer from dual disadvantage; first, of being dalit due to socio-economic and cultural marginalization; and second, of being women suffering from gender based inequalities and subordination. Though Tamil dalit literature is in its growing stage, it is vibrant, multifaceted, articulative and radically innovative. The aggressiveness of the Tamil dalit women writers is still strong because they struggle and rebel to attain self identity both in the domestic and social circles even now. The issues of persecution and oppression of dalit women still exist in Tamil Nadu and hence the theme of discrimination, resistance and survival are demanded from the writers. The interrogative and self-reflexive nature of Tamil dalit discourse renders it a significant pointer to contemporary social/political reality. They employ a wide variety of literary forms, devices and styles as tools of resistance which are powerful weapons used to stub oppression and discrimination that are meted out to the individual and the community. Their writings also call attention to collusion of caste hegemony and patriarchal structure which seek to control a dalit woman’s sexual life and conduct.

6.4 Revival and Survival

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. Instead of becoming sadomasochistic, the blacks and 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 vulnerability and create an independent mind which would help in the formation of concrete self-image. They refuse to be stereotyped but instead with their self-confidence and resistance almost terrorize their opponents. The hope and optimism inherent in the writings of Angelou and Bama make them different from other writers of their clan.

6.4.1 Reviviscence of Culture

Use of language is another mode of resistance in the struggle of the blacks and the dalits. Language displaces not only the theme but also the revitalization of culture. The narrative style of Angelou is very unique in the sense that it diverges from the traditional format to a commitment to safeguard the African language and culture. Hence the autobiographical statement emerges as a public gesture rather than private. The African folksongs recast and sung before the White was a challenging and bold endeavour of Angelou. The freedom that was denied to the blacks was loudly sung to vent up their feelings of revolt, rebellion and resistance.

Dalit literature has become a new and distinct stream of Indian literature. It contributes fresh experiences, new sensitivity and vocabulary,
different types of protagonists, an alternate vision and a new chemistry of suffering and revolt. It is essentially subversive in character, brings forth both content and form that challenge received norms. As the experience described is social, it is articulated as collective and not individual. Usually a testimonial bridges the gap between the suffering individual and the community of listeners who provide empathetic responses. Bama sculpts new moulds of female characters in relation to culture and community they live in. She acknowledges her culture and celebrates it. Many detractors would like to insist that dalits lack culture but Bama squashes their statement by consciously bringing in cultural values, their native language and some of their positive traditions in her writings. She never forgets to highlight the freedom enjoyed by the dalit women.

Angelou’s feminism is totally different from that of the other writers of her period in the optimistic vision and reformatory future in her writings. She feels proud to be identified as an African descendant. She considers her kinky hair and black skin as a marker of the African-American identity. Bama argued for the rights and freedom of the dalit women and appreciated their courage and valued those customs that allowed women freedom. 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 unique perspectives shared by women as a group that demands the ideology of self definition and self
evaluation. She juxtaposes feminism and casteism which stands in clear testimony that she is a writer with a difference.

6.4.2. Affirming Self Image

Self-narration of Angelou and Bama expressed 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 and dalit issues and brings forth the values and validity of the community. Their writings prove that even if they break the conventional style of autobiographical writing, they could demonstrate the oppression or the situational crisis encountered by the subject. Both 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 a violation of social and moral code. The self is constructed in the political domain of violence and resistance.

The deep rooted pride in the race formed the armour to preserve her respect. Angelou has confessed that she had drawn her strength from her grandmother and mother. Similarly, Bama has also been inspired by her grandmother who played an integral role as Bama constantly interacted with her to elicit the details of the earlier generation and it offered Bama a graphic description of her community and their life style. 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 reaffirmation of their specific cultural values and traditions.

Angelou and Bama articulate the discrimination and exploitation leveled against their communities and against themselves as individuals. It helped them create a philosophy wherein the possibility of rising out of oppression to optimism is explored. They use the philosophy of optimism as a shield to edge forward, resisting whatever is detrimental to the gynic quest of self identity, self assertion and self worth. This act of autogenesis, the process of coming into being from silence into sound, is a slow process from marginalized invisibility into central vision.

6.5 Conclusion: Victimized Victors

To recuperate the past is to recall that all colonialism were about the conquest of space, and about the exploitation of people and discrimination; and what colonial people resisted was the violent appropriation of their homes, assaults on their persons as well as the subordination of their cultures and the denial of their right to self determination.

The black and the dalit writings emerge from their history and it is not only the importance of historical facts or artifacts but also the historical meanings of two things – a sense of truth and a sense of community between the writer and the reader. The act of going back is only to march forward, returning, reclaiming and repossessing what is lost. The writings of Angelou and Bama reveal oppression and register their protest and resistance but
simultaneously affirm their own humanity and dignity which has been denied historically. They spin their own philosophy of optimism and hope which becomes a protective shield that enables them to ward off discrimination and disillusionment and gain a positive vision of empowerment and hope.

Notes

1‘Beautiful Black, Dignified Dalit’ is taken from the slogan of black and dalit cultural movements. John Sweat Rock was long thought to be the first to point the praise ‘Black is Beautiful’. Its aim is to dispel the notion in many world cultures that black people’s natural features such as skin colour, facial features and hair are inherently ugly.

‘Dalit is Dignified’ became the slogan of the marginalized people of India when Dr. Ambedkar challenged the social inequality.

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