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*STC Scholars Vision*

Special Edition
Selected Articles: 1st International Conference

Annual Journal of
Multidisciplinary/Interdisciplinary  
Studies and Research

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RESEARCH WING
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Editorial

Renaissance and Reunion of Social Groups in the World

Dr. Mrs. I. Annapurna

Caste in India is a lived social experience making it a unique feature of Indian society. This social stratification based on caste lead to injustice and oppression which has been questioned by social reformers and thinkers. The functions of labour and the perverse notions of pollution attached to it have segregated a part of the society. It was during the colonial times that it came to the centre stage of Indian politics. Though the British tried to use it to further their colonial interests, it was Dr. B.R. Ambedkar who made a comprehensive and rational crusade had never seen in Indian history against caste discrimination. His efforts bore fruits as the constitution of India recognized the age old deprivations and envisaged a policy of positive discrimination to eliminate inequality.

The depressed classes were recognized in a separate schedule of the constitution for affirmative action. Whether this policy has led to a further crystallization of caste identities even if the goal of the constitution was the elimination of inequality is a matter of debate. The post-independence history proves that a lot of struggle and effort was necessary to ensure what was promised by the constitution. The twentieth century has seen many movements across the world against discrimination and deprivations. The struggle of African American community for civil rights in America, movement against apartheid in Africa or struggle against injustice arising out of the concept of caste attached to the accident of birth in India were all struggles for human dignity. These struggles have produced unique writing forms that not only reflected the discrimination they suffered but also their aspiration for recognition of their humanity.

The aim of this Volume: IV is to project the struggle and document the progress from deprivations to dignity. This theme is to stand and look back over the past, ruminate over it and propose a future that recognizes human dignity and equality of all men and women. As part of it as an academician I felt it is the need of hour to discuss the Dalit literary movement in various parts of India and compare it with other similar struggles in Africa or America. Special attention shall be paid to Dalit women, their struggle for dignity within their respective communities for equality and the opportunities that were denied to them based on their gender and caste. As such this experiment need not restrict itself to the study of literary productions but will undertake a comprehensive discussion of socio-economic issues based on statistical data. While a substantial part of this Journal will focus on literary productions, with special focus on Subaltern groups.

As there are no standard and developed socio – economic, religious and political systems in the African, American and Australian Continents during the occupation and annexation of Imperial and Colonial forces of Europe, the natives of these continents just can able to express their suppression to the World Press. Of course those native Dalits (i.e. Red Indians, Negroes and Local tribal’s) not able to get out of the clutches of European greedy occupants. As the Asian theoretical models were highly developed and sophisticated before 3000 years itself, people of this continent not able to compete with the European Ideologies and also there are different groups, believers and patriots of opportunists and atheist, Though Asians are able to won the political game against the European ambitions, these people not able to come out of the theological struggles created by Europeans. And not able to establish the clear dignity and identity of Dalits and they are in confused state of mind.

Regarding Indian stories about caste system and untouchability, as I have already mention that we lost our authentic history during colonial rule of suppression. The only history available officially is the works written by Lord Macaulay and his assistant Max Muller. It is known truth always the invaders wants to control the subjects by dividing the people through all walks of life were we Indians infected with untouchability and other inhuman degraded practices of life. After Independence the Indian political leadership realized and
corrected the deficiency in social aspects. Now in many states our dalit people are enjoying more liberty than any other community and also the Indian youth has taken a revolutionary step of mixing all the communities by exogamy. Before Christ itself the Indian communities well established in art, literature and professions, as there is no system of Collegiate Education and pattern of professions in those days which are present today.

And also there is no struggle for employment and livelihood deprived and degrader by today's economies. The ancient Indian Societies are stable in economics, employment and self-sustained professions are generally inherited from parents and the youth need not struggle for livelihood and employment. The societies Cohesive, Independent, Peaceful & Progressive, this type of system are not convenient for invaders. So, they have broken the communities and created differences among them. Now we have to adopt more peaceful methods of coexistence and society with mutual respect breaking the communal barriers. But, still here and there some unlawful incidents are happening to control these incidents Laws are made, but these laws are depriving other sections of the citizens to second grade.

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Dr. Mrs. I. Annapurna
Editor - in - Chief

"I speak not for myself but for those without voice... those who have fought for their rights... their right to live in peace, their right to be treated with dignity, their right to equality of opportunity, their right to be educated".

Malala Yousafzai
55. Dalit Women And Education
K. Rajamanikyan

Key words: sentimentalized, initiatory model, ideological commitment, foregrounding, subversive strategies, hypocrisy.

Introduction

Marxist thinkers in India need to come to terms with the ground reality of caste and work towards a casteless/classless society. The influence of Ambedkarite thought is substantial and significant in Dalit discourse. Writers posit Ambedkar's call to Dalits to "educate unite and organize" as a central statement in the works of Dalits. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. Human beings are attribute and aim at protection of rights like right to life, liberty and property irrespective of class, caste, gender, colour and religion. Dalits and women in general are normally violated by high castes and powerful communities to practice and exhibit patriarchy and casteism. But human rights of Dalit women are violated extremely and in peculiar form. Dalit women are in worse position than the Dalits in general, in terms of sex, ratio, wages, employment, occupation, assets, education, health, social mobility and political participation. It is essential to discuss the status of Dalit women and various problems they face even after sixty three years of Independence. Despite the excellent laws in place to protect Dalit women, Dalit women are leading miserable lives with the harsh reality of the suppression, struggle for existence and torture. The hardships of the Dalit women are not simply due to their poverty, economic status, lack of education, but are a direct result of the severe exploitation and suppression by the upper classes.

“Dalit” (‘oppressed’ or ‘broken’) is not a new word. Apparently it was first used in the 1930s as a Hindi and Marathi translation of ‘depressed classes’. The British used this term for what are now called the scheduled caste. The word “Dalit” comes from the Sanskrit language, and means ground, suppressed, crushed, or broken to pieces. Dr.B.R. Ambedkar chose the term ‘broken men,’ as English translation of ‘Dalit’, to refer to the original ancestors of the untouchables. Dalit Panthers’, the youth activists from Dalit community revived the term and in their 1973 manifesto expanded its reference to include the scheduled Tribes, neo Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and also those who are being exploited, politically or economically in the name of religion.

Dalit literature forms an important and distinct part of Indian Literature. In the modern era, Dalit Literature received its first impetus with the advent of leaders like Mahatma Jyothiba Phule and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in Maharashtra, who brought forth the works of Dalits through their writings. Dalitism essentially implies conditions of subjugation, economic, political, social and cultural. Dalitism also embodies different degrees of marginalization. It includes not only marginalized status
in the economic sphere but also in cultural, political, religious and social domains. That means Dalits symbolizes marginalization. It is a well known fact that marginalization denies basic human rights and social justice (Punalikar, cited in Jogand, 1995).

Pranjali Bandhu quotes Ruchi Manorama, “Dalit women are the ‘Dalits among Dalits’, because they are thrice alienated on the basis of caste, class and gender”. She brings out various oppressions on Dalit women in this essay. The problem of minimum and unequal wages of Dalit women, though women also work equally hard and for the same length of time with men. The problems like lack of education, early marriages, and health problems are rampant among Dalit women. There are many prejudices against education for Dalit women in the society. The Casteism in the schools is also a deterrent for Dalit girls (and for boys as well) and prevents them from education. In Dalit Community, it is economical to marry a much younger girl for an older man and this result into too many pregnancies until menopause. These early marriages take place also for the fear of Dalit girls falling prey to “upper-caste” sexual exploitation. These early marriages and lack of medical facilities lead to health problems for Dalit women. She scrutinizes the claim of the Dalit movement, that Dalit women are enjoying greater liberty when compared to other women. Dalit society allows divorce, remarriage, and widow marriage. There also might be certain equalities between Dalit men and women, but at the same time we cannot ignore issues like wife beating, harassment and other forms of domestic violence and the violence from the “upper-castes” that targets Dalit women. The political exclusion of Dalit women is also indicated by her and then is substantiated by a look at the Dalit movement in which we can find the rampant domination of Dalit men and their leadership. Dalit women are questioning such patriarchy in Dalit movement.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, at the Mahad Satyagraha Parishad in 1928, put forward a question addressing Dalit women- “Why the birth from your womb is considered as a sin?” Dalits who are born of womb but not of any part of Brahma (according to the Hindu Mythology) have been stigmatized and subjugated for centuries. The practices of untouchability, sexual violence, and threat of rape which have customary sanctions by the religion are the crucial issues, Dalit women are addressing. Dalit women’s participation assured the strength of the Dalit movement in Maharashtra.

During Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s period, Dalit women actively participated in the Dalit struggle. They acquired an admirable position in Maratha Dalit Literature. They also recognized the importance of education in Dalit women’s lives. It is not only the caste system and its inequalities we need to address but also the male chauvinism in the Dalit Communities and in the Dalit movement. Male domination in the Dalit communities can be understood as the result of the Indian social system but that in the movement and in the reconstruction of the history of Dalit movement should be condemned. When the excluded history of Dalit movement is being excavated with retrospection, it should be done in more egalitarian way. But Dalit movement had never done so and eventually excluded the Dalit women’s history. This was pointed out by Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon in their substantial work “We Made History... Too.”

Gopal Guru, in his paper, “Dalit Women Talk Differently”, pointed out the political marginalization of Dalit women in post-Ambedkar era. In Post-Ambedkar period, Dalit leaders have always subordinated and at times suppressed an independent, political expression of Dalit women. He also indicates the literary dominance of the Dalit men in the paper. Thus, he encourages Dalit women to have self-organizations. Dr. Gabriel Dietrich says in the article, “Violence, Dalit feminism, and the Healing of Fragmentation”,

“Dalit movements under heavy pressure themselves, do have a tendency - To subordinate women’s issues to their “larger concerns” and Dalit - Women face perpetual problem of organizing themselves, not only - Vis-à-vis women’s movement which have not always been sensitive - To inter-caste violence and of untouchability”. (Gabriel Dietrich. Dalit Movement and Women’s Movement. Rao, Anupama (Ed.) Gender and Caste, Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003.

Dalit women are one of the most marginalized segments in the Indian society. The condition of the Dalit women is more vulnerable than non-dalit women. To explore the crucial issues concerning the Dalit
women, there is need to discuss some basic facts dealing with the vulnerable situation of the Dalit women. It is easy for the historically dominating caste and gender to violate human rights of the dalit women who are at the lowest rung of the hierarchical ladder. The type of violence inflicted on Dalits is in the form of severest violation of human rights. Dalit and tribal women are raped as part of an effort by upper caste leaders, landlords and police to suppress movements to demand payment of minimum wages, to settle land cropping disputes or to reclaim lost lands. (Human Watch Report, 1998).

The recent incident of Khairlanji Massacre is not something new; a Dalit family had refused to let upper caste villages build a road through their fields. Hence on September, 29th, 2006. Bhaiyalal Bhatmange's family, - wife Surekha, daughter Priyanka and two sons were killed by the villagers of Khairlanji in Bhandara district of Maharashtra. They are first attacked with huge iron chains and then abused by the other caste women of the village. Surekha and Priyanka were paraded naked and raped, and later their bodies were mutilated and thrown into a pond (Hindustan Times, 14th November, 2006). This shows that the Dalit women are easy targets for any perpetrator Upper castes consider them to be sexually available. Hence, they are largely unprotected by the state machinery. Further, there is prevalence of violence, making Dalit women eat human excreta, parading them naked, gang-rape, murder, dacoity, robbery and burning of their rights of communities. These are the types of crime, which violate their human rights (Human Watch Report, 1998).

According to Scheduled Castes/ Scheduled Tribes commission report between 1981 and 1986, about 4000 Dalit women became victim of rape. In 1993-94 this figure rose to 798 and 992 respectively. This means annually about 700 Dalit women fall prey to sexual assault by high caste people. (Pal and Bhargav, 1999). The 1992-1993 Annual Report from the Ministry of Welfare shows 1,236 reported cases of rape of Dalit women and the National Commission for Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes shows that approximately 10,000 cases of human right violation of Dalits are reported every month.

A large number of Dalit women are engaged in unclean, inferior occupation such as sweeping, scavenging and working in dumping grounds, rag-picking and also in prostitution. These women have to face steep discrimination in the matters of social relation and employment due to their engagement in these occupations. Women constitute half of total population, but are unable to get equal share in active politics. Their socio-economic status directly depends on their participation in politics. Political parties in India speak much about equality of women but have totally ignored the Dalit women (Jogdand, 1999).

Dalit women also faced many problems in performing their duties due to illiteracy, lack of information and dependency on the male members of their families. An important obstacle is the no-confidence motion against Dalit women as pradhans by the dominant sections. Rural elites are unable to accept the power, which has been given into the hands of the poorer and disadvantaged women (Maniwal, 1998). Despite recognition and legal sanction for political rights rigid caste system and patriarchy directly and indirectly has been suppressing Dalit women and violating their political rights. This proves that human rights of women are violated right from her family to the society at large by one and all. All these factors are largely responsible for the precarious position of Dalit women as far as their social, cultural, religious, economic, health and political status in the society is concerned.

The rejection of reservations for Christian Dalits, the destruction of the Babri Masjid, the Karamchedu and Tsundur atrocities have sharpened the voices of Dalit women. Durga Devi has criticized Vedas and Swarnapati Rani the Varna System of the so-called sacred Bharat, land of the Vedas. Many Dalit women have questioned the caste, religion and patriarchal violence in society. We also need to analyze why Dalit women are not able to write and why Telugu literature has not given recognition to Dalit women writing. We have multi-sided problems in society for the recognition of Dalit women writings as mentioned above. Dalit women should stand as an established group instead of just being part of feminist or Dalit organizations.

Although there is a production of literature in society, it is only of "upper-caste" and male-centered literature, which is completely different from Dalit Literature. The norms of that literature continue to be
“upper-caste” male dominant. This literature has measured Dalit women and their issues with its own norms and standards; the norms of the beauty and experience and religion of literature have continued to be of Hindu upper-castes in Indian society.

Though Dalit women started their writing from 1890s onwards, from the time of the “Adijan Movement” to the recent self-respect movements we have to search with a microscope in the ocean of “upper-caste” literature to find Dalit women writing. Dalit women is not having education before the 1940s but the search of the Nallapodda” team has proved successful because it has brought to light the fact that Dalit women writing existed from 1890s itself. Tadi Nagamma and Jala Mangamma started writing from 1930s onwards; one significant point about them is that both of them were also social revolutionaries and leaders. Other Dalit women like Gulbanamama and Gnata Ratnamma, who also acquired education during the colonial period, have recently written about their experiences of Christianity.

Some Dalit women have produced path-breaking writings from their pens, with their experiences of participation in the Ambedkarite movement, working class movements, Karamchedu, Thimmasamudram, Neenukonda, Tsundur Dalit Movements. Most of these writings are autobiographical, and of their struggles between Christianity and Hinduism. It is not an exaggeration to say that most of them are “Asa” (The spontaneous way of creating poetry orally within a short span of time.) Poets. There is no tradition of literature from times of yore to the present that is untouched by Dalit women. Dalit women have introduced a new genre to Telugu Literature called “Hykoo”. (A genre invented and developed in Japanese literature. This form of poetry called Hykoo is first used by Dalit women in Telugu Literature.

Challapalli Swaroopa Rani, a Dalit writer, attacked the Gandhian term “Harijan” in her poem “Biruda”. She also criticized the idea of woman “Vasudha”, who was purportedly the reason behind Vemana turning into a “Yogi” from being a “Bhogi”. Dalit women writers like Leela Kumari and Vijaya Bharati have criticized Hindutva, which has been taking over and misrepresenting Buddhism for its own survival.

Dalit women wrote about their devotion towards Christianity in the early phases. They also wrote about “Saiva” and Hindu religions. They have further attacked patriarchy and violence against women that have religious sanction in the Vedas. For instance K. Durga Devi has written an essay called “Annie Vedakore Unnayisha... Sree Patanam Kuda!” (Every thing is in Vedas... including the Destruction of Woman!) Swaroopa Rani’s “Namaiah Mahila” also attacks Vedas. Issues such as hero worship, love, anti-toddy movement, children’s literature, women’s education, adult education, inter-caste marriage, problems like child labour, rationalism, caste-class differences between women themselves, also appeared as core issues in their writings.

Jyothirmayi has responded to the famous poem of Gurajada Apparao’s “Desamante Matti kadoi” (“Nation means not earth... but human) in an interesting way from the Dalit point of view: “Yes, we know that nation means people, but you should know that are differences between those people.” In a similar way she has responded to SriSri’s “maroprapamcham pilichindi” (another world has called); “At least this world should be free from caste-class differences.”

Feminists like Swaroopa Rani called on women to establish a separate ideological world outside the norms of regular society. Some Dalit women also participated in the nationalist movement and propagated ideas through speeches, songs, and essays. But none of their names were included in the list of freedom fighters nor were they recognized either by the government or by the people.

Dalit women are the participants in the national economy of our country. 90% of Dalit women are participating in productive labour, especially agriculture. The division of labour is also according to gender and caste in Indian a society. Their labour has not been taken into consideration when it comes to the overall view. Along with patriarchy, caste oppression also should be recognized by feminist and communist movements. Feminists have not come out of Hinduism to demolish its existence. This is the reason why feminism failed to highlight the issues of Dalit women and the caste system, as the caste system is base to Hinduism.
Alisamma Women’s Collective announced that “we request Hindu and non-Dalit women to recognize that casteist patriarchy has differentiated the women of India. It is not only patriarchy that prevails in India but also the casteist patriarchy that subsists in India. We should recognize the diversity of the Indian women and its political significance. You are getting established and we are getting destructed. You are kept in the temples as goddess and we are thrown into fields to work day and night. You are becoming Sat and we becoming Dasia. Democratically, feminist goal should be the eradication of the binds that area interlinked between caste class and gender.” This is how Dalit women raised their voice for the first time and a foundation was laid for the Dalit Feminism. They set certain goals and started fighting for their rights.

A search for Dalit women writing might show us some representations of Dalit women in Dalit male writing: they have portrayed Dalit woman as poor housewives, mothers and helpless beings. There are instances in these writings of Dalit men marrying “upper-caste” women but no reference to a Dalit woman marrying an “upper-caste” man, though which there is much scope to discuss caste oppression within the domestic sphere and power relations. As a woman belonging to a lower caste, the oppression she experiences in the family of an upper-caste is of a different order, because a woman has to leave her parental house and live in the family of a merely different class-caste and cultural practices.

Shyamala Gogu says in her introduction to Nallapoddum:

Male dominated Dalit movement has failed to look at the problems - of Dalit women and their self-respect. When a Dalit woman is raped, - there are two factors that are presented, one is self-respect and another one is compensation. Compensation became a primary issue than self respect in the case of Dalit women due to the poverty in Dalit communities. (op. cit; pp. 23-24)

Though, Dalit women’s contribution to the movement is palpable, their place as leaders in history is not found. Movements use them for some time and finally marginalize them. Women who fought against the atrocities in Karasam, Thimmasamudram, and Tsundur have given foundation to present day Dalit women’s organizations. Savitramma, Esamma, Aleesamma, Grasamma, Leela Kumari, Lakshmi Theresa have played significant role in the Dalit movement.

Many times Dalit men themselves have announced that Dalit women enjoy freedom, and that they are free from patriarchy. The patriarchy in Dalit communities is miniscule in its vigour and there is much more democracy in Dalit communities.

The romanticized, sentimentalized Dalits of Poomani and Daniel find an authentic voice and affirmative presence in the writings of Sivakami, Edayavendan, Unjai Rajan Abimani, Bama, Anbadavan, Gunasekaram, Maaivam and others. The first Dalit novel in Tamil written by a woman Dalit writer, Sivakami, was published in 1989. The novel, Pazhiyana Kazhidalam (1989) discusses the issue of Dalit leadership and points out pitfalls inherent in an imitative model wherein Dalit leaders duplicate corruption and manipulative politics prevalent among empowered, upper caste politicians. The novel advocates the need for an organized, educated, Dalit youth that stands united by ideological commitment and sincerity of action towards empowerment of Dalits. Such a leadership, consisting of young men and women is projected as the novelist’s vision to curb intra-Dalit strife and ensuring of social justice.

This novel’s significant contribution to Dalit literary discourse lay in its foregrounding of Dalit men’s violent treatment of Dalit women at home. Dalit patriarchy is an important subject of concern in Tamil Dalit literature. Sivakami’s novel prepared the ground for a sustained critique of domestic violence and abuse of Dalit women at home by Dalit men—fathers, brothers, sons, fathers-in-law, brothers-in-law, apart from sexual and occupational harassment faced by Dalit women outside their homes at the hands of upper caste men and the police. In her second novel, Aanandayaee (1992), Sivakami focuses on violent exploitation of woman’s body and points out how the family as an institution is embedded in patriarchal oppressivesystem that is blatantly unjust to women. In 1992, another significant Dalit work in Tamil was published. The first Dalit autobiography in Tamil, written by a Dalit woman, Bama, was published and was warmly received by readers and critics.
Karukku (1992) discusses oppression borne by Dalits at the hands of state (police), panchayath the upper castes and at the church. Bama also highlights how Dalit women are oppressed further by Dalit men at home.

The collusion of patriarchy with caste hegemony is a harsher and more unjust suppression of Dalit women as shown in the works of Sivakami and Bama. Bama’s Karukku discusses various forms of violent oppression unleashed on Dalits, specifically on the Paraayar caste. A significant aspect of this work pertains to the oppression of Dalit Christians at the hands of the church. Karukku depicts how Dalit Christians are not allowed to sing in the church choir, are forced to sit separately, away from the uppercaste Christians, are not allowed to bury their dead in the cemetery within the village, behind the church, but are made to use a different graveyard beyond the outskirts. The Paraayars who converted to Christianity in order to escape casteist oppression at the hands of orthodox Hinduism are shown to be greatly disillusioned as they are not able to escape cabinet oppression within the church fold. In Bama’s Sangati (1994), Dalit women’s dual oppression on account of gender and caste Bama’s writing celebrates Dalit women’s subversive strategies to overcome their oppression. While some act as shrews and overwhelm their alcoholic, violent husbands with their verbal tirade and thereby escape physical violence, some others wrestle with the men while a few of them choose to walk out on their abusive husbands. The romanticized, sentimentalized Dalits of Poomani and Daniel find an authentic voice and affirmative presence in the writings of Sivakami, Edayavendan, Unjai Rajan Abimani, Bama, Anbadavan, Gunasekaram, Imaiyan and others. The first Dalit novel in Tamil written by a woman Dalit writer, Sivakami, was published in 1989. The novel, Pachiyana Kazhidulam (1989) discusses the issue of Dalit leadership and point out pitfalls inherent in an imitative model wherein Dalit leaders duplicate corruption and manipulative politics prevalent among empowered, upper caste politicians.

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All Dalit writing is to be perceived as political writing, as a strategy of resistance to social oppression. Bama through her writing hopes to influence Dalit women readers to shape their lives positively. Her works lay a lot of emphasis on empowerment of Dalits through education. Bama's third novel, Vanmaan (2002) argues for forging of better unity among Dalit groups and to avoid intra-Dalit strife. Thus, I conclude that literature has always been used by writing as a weapon to fight against the established social order norms, traditions, hypocrisy out mood customs, as well as political system. Protest in literature has always existed. Though Dalit literature is written in different Languages, different geographical background, but there is a common suffering, denominator, the roots, the sensibility the common suffering, exploitation and justice and by writing their personal narratives, Hence Dalit mobilising resistance which to fight against all form of oppressions which they have been experiencing for ages.

Writers like Bama and Sivakami hold that feminism has to reinvent itself in order to integrate the woman question with the Dalit woman question.

The novel Karukku (1992) is an autobiographical literary narrative which imaginatively constructed her lived experience with that of the experiences of the larger groups pertaining to her caste and gender. This aspect is explored further in an objective, social milieu in her third work Vanmaan (2002) where she analyses the intra-community conflicts, caste hatred and resulting violence and mayhem among Dalit communities. The confessional, conversational mode of writing adopted by Bama in Karukku and Sangati is a significant milestone in Tamil Dalit fiction. It departs from the literary, invariably refined and therefore elitist vocabulary of literary discourse that stands alienated from the marginalized subjects. Bama employs the vocabulary and spoken idiom of the marginalized in her literary works thereby underlining the ideological underpinning that regulates the matrix of identity, self-articulation and literary discourse in Dalit writing. She writes about those hitherto marginalized in literary discourse in a language that has been held unliterary. She at once interrogates dominant literary practice and articulates the experiences of the oppressed in the language of the oppressed. Bama writes about Dalit women in her novels in her capacity as a Dalit woman herself. She thereby makes it evident that writing from the margin- the act of writing for a Dalit woman - is a political act. She seeks to subvert dominant perception, representation and articulation of Dalit women’s lives. In our analysis of Bama’s writing, we shall trace the close link between education, writing and empowerment that existence perennially.

Conclusion

Dalit literary script is a sort of activism that seeks to free Dalits from the clutches Bama posits as tools that could liberate women of her caste from leading a degraded, repressed of dominant ideology and casteist subjugation. Bama’s fiction, I shall try to discuss below, argues for an activist intervention in the context of Dalit empowerment in Tamil Nadu. She believes that “Reading and writing are political practices”, for a Dalit. She likes to foreground Dalits’ resistance to oppression rather than merely record their victimisation on account of their caste.

A Dalit is kept away from formal education due to social, economic and ideological paradigms. Manusmriti forbade a Dalit any kind of access to Vedas, srutis and other shastras. The Sanskritic tradition was totally unaccessible to a Dalit. Things have hardly changed over the ages for Dalits in the Indian social milieu. In modern India, social prejudice and economic deprivation largely account for lack of educational opportunities for Dalits. In post-independence India, the situation has not improved much indeed.

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"A truly free society must not include a "peace" which oppresses us. We must learn on our own terms what peace and freedom mean together. There can be no peace if there is social injustice and suppression of human rights, because external and internal peace are inseparable. Peace is not just the absence of mass destruction, but a positive internal and external condition in which people are free so that they can grow to their full potential."
— Petra Kelly
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DALIT LITERATURE IS A REPLICA OF HUMAN LITERATURE: 
AN ELUCIDATION WITH BAMA’S WRITINGS

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ABSTRACT

Dalit writing deals with the literature of various marginalized groups of people. Dalit writing is a post-Independence phenomenon. The emergence of Dalit literature has a great historical significance. It has served the purpose of awakening the consciousness of the downtrodden for forgoing their identities. Indian Dalit writing is a post-Independence literary phenomenon. Not that there were no Dalit writers writing before Independence. There were, but they were very few. Even in the long past, saints like Chokhamela and Rohidas were expressing their predicament. Their voices were passive. Today we hear loud voices of protest in Dalit writing. Dalit writing today has a lot of sound and fury and one such writer is Bama.

Keywords: Dalit Literature, Caste, Oppression, Religion, Untouchability.

Citation:


Silenced for centuries by caste prejudice and social oppression, the Dalits of Indian social fabric have, in the last sixty years, found a powerful voice in Dalit literature. The revolutionary social movement launched by their leader Dr Ambedkar, was paralleled by a wave of writing that exploded in poetry, prose, fiction and autobiography at a raw vigour, maturity, depth and richness of content, and shocking in its exposition of the bitterness of their experiences. One is jolted too, by the quality of writing of a group denied access for long ages to any literary tradition. Dalit autobiographies are representative life stories where the Dalit individual uses the narrative to raise his voice for those communities that are silenced by caste oppression. The self represents all other Dalits who were crushed down because of their Dalit identity. They differ from other types in expression and purpose. They are narratives of pain. They depicted the Ile of torment and anguish experienced by these people. Dalits use an array of crimes related to injustices as the theme of autobiography in order to educate fellow Dalits, but not to celebrate. There is no fictional theme in Dalit autobiographies. Unlike Dalit men,
only a few Dalit women have written their autobiographies and most of them have been written in regional languages and that they have hardly been translated into English. Despite the fact that India gained independence long time ago and there were formal educational facilities, the literate Dalit women is very low. Poverty forces them to abandon education and work hard to survive. Bama, one of the first women Dalit writers, through her autobiography Karukku throws light on the most agonising and wretched lives of the Dalits, by experiencing the process of self discovery, identification and empowerment and it is in this context Karukku becomes relevant. Bama Faustina Mary was born at Puthupatty near Madurai in 1958.

The name Bama generated from the author's real name Faustina Mary Fathima. Her family was converted to Christianity way back in the 18th century. Bama began to be noted as a writer with the publication of Karukku (1992) in Tamil and which was translated into English (2000) and many other Indian languages. It won the Crossword Award in 2000. Her works include Sangati (1994), Kisumbukaran (1996) and Vanman (2003). The works of Bama in Tamil represents the emergence of the Dalit writings. She is hailed as the first Dalit woman writer in India. Bama's Karukku is the first Dalit autobiography written in Tamil. It focuses on two aspects namely caste and religion that caused great pain in Bama's life. The book describes Bama's life from childhood to adulthood. The first person narrative expresses the traumatic experience of caste discrimination from the stand point of Dalit women. When Bama was studying in the third standard, she has seen the discriminations in her locality. She saw an elderly man carries a package without touching it. ...He came along, holding out the packet by its string, without touching it. I stood there thinking to myself, if he holds it like that, won't the package come undone, and the vadai fall out? The elder went straight up to the Naicker, bowed low and extended the packet towards him, cupping the hand that held the string with his other hand. Naicker opened the parcel and began to eat the vadai. (13) Later, Bama understood that she and her communities were prohibited by Hinduism and were cursed to remain as poor, cloth washer, cobbler, the one who cleans dead animals, conveys death news, grave digging and drumbeat announcer.

Bama remembers her experience as a farm worker. Even though Bama went to school, she worked as a labourer for daily wages to meet her expenses. There is also double vessels system. Dalits were asked to stand away from the vessels of the Naickers when they give leftovers: ...I knew I should not touch their goods or chattels; I should never come close to where they were, I should always stand away to one side. These were their rules. I often felt pained and ashamed... (46) Bama says, “I am like mongrel” (78). Bama is a sincere follower of discipline, prayer, and Bible. She prayed as her elders said, but when she realized her past years that had gone her “Bhakti” and “Belief” on God changed. Bama was baptized when she was in the second class level i.e. at the age of six. However, the legacy of Christianity was brought to light. The nuns used Bama to wash and clean the church and its belongings. They threatened Bama with the story of Devil. It made Bama familiar with confession. While digging, Bama and her friends found pieces of human skeleton near the church. They were told that was one of priests’ and asked to keep at hope. It is also convinced that those who possess will study well. Bama’s elder brother shows her the right path and tells her that education is the only way to attain equality. Bama’s elder brother opines: Because we are born into the Paraikai Jati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that. But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities. So study with care, learn all you can. If you are always ahead in your lessons, people will come to you of their own accord and attach themselves to you. Work hard and learn” (15). Bama’s elder brother’s counsel makes a very deep impression on Bama. Ever since her brother speaks to her, she started studying very seriously. She sees to it that she always stands first in the class. Bama writes:

“In fact, because of that, many people become my friends, even though I am a Paraichi.” (15)

Throughout her education, Bama finds that wherever she goes, there is a painful reminder of her caste in the form of untouchability. The government
offers the financial grants and special tuitions to the Harijans. These grants and tuitions were more of humiliation mainly because it singled out her caste identity. Once the identity is revealed, Bama opines:

“Among the other students, a sudden rustling; a litter of contempt. I was filled with a sudden rage.” (19)

Bama lights on an incident that took place in her college hostel. That incident has been piercing her heart into pieces. She made a request to the warden for availing leave for her brother Raj Gautaman’s communion on genuine grounds. Her plea was rejected. But the warden granted leave for the upper caste students without any query. As an educated girl, Bama argued with the school authorities with a vibrant voice:

“...there cannot be different rules for different castes, only the same rules for everyone” (19).

At last, she won justice and she went home. Bama who completed the nun training admitted about various caste discriminations in the Christian institutions. She worked in the Christian school where both wealthy and Dalits students studied. In that school, Dalit children were used for menial works. In that school, attended by pupils from very wealthy households, people of my community were looking after all the jobs like sweeping the premises, swabbing and washing the classrooms, and cleaning the lavatories. And in the convent, as well, they spoke very insultingly about low-caste people. They spoke as if they didn’t consider low caste people as human beings. They didn’t know that I was a low-caste nun... (Karukku 22) Even women from Bama’s street were forbidden. Bama gives importance to women identity. Women are more vulnerable to the assault by upper caste people, and were restricted from certain freedom. They were not allowed to see movies, or walk in the streets with an open face. If any woman moves freely, she will be humiliated, assaulted and sometimes raped by upper caste men.

After graduation, Bama joined as a school teacher in a Christian convent school where the nuns deliberately oppressed the Dalit children with contempt. In order to put an end to this sort of discriminations, she decided to become a nun with a mission of helping the poor students. She entered a religious order with great hope:

“...why should I not become a nun too and truly help the people who are humiliated so much and kept under such strict control?” (20).

As she wanted to serve the Dalits, Bama embraced Christianity. The reason behind mass conversion is to safeguard Dalits from the cruel injustice, discriminations, humiliations, and caste bias of the Hindu religion. Dalits think that Christianity would treat them gently. Quite surprisingly, Bama found discriminations in the Christianity also. They labelled her as Dalit-Christian. In spite of the obstacles, she successfully completed nun training with a strong will. At the end of the training, a nun-sister said “...in certain orders they would not accept Harijan women as prospective Nuns and that there was even a separate order for them somewhere” (22).

She thought that the only weapon which annihilates the caste in the society is education and writing. In the new convent-school, Bama felt really sad about the pathetic conditions of Dalit workers. Children of wealthy families were given more privilege. Dalit children were crushed by the upper caste nuns and teachers. Bama’s psyche is fully disturbed by these bitter experiences: ...my mind was disturbed. My conscience was battered and bruised. At last I asked myself, is this the life for me? I left the convent and went home, utterly weary and dispirited. (67) The caste and gender based bitter experiences made Bama to lose faith in God. Both Christian and Hindu institutions mocked, marginalized, humiliated, and ostracized her. She also observed that there was no genuine love for the poor in churches and schools. But, the nuns claim that:

“God’s love is limitless, subject to no conditions” (92).

Bama experienced the discrimination in the village, bus, church, nun’s convent, hostel, recruitment and work places. However, Bama brings out here the attitude of upper caste Indian to the world. Bama’s suffering is the suffering of Dalits that remains unchanged throughout India. She comprehends that Dalits have been forced to live a life of humiliation, and degradation until death. The