THE THEME OF ERASURE AND SURVIVAL –
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ALICE WALKER AND BAMA.

INTRODUCTION

The present study reads together two writers: Alice Walker and Bama Faustina. Both of them represent communities that have had rough historical passages and both of them symbolize faith in the power of the pregnant word to liberate the shackled mind and body. They are examples of extraordinary courage and fortitude for, as women, they have had to come up against multiple degrees of marginalization. While Alice Walker had to negotiate, in four decades of her writing career, the pernicious evil of racial prejudice in America, Bama had to suffer the frightful and grinding effects of caste politics that informs the social fabric of India. Borrowing Walker’s title for the piece of non-fiction she published in 1988, one can say that both these writers have been “Living by the Word.” They have wielded the pen with the conviction that the living word would, eventually, bring voice to the voiceless, and bring light to the community that has acquiesced to a blindness inflicted upon it by others for whom it was necessary to keep the African-Americans or the Dalits in a state of perpetual bondage.

Both, Walker and Bama, invest in the written word, a large measure of social consciousness. The articulation of aspirations has the keenness of purpose. Like narrator-actors who are ambivalently placed in the cusp between real life and staged play, these two writers have been witnesses to the, hitherto, untold sufferings of their, respective, communities as well as being torchbearers with a promethean courage to turn those sufferings into transactions that enlighten others and empower them with the aspirations for a new belief system and an impatience to put up with status quo. Walker and Bama have been subjects of social inequities that they possess an intimate knowledge of those orchestrated acts of inhumanity. However, they also demonstrate the capacity for transcribing their respective hurts into words that do not carry the morbidity of complaint or a personal grouse. There is an adroitness with which the pain of
life experiences is transmuted into the paint of a pregnant image. The telling image leaves an aftertaste that makes the reader come back for meditating on issues that shake the pretentious claims of civilized societies.

Now, Alice Walker’s output is prodigious compared to Bama’s. Walker has a profile which can only be described as multi-faceted: a novelist, short-story writer, poet, political activist. She is also respected the world over and revered in her own community as a literary activist. She discovered the genius of Zora Neale Hurston who, in the 1920s, was the leading contributor to the Harlem Renaissance. Through Zora, Walker recovered the African-American folk stories, dialect and religious practices. Zora and Jean Toomer would, become for Walker, the examples of integrity and conviction in speaking one’s heart and pouring one’s conviction into the spoken and written word. Walker would also discover another forgotten voice of the Harlem Renaissance by publishing her book titled: Langston Hughes: American Poet (1974). Walker’s tryst with the writer’s destiny started in 1968 with the collection of poems titled, Once. Since that date she has been compelling the reason and imagination of her readers for close to four decades now. With seven novels, eleven short-story collections, ten collections of poems, and ten non-fiction books, she is a powerful and significant figure in African-American literature, politics and culture.

Bama Faustina’s output, in comparison with Walker’s, is modest. In a writing career that began around 1990, she has hardly two decades of writing. With three novels and a short story collection, she is a recognized novelist though one who is, grudgingly, given the status of an Indian writer in the Tamil language. Her 1992 novel, Karukku, had to wait for eight years to reach a worldwide circle of readers when the English translation of Lakshmi Holmstrom announced the view from the margins of society in the state of Tamilnadu. Bama does not have the privilege of drawing from a tradition- literary or social- considering the muteness to which her community of Dalits was consigned to. Though the African-American community does experience a modicum of marginalization to this day, they have made ample strides in recovering their cultural traditions that are, in turn, feeding the present generation of writers. Bama’s
community has been imprisoned in a sinister web of intrigue by the upper castes that the endeavour to recover the dead or dying traditional practices is being, systematically, thwarted. The writer like Bama cannot but look inward, under the circumstances, and leave to honest perception the duty of recording for posterity.

So, how do we compare two writers who are so unequal in terms of output? One becomes skeptical of the exercise. Both, in terms of the number of novels written and the number of years writing on the theme of erasure and survival, Walker’s œuvre is two-fold that of Bama’s. Suddenly, one is struck by the realization that while Walker’s reputation has been secured by her own craft that she demonstrates in different genres, Bama’s forays into the genres of the novel and the short story need the ministrations of a skilful and sensitive translator. That she has managed to find some of the finest translators of Tamil in Lakshmi Holmstrom and Malini Sheshadri, is motivated by the zeitgeist of our times when the impact of globalization is, slowly but surely, obliterating the iron cast of marginalization, by defying the denial of an identity and the concomitant intolerance towards revisionist positions. The comparison of these writers must be made on the basis of how, each is involved in their respective communities, how they absorb the magnitude of wicked injustices, how each, in her own way, responds by re-telling these personal hurts and perceived iniquities.

Perhaps there must not be any comparison between these two writers because the dynamics of the African-American reality is not congruent with that of the Dalit reality. The historical forces that manifested as the ‘slave-trade’ brought the ancestors of the present day African-Americans to America. The historical forces that manifested as the caste system or varnashrama dharma held the Shudra, who was at the lowest rung of the social hierarchy and who re-manifests as the Dalit, in an enforced state of bondage in which ministering to the upper castes was considered the Shudra’s duty. However, the American polity responds earlier to the fact that the nation “conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal,” cannot allow a blot on the escutcheon like marginalization of the African-Americans. The Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution of 1865 is testimony to the responsiveness of the political will. Strangely, the country that made its historic “tryst with
destiny” in 1947 waited till 1950 when the Constitution of India was adopted as a written testament, the drafting committee for which was headed by a Dalit, B.R.Ambedkar. Alice Walker represents a community whose sufferings are about four centuries old while Bama represents a community that has been in bondage for over twenty centuries.

Can there be a comparison between the African-American culture and the Dalit culture? There are few visible lines of communication between the two cultures which have been separated by a gigantic geographical chasm. There have not been many passages from one culture to the other by men as, say, a Whitman who made a “passage to India” in order to “eclaircize the myths Asiatic,” or, say, a Forster who made a passage to India to test the ominous pronouncement of Kipling who said “East is East and West is West, and the never the twain shall meet.” The only meaningful contact between the two cultures is more of a spiritual connection that needs to be intricately worked out: Mahatma Gandhi. Like Whitman and Forster, Gandhi’s contact with the Dalit reality must be counted as the ‘outsider’s’ view or the “other” perspective as opposed to the position of an Ambedkar who, as a Dalit, is the voice located within the culture. This is evident in the difference in the acceptance of the Dalit identity by Ambedkar and the proclamation of the Dalits (“untouchables”) as “Harijan” (the Lord’s people) by Gandhi. However, it is Gandhi whose historical connection with the two cultures can be spiritually configured.

Alice Walker’s Spelman College years coincides with the Civil Rights Movement reaching its high tide. The discriminatory practices against the African-Americans were reaching the critical point when the milieu would make it ripe for a revolution in the form of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Walker who grew up enjoying “people watching” was sucked into the vortex of the collective aspiration of the blacks and became a part of the movement. She could not but go on to realize Martin Luther’s “dream” of an egalitarian society. The spiritual force Martin Luther drew from the political and morally compelling gestures of Gandhi like the civil disobedience movement and satyagraha, in a sense, binds Walker to Gandhi. And to imagine that the same man was concerned about the Dalits and championed the abolition of untouchability causes a spiritual communication in which Gandhi becomes a cultural link. The
Gandhian ideology collapses the geographical chasm by reaching the shores of America while Gandhi, himself, stays on to fight against the age old social evils engendered by a pernicious caste system. So, when Bama, the Dalit writer travels to the North American continent to participate in the Tamil Studies Conference (2008), she can be seen to retrace the passage through which Gandhi’s ideas reached America or, in other words, she as a writer is retracing the passages that a Whitman or a Forster made.

At this juncture, it is pertinent to examine the reasonable grounds on which the two writers can be compared. It remains to be seen what space a discipline like Comparative Literature would provide to a project of this kind. There are the traditional assumptions of the discipline of Comparative Literature that has fostered the traffic of people, ideas, cultures and ways of life, which must be considered. It is an exercise well worth the effort to see if there are points of validation within the discursive and theoretical field of the discipline that would lend credence to the present project that reads together Alice Walker and Bama. It is an interesting coincidence that Alice Walker began her career about the time Comparative Literature was beginning to find acceptability in the Indian Universities and in the other academic spheres like Colleges and Schools. For the record, it may be reckoned that the first Department of Comparative Literature was started at Jadavpur University in Kolkatta, in 1956. However, it took about two decades for the discipline to become widely acceptable as a reasonable and respectable scholarly occupation. As a matter of fact, Ulrich Weisstein’s book: *Comparative Literature and Literary Theory: Survey and Introduction*, appeared in its original German version in the year Walker published her first book (1968). The English translation by William Riggan appeared in 1973, in which form, it did the rounds of the Indian academic circles.

What is worth remembering about Weisstein’s book is that the two epigraphs, at the very beginning, locate the contrary positions that are always present in any project involving comparison. The two epigraphs are about five centuries apart of each other. The first one appeared in 1471 as the statement of John Fortescue who felt the whole project, a waste of time: “*comparaciones . . . odiose reputantur.*” The next epigraph is the title of the editorial on
Comparative Literature in the TLS, which categorically declares that Comparative Literature is, “NOT SO ODIOUS.” One feels that a reading together of Bama and Alice Walker would have to negotiate between these two contrary positions all the time. There are moments when it would seem that the two cannot be compared at all. At other moments, one would see the reason for venturing towards a comparison. In other words, the project of comparing the two writers would be located between the orthodox French School (otherwise called the Paris School) and the liberal American School. The French School, whose original champions were Paul Van Tieghem, Jean Marie Carre and Marius Francois Guyard, offers very little space for a comparison between two writers who do not strictly conform to their specification of “international spiritual relations” (3) where they insist on definite relationships as obtains between Byron and Pushkin, Goethe and Carlyle, Walter Scott and Alfred de Vigny.

The counter-position to the French or Paris School is that of the American School towards which Weisstein was sympathetic but careful in subscribing to the liberality of their stand. The chief protagonists who have in different degrees supported this school would be Rene Wellek and Austin Warren who in their Theory of Literature would expand the scope of Comparative Literature to include “General, Comparative and National Literature,” which is the title of the Fourth Chapter in that book (30). The most liberal position acknowledged by Weisstein is that of H.H. Remak’s for whom “ ‘Comparative Literature is the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of the relationships between literature on the one hand and other areas of knowledge and belief, such as the arts’ “ (23). At a later point in the same chapter titled “Definition” (of Comparative Literature), Weisstein invokes Remak’s call for “ ‘more imagination’ “ (27) in any endeavour of comparison, as in this case, where an attempt is made to read together an African-American like Alice Walker along with a Dalit like Bama. The reason for cleaving towards “more imagination” is that the other important considerations like: Influence, Imitation, Reception, Survival, Epoch, Period, Generation, Movement, Genre, Thematology and Mutual Illumination that Weisstein explores in his book cannot be rigorously applied to the present project. If an exception is allowed, one can make concessions to Thematology.
Thematology, however, as a concentric concern within Comparative Literature does not serve the purpose of the present project. The reason for this is Thematology’s alignment with the operations in Classical Rhetoric and Folklore studies which are not necessarily areas of interest for the present study. Thematology, as a discipline, is certainly concerned about themes and motifs but engages them only at the level of evolution and historical trajectory. With the concern for themes and motifs aligned in this manner one is forced to digress into literary topoi. This project is more interested in the image as a crucial thematic unit. It treats the image that Alice Walker constructs or Bama constructs. The argument is that, the present study is interested in the image as a conscious construction than as a mere deployment. The two writers are appreciated for the manner in which they find breakthroughs in their respective cultural location where the freedom of speech is denied and articulation of the truth is counted as the audacity of the revolutionary. In this regard, the image imbued with symbolic meaning is crucial to the telling of their tales. A little caution is exercised in treating the image differently from the manner in which it is lumped together with thematological units like trait, topos and leitmotif.

One would like to think that the founding fathers of Comparative Literature were aware of the ramifications that the field would undergo over time that they have, in the best traditions of scholarship, been accommodating of the imminent, though often unpredictable developments that always push the horizons of the discipline further afield. The need to create more space for newer categories that would be necessitated by reading together writers from different cultures is evident when a contiguous discipline like Post-Colonial studies emerges in the closing decades of the 20th century. The position taken by the authors of the most significant landmark in Post-Colonial studies: Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures (1989), is illuminating and offers pathways for a project in Comparative Literature as well. The authors, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith and Helen Tiffin imply that one can move forward in a multicultural scenario, as it obtains today, only by identifying “critical models” (23) that serve the purpose of “Cutting the ground.” The models they propose suggest the ramified growth of the fields like Post-Colonialism and Comparative Literature which are imperative when one
undertakes a project like the present one. The models suggested are, for illustration, 1. National and Regional Models, 2. The ‘Black Writing’ model, 3. Wider Comparative Models, 4. Models of Hybridity and Syncreticity.

1994 must be regarded as a watershed in Comparative Literature studies. The American Comparative Literature Association’s (ACLA) session at the 1994 convention of the Modern Language Association was titled: “Comparing Theories/Theorizing Comparison.” In a way, it was also the time for gathering, consolidating and formalizing the scholarly and polemical adventures in the field. The proceedings of the meeting of the MLA were later published under the title: *Comparative Literature: States of the Art* (1995). 1995 was also the year in which an important contribution to the evolving discourse on Comparative Literature was made by Charles Bernheimer who edited *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism* which was published by Johns Hopkins University Press. One would reckon that the discipline had, by this time, traversed beyond its tentative beginnings in America where Rene Wellek, in 1958, articulated his anxiety about “the lack of both subject matter and methodology” (4) in his essay, “The Crisis of Comparative Literature.”

One of the crucial interventions with respect to the theory and practice of Comparative Literature is WJT Mitchell’s essay, “Why Comparisons are Odious” (1996). It problematizes the concerns of the discipline by cataloguing the critical issues in the form of questions about the present state of the discipline, the requirements for a theory, possible utility of such theories, how judgements about relative values can be made, about the reality of theories themselves being subjects of comparison and so on. The position Mitchell takes is one that does not want to be trapped in any categories but to forge an approach that has a sound philosophical orientation which he states in the following words:

Comparison, then, is never just finding similarities, identities, or equivalences, nor is it just finding differences. It is the dialectic between similarity and difference, the process of finding differences between things
that appear to be similar, and of finding similarities between things that appear to be different. (322)

While Mitchell’s essay examines the field of Comparative Literature from a more philosophical and methodological plane of what it sets out to achieve and how the tendency to theorize the methods has deflected from the avowed spirit of the discipline, Linda Hutcheon approaches the field from the point of view of culture. She anticipates Mitchell by trying to decipher the sudden spurt in the institutional interest in “the protean discipline,” (303) which was also experiencing a serious problem of coming to terms with a multicultural world that had caused a shift of emphasis from a predominantly Euro-centric persuasion. In her essay, “Productive Comparative Angst: Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism” (1995), she posits that:

As an internationalist discipline, comparative literature could not remain untouched by the pluralistic demands for canon revision and the ethical considerations vis-à-vis minoritized groups that were part of the contested academic and intellectual climate of the 1980s. In fact, it has faced particular and particularly troublesome problems because of its comparative function. (300)

Hutcheon, can be seen to be taking cognizance of the reality of the 1980s when more and more, hitherto, marginalized voices were becoming audible and jostling for attention. A situation aptly captured in the eponymous image of Bill Ashcroft’s theoretical exposition of the postcolonial reality as “The Empire writ[ing] back [to the centre].” Alice Walker, located in the African-American culture, and Bama, located in the Dalit culture are two such multicultural voices that must be accommodated in the expanding field of Comparative Literature.

When Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak visits the pluralistic and multicultural discursive terrain that includes, both, Comparative Literature, with its strong Euro-centric orientations, as well as Post-Colonial Literature, with the emergent voices that now compose the “other,” she fears that, she is, perhaps, presiding over the “Death of a Discipline.” Delivering the Wellek Library Lectures in May 2000, which were later compiled as Death of a Discipline, she gives a
call for “a new comparative literature”(6). She is eminently qualified for this project as she started as the Chair of Comparative Literature at the University of Iowa in 1975 and later, in 1986 founded the Institute for Cultural Studies at the University of Pittsburgh. She opens her lecture with the reference to the historic fall of the Berlin Wall, in 1992, as announcing the rise of multiculturalism and cultural studies. Incidentally, 1992 was the year in which the, hitherto, muted voice of the Dalits finds a new voice in Bama Faustina who publishes *Karukku* that year. Perhaps, the fall of the Berlin Wall symbolizes the coming down of several man-made walls that had caused uncountable social wounds.

The position that Gayatri Spivak takes in *Death of a Discipline* is not that of a doomsayer who announces the demise of the discipline. She only draws attention to the fact that the publishing industry, the academy and the multinational agencies are suddenly finding profit in the involvement in multiculturalism. She, who earlier championed the cause of the Subalterns and even raised the question: “Can the Subaltern speak?, does not want the Euro-American domination of the field of Comparative Literature to result in a new imperialism where the minority voices, the “other” voices, the new literatures, revisionist voices are not subjected to the old power equation of the Centre-Margin. The three lectures in the book are evocatively titled: 1. “Crossing Borders,” 2. “Collectivities,” and 3. “Planetarity.” She implies that if Comparative Literature must continue in the old-fashioned manner of pampering the Euro-American hegemony then it better die and be reborn as a New Comparative Literature which has the adventurous spirit for crossing borders, the accommodation for understanding the new collectivities and proceed to the apogee of “Planetarity” which in Spivak’s own terms goes beyond the stereotypes of globalization or the tokenist gestures of pluralism as practised even in the academy. It is:

best imagined from the precapitalist cultures of the planet. . . .It is, however, the right of the textual to be so responsible, responsive and answerable. The “planet” is here, as perhaps always, a catachresis for inscribing collective responsibility as right. Its alterity, determining experience, is mysterious and discontinuous – an experience of the impossible. It is the collectivities that must be opened up with
the question “How many are we?” when cultural origin is detranscendentalized into fiction – the toughest task in the diaspora. (102)

Gayatri Spivak’s Wellek Lectures, coming in the year 2000, must count as a historic pronouncement. It calls for an end to all scholarly positions that refuse to see the paradigm shift towards “planetarity.” It also sets the agenda for the “New Comparative Literature” in the new millennium. The impact of Spivak’s pronouncements is given a serious critical consideration in every serious critical engagement on Comparative Literature. For the present project, the idea of “planetarity” and the scholarly articles that came in its wake provide the much needed justification. The ground is cleared of the old terms of reference where a comparison between an African-American like Alice Walker and a Dalit like Bama would have appeared a little too ambitious, if not, without sufficient grounds for comparison.

Didier Coste, in 2004, starts his essay at the point where Gayatri Spivak leaves off by asking, “Is a Non-Global Universe Possible? What Universals in the Theory of Comparative Literature (1952-2002) Have to Say About It.” He invokes another Indian, the novelist, Vikram Chandra, for the image of the maidan from Chandra’s Red Earth and Pouring Rain (1995). This Hindi word means, “playground”. Incidentally, Vikram Chandra’s title is itself an example of “planetarity” as it is borrowed from A K Ramanujan’s translation of a Classical Tamil Song of the Sangam era. What Ramanujan’s translation and Chandra’s borrowing have achieved is the visibility they could provide to Classical Tamil, which was hitherto, marginalized in India whose political context is, overtly, plural and secular. Didier Coste appears to be expanding, in his own way, Spivak’s “planetarity” when he says: “we do want one peaceful world, but it should be like a public space, an open forum, a playground, a maidan, not an ecclesia or community of beliefs” (37).

A specific response to Gayatri Spivak’s Death of a Discipline appears in 2005 by a colleague of Spivak’s from the Columbia University faculty of Comparative Literature. Emily Apter in “Afterlife of a Discipline” places Spivak in perspective and her essay helps to dispel the numerous voices of disagreements caused more out of a misunderstanding about “planetarity” as
at, some level, militating against the interests of the Subalterns that Spivak so untiringly championed. Apter concludes her essay with the declaration that:

Spivak’s speculations. . . are rife with implications for the future of translation studies and for the afterlife of a discipline called Comparative Literature. In setting up the conditions for a rapprochement between two orders of knowledge often kept separate – the cultural and the technical – Spivak establishes the terms for imagining a politics of cognition and linguistic expressionism that positions Comparative Literature centre stage. (206)

These responses not only expand the field of Comparative Literature to accommodate multicultural discourse but it also enriches the Humanities by re-inscribing the valuable positions that were undermined by a single-minded academicism that went by the letter of the pronouncements of different schools of thought than by their spirit. What these responses help to foster is a reasonable approach to cultural dialogue without being too judgemental about the parties involved nor too distracted by their cultural locations nor too influenced by their political affiliations. John Pizer in “Towards a Productive Interdisciplinary Relationship: Between Comparative Literature and World Literature” makes a case for a “universal-particular dialogue” (22) that can help the scholar steer between extreme positions in reading and reap the understanding that emerges from a reading together, as this project attempts, of protagonists from two different cultures, geographical locations that are too far apart, and articulating issues that are similar but not congruent.

The “universal-particular dialogue” implies that the protagonists are negotiating between two extreme positions, even, extremist positions. It suggests that if the Humanities, particularly, Comparative Literature must receive a new fillip, it will come from projects, such as the present one, in which borders are crossed, in more than one sense of that expression; in which collectivities are understood, in ways different from the patented responses; in which planetarity is sought as a way of academic life in the age of multiculturalism. What this means and what scope it has got is better articulated by Sandra Bermann, who in her 2009 ACLA Presidential
Address titled, “Working in the And Zone: Comparative Literature and Translation,” opens with the following belief:

Fortunately, a more transnational, interdisciplinary, and responsive humanities is, I believe, poised to emerge. Underscoring the importance of language, literature, and culture, it can help us better explore our past imaginations of the human condition and engage more fully with the wide range of arts and traditions that now imagine the world in such diverse and sometimes surprising ways. Firmly embraced and energetically taught, such a humanities may well contribute to a new sort of global consciousness, one that would bring a keener sensitivity to the languages, cultures, and peoples of our polyglot planet and begin to draw us all into a broader, more responsive conversation.

To prompt such a humanities, no fields are better suited, it seems to me, than comparative literature and translation. (432)

In the light of the discussion on Comparative Literature that has been configured around Spivak’s definition of “planetarity,” it may be said that Alice Walker and Bama become two compelling cases for the minority voices coming into their own. The study of their novels opens an interesting area where the writer is seen to negotiate social and philosophical issues in terms of art. The novel becomes a site of comparative perspectives which illuminate the issues of racial prejudice and Dalit marginalization through voices that are located within the communities that are subjected to these historical and socio-politico-cultural inequities. The fact that these communities themselves do not allow a privileged position to the women makes the writings of Walker and Bama gestures of extraordinary courage. The women speak within the community to break the age old strictures, thereby declaring the arrival of the “other” voice within. Their skill to tell the tales about their suffering as well as the tales of misery of their women provides the momentum to go beyond their respective communities and be recognized as the voices with integrity, at which level, they are not merely African-American or Dalit, but worthy members of the community of artists who have demonstrated the power of art to transcend barriers and provide new spaces of discourse that were consigned to neglect and apathy and muteness earlier.
Looking at the novels that Alice Walker has written, one finds that she has been concerned about aspects of life that render the individual powerless. Her novels explore and examine these aspects with admirable perspicacity. The Third Life of Grange Copeland (1970), presents the triangle of economic struggle, psychological impact, and social position, in which Grange Copeland is located. It shows the delicate tension between the individual and the environment which requires a certain amount of self-knowledge for the individual to survive. The journey towards this self-knowledge is in three phases as far as Grange is concerned.

Her second novel, Meridian (1976), received rapturous acclaim. It has the eponymous heroine who emerges as a symbol of hope and courage. In this novel, Walker opens the triangle to add a fourth dimension, the political. Meridian Hill’s involvement with the Civil Rights Movement and her attempts to turn education into life altering initiatives becomes a model for women with a strong aspiration for emancipation. This is also the novel, where Walker can be said to animate womanist attitudes.

The Saxon College graduate, Meridian Hill, yields place to the unlettered and timid Celie in Walker’s third novel, The Color Purple (1982). Walker turns her field of concern which was a triangle in The Third Life, and which was modified into a square in Meridian, to become a polygon in The Color Purple. Walker’s concern for the African-American family is evident in the third novel where she examines the meaning of relationships. She exposes the evil practices perpetrated by men in the man-woman equation and makes a strong case for the fumigation of all forms of hypocrisy in familial relationships. Through Celie, she examines the magnitude of the psychological trauma as a fall out of relationships that are founded on brutal and merciless exploitation. It is compelling to see how Walker’s heroine delicately manoeuvres the serious challenges in her life and forms new patterns of womanist relationships that provide the long awaited release from all forms of bondage.

The horizon of concern is widened by Walker in her next novel, The Temple of my Familiar (1989). While the narrative in The Color Purple is focused on one woman, Celie to whom all the other characters are centripetally related, the narrative in The Temple is a massive canvas with multiple characters, each with a capacity to engage the reader on his own or her
own terms. Moreover, the contact that Alice Walker establishes with Africa in *The Color Purple* is widened into a conceptual space to accommodate more complex characters, an almost complete span and sense of Time, a wrestle with the constituting elements of History, and, for the first time in her oeuvre, one gets to see her deploy the personal myth about the origin and separation of civilizations with fabulations on how the White man became distinct from the Black man causing, in the bargain, the emergence of separate consciousnesses. The multiple points of the narrative are manned (as well as woman-ned) by some remarkable individuals: a musician in search of his past, Arvedyda, a Black professor of history who is able to read the injustices the men have caused their own women, and Lissie, a woman with a thousand facets that weave through the mythical, historical, fictional and real dimensions of the novel.

Alice Walker’s fifth novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) is a delicate balancing act between the physical body which she explores through Celie in *The Color Purple* and the spiritual body which she explores through Lissie in *The Temple*. The physical body of the woman is the flesh and blood of history which is revived through the awakened sexuality of Celie. The spiritual body, here, stands for the soul of the African and, by extension, the African-American civilization in which is inscribed the place of the woman. The “secret” in the title of the novel is that gigantic deception of the woman by the male who, in the name of tradition and cultural mores, has perpetrated a heinous practice to which the woman acquiesces. Alice Walker goes deep down into the physical and psychic dimensions of this deception by unraveling the secret behind a horrifying practice like genital mutilation. She, who has been championing the regeneration and the flowering of the woman, is appalled to see genital mutilation eroding the physical and traumatizing the psychic dimensions of the woman. It is far from any understanding of civilized practices when one reckons that more than a hundred million women have gone through the hideous rite of having their clitoris excised or, in the worst case, the labia scraped away completely. Tashi, the African woman who lives in America and who makes a fleeting appearance in *The Color Purple*, becomes the central character through whom Walker animates the perils and the pain of genital mutilation. For Walker, Tashi becomes the lectern from which she lashes out at genital mutilation. In this role, Walker is more an activist whose polemic is meant to knock at the conscience of the civilized world. Tashi, out of solidarity with
her women, submits to this frightful rite and becomes a walking example of the physical and psychological wreckage that the traditional practice can cause. Walker’s controlled anger is directed against the denial of sexuality to the woman by the male. One would understand the moral indignation of Walker who, through Fanny, the granddaughter of Celie, and who appears in *The Temple of my Familiar* is shown to discover sexual freedom through masturbation in her consciousness raising group.

Walker’s conviction that sexuality is not merely a path to physical pleasure but a necessary awakening and consciousness that enable the woman to become more life-affirming is examined, with far greater delicacy than *Possessing* in her sixth novel, *By the Light of my Father’s Smile* (1998) that appeared a good six years after her tirade against FGM (Female Genital Mutilation). Walker goes beyond the African and African-American frame to become more ecumenical in *By the Light* where she handles a trans-racial context. The novel is set, this time, neither in America or Africa but in Mexico to which Susannah goes along with her parents and her sister, Magdalena. Susannah, as the aspiring writer and as Walker’s alter ego, sensitively captures the latter’s keenness for observation and subtlety of evocation of hidden consciousness. In the remote Sierras of Mexico, Susannah discovers other cultures: the mixed-race Blacks and Indians called the Mundo. The novel, for the first time includes a dimension that had not been a very important aspect of Walker’s narratives; that dimension is the ecosphere. Susannah’s consciousness as a writer is sharpened and her understanding of human beings and their culture are vastly developed after she comes to the Sierras where every moment is an intense and passionate relationship with the natural environment. The fundamental bond with nature that was in a state of rupture in America gets repaired as Susannah experiences new discoveries every moment after their relocation. In this novel, Walker moves centrifugally from the woman’s body towards the wide and inscrutable nature that surrounds the individual for a life-enhancing education, at the fullness of which consciousness returns to the body in the form of an all-embracing love. What one sees in this novel is an unusual serenity to Walker’s narrative, as if a spiritual turn is consciously willed by her.
One cannot be off the mark for supposing that Walker takes a definite spiritual turn if one were to see how the seventh and, till the completion of the present study, the latest novel, *Now is the Time to Open your Heart* (2004), is thematically laid out. This novel is the first novel that Walker has published in the new millennium. It distils her engagements: social, political, cultural, and historical, of about four decades. The life in words began with the Civil Rights Movement when Walker was herself riding on the wave of idealism that marked her Spelman College years. She moves from the individual through the family through the community to point of philosophy when she spiritually examines the values that must shore up human kind. As a novel that appears six years after Walker’s sustained exploration of a human existence buoyed up by the equilibrium that man can muster with the circumambient universe, *Now is the Time* goes farther into the heart of human darkness that has come to characterize the life in the closing decades of the 20th century. The amount of inhumanity that man has been causing man makes Walker wonder at the Satanic propensities of human beings. She asks, with not a little incredulity, as to how anyone who has seen a human being can bring himself to kill. Walker pushes her writer-like wonder and enquiry on the rational and irrational impulses of man. There are existential problems of identity, of an understanding of the self, of one’s location in a community and in society which Walker has dwelt in imaginative ways. What happens to Kate Nelson in *Now is the Time* is an adventure of the self from the zone of knowledge towards a zone of mystical experiences which elevate her level of consciousness. What is left of a successful life? Is the question that Walker confronts in this novel. A woman who is much married, a successful writer, a mother with an overflowing fount of human kindness still finds something crucially missing from her repertoire of learning and understanding. She begins a journey by first divesting herself of all material attachments and accepting a life of communing with the inner self. For the second time in Walker’s oeuvre, the protagonist as writer, travels to the South American continent for a spiritual retreat in the Amazon. The ecological concern that one gets to see in *By the Light* is much more amplified and universal in tone when Kate Nelson picks up the spiritual thread from where Susannah leaves off. Walker seems to be concerned about the numerous indigenous cultures that have got completely erased by the hegemonic control of communities with a more organized history and a greater capacity for perpetuating the dominant
cultural ideologies. So, the journey that begins with Grange Copeland going to Georgia, to Meridian going to the Civil Rights march, to Celie benefitting from her companionship with Shug, to the journey into the heart of Africa and back in time to the myths about the origin of the civilizations to the journeys to Mexico and the Amazon, has taken Walker to different levels of knowledge and consciousness. In the final form, it amounts to a serene philosophy that even promises to rid the world of the thirst for revenge and killing where all the communities can sink their prejudices about the others and arrive at a newer and better understanding of one another.

The journey that Bama Faustina makes in the world of letters is even more remarkable for the fact that the writer has undergone struggles as much as the characters she depicts in her novels. One does not get a perspective on Bama, the Dalit writer in Tamil, if one does not pause a while to understand the context in which Dalit literature emerged in India. Dalit literature, as a distinct literature, with the identity and respectability to stand separately from the regional or vernacular literatures in India, emerged around 1970 in the state of Maharashtra. The spurt of interest in the writings of B R Ambedkar marked a new stream of intellectual activity that was to be different and yet as engaging as the other dominant streams of discourse like the interest in the writings of Gandhi and Nehru. The sudden interest in Ambedkar suggests that the political and social climate in India is seeing a thaw in the, hitherto, frozen social equations in which the Dalits were, to borrow Ralph Ellison, “invisible men [and women].” The identity of the Dalits was itself under erasure as the recognition emerges with the very name, “dalit” out of a centuries’ old practice of untouchability.

How the Dalits became visible as an identity and how the dalit writers found their publishers are documented in “touchable tales: publishing and reading dalit literature,” (2003). This was among the first books to be published by Navayana, which declares its mission statement in the following words: “As a publishing venture, Navayana will be a ‘new vehicle’ to take forward debates on issues neglected by mainstream publishers.” This book, which brings together twelve representatives from the publishing, teaching and creative writing fields, is an important document that convinces one that the Dalit writer has had to penetrate the ossification of untouchability both in the Indian society and in the Indian psyche. One of the insights comes
from Mini Krishnan who has been a commissioning editor with two mainstream publishers: Macmillan and OUP and has this to say about the long wait to get Bama translated into English. Speaking to the editor of the book, S. Anand, she confesses:

I began planning the publishing of dalit literature in 1993 while in Macmillan and was working on the launch list of eleven translations which were eventually released in May 1996. That was when I first read about Bama. I was terribly intrigued. A nun leaving the convent and writing about it! . . . .But I was so ignorant I didn’t know where to begin. Also, I was with an extremely traditional publisher, so I had to move cautiously. I met my former teacher in Bangalore, Indira Sampath, and asked her if she would translate Karukku. That was as far back as November ’93. At that time, drowning in mainstream literature, vast amounts of which were lying untranslated, I remember feeling uneasy about excluding an experience (the dalit experience) that had not really been made available except as ‘told-to’ accounts. You wouldn’t know the number of upper caste translators who pointedly declined to translate Karukku! Bama and I eventually found a translator (Lakshmi Holmstrom) only in 1998. Though I was in touch with Bama years before that and told her that I wanted to publish her in translation. (10)

Mini Krishnan is articulating a problem that has two implications. She is, obviously, referring to the fact that Bama, the Dalit writer, was spurned by upper caste translators for they did not think it was worthwhile to render a low-caste woman’s work in Queen’s English. Krishnan is, perhaps, also implying that the translators are also reckoning the fact of the Dalit writer being a woman. The six years of waiting for the translator suggests the reluctance to accept someone from the lower caste as a creative writer. There is also the suggestion that there is greater reluctance to read what such a person has written. One wonders whether this reluctance also implies the smugness of the upper caste members about their greater talent for the creative arts in which a Bama is an aberration, a freak who does not deserve their care. The woman writer who belongs to the lower caste and who waits for her translator is like Ahalya in
the *Ramayana*, the woman cursed to be a stone and who waits for the feet of the Lord to touch her and liberate her. Yet another implication, frightful in scale, is to know that the fate of the educated woman from the lower caste is this; one shudders to think of the fate of the woman who lacks education or who is denied education.

Of all the places in India, Tamilnadu, the state to which Bama belongs awoke to the perils of a caste system that kept the members of the lower castes in enslavement. The person who tried to open the eyes of society to the heinous practice of keeping men enslaved and consigning women to a greater degree of bondage is EVR Periyar. Although he belongs to the upper caste community of the Naickers, and about which community Bama is critical for perpetuating social evils against the Dalits, he was responsible for the first wave of churning in society which galvanized the movement against caste prejudices as well as the emancipation of women. In the same year that Bama wrote her first novel, *Periyar on Women’s Rights* (1992) was translated into English from Tamil. Periyar, who, as a social reformer had been voicing his concern for the emancipation of society through the liberation of the woman has spoken on every subject concerning women like: love, chastity, prostitution, marriages, widow remarriage, women’s education, birth control, property rights, suppressed womenkind, freedom from bondage, poor status of women in Hinduism. The book documents a speech Periyar delivered on the occasion of a wedding at Vadasseri on 26th August 1956 where he reiterates his position about women’s education thus: “All women should be educated and they should make use of their learning to eradicate the superstitious beliefs and practices found in our society” (106).

Periyar did initiate the Self Respect Movement which vowed to eradicate all practices that secretly facilitated a consolidation of upper caste interests and systematically led to the lower castes becoming disenfranchised. He was, particularly, concerned about the muteness of the woman which has allowed the monster of caste-based evils to raise their ugly head. However, Periyar’s is the voice of the outsider as one does not find a focus on the Dalit issue in his campaign. One of the important documents that looks at the Dalit issue as a social and political aberration similar to the apartheid is Chandra Bhan Prasad’s *Dalit Diary: 1999-2003: Reflections on Apartheid in India* (2004). K P Singh of the University of Washington
commenting about the book-on the blurb- says: “Dalit Diary compares in its vision with Booker T. Washington’s writings on the economic and educational empowerment of Blacks.” Robin Jeffrey of La Trobe University, Melbourne, who has written the Introduction to the book says that “the similarities between the plight of dalits and that of Black Americans in the recent past are obvious” (x). Chandra Bhan Prasad uses statistics and hard quantitative analysis to prove the fact that there has been a conspiracy of the proletariat to ensure the continuation of the varna-system that promotes apartheid and keeps the Dalits out of all the social, political and cultural institutions of this country.

Harmony India, a social welfare group organized a seminar to discuss the growing resistance among Dalits and the growing intolerance of caste Hindus on 28th June 1997. The participants in that seminar concurred that:

Dalit awakening has been a positive development of the recent past, and . . . that the fight of dalits against caste oppression augured well for the development of a more democratic polity. . . . The resistance of caste Hindus to dalit empowerment was at the root of the prolonged caste tensions in southern Tamil Nadu. . . . The harassment of dalit women by caste-Hindu men is a separate dimension of the issue of violence against women. (78)

It is interesting to note that the abovementioned text and similar articles were, originally, published in the Frontline, a fortnightly magazine that comes out of the stables of The Hindu which claims in its masthead to be “India’s National Newspaper.” These reports filed by S. Viswanathan have been collected under the title: Dalits in Dravidian Land: Frontline reports on anti-dalit violence in Tamil Nadu (1995-2004), (2005).

What the tale bears has always fascinated the reader of tales. It has been the reason for storytellers to make them as unbelievably believable as possible. This impulse to tell the riveting tale, the engaging tale, the absorbing tale, the realistic tale, the fantastic tale has driven storytellers to plough the imagination for the more fantastic tale. The act of storytelling is motivated by the need to see the marks of incredulity in the reader’s face. However, the
postmodern phenomenon has only cautioned the storyteller that the fantastic and the unbelievable need not, necessarily, be far-fetched. Ironically, the greatest source of the fantastic can be real life itself. If one likes to think that the social activists, the Dalit writers, intellectuals have been dealing with vague generalities when they say: ‘social evil,’ ‘social inequities,’ ‘heinous practices,’ ‘dehumanized lives,’ one must be relieved that the discussion is not about the Dalits, say, a particular caste among the Dalits who are involved in manual scavenging. Gita Ramasamy’s, *India Stinking: Manual Scavengers in Andhra Pradesh and their Work* (2005), is about Dalits who:

> go by many names in various parts of the country: han, hadi (in Bengal); balmiki, dhanuk (Uttar Pradesh); methar, bhangi (Assam); methar (Hyderabad); paki (coastal Andhra Pradesh); thotti (Tamil Nadu); mira, lalbegi, chuhra, balashahi (Punjab); bhangi, balmiki, methar, chuhra (Delhi).

Whatever they are called, they belong to the bottom of the Hindu social hierarchy: they are untouchables. . . . The dalits, traditionally, have the least desirable occupations – cleaning, sweeping leatherwork, removal of human excreta, removal of human and cattle corpses, rearing of scavenger pigs and suchlike. While there are many castes among the dalits, scavenging is the occupation of a few of them. (3)

When one writes about the ‘plight’ of the Dalits, one is not using a cliché but putting the word to its most appropriate use in the context of the caste system in India where the Dalits are at the receiving end. When a Bama writes about the “karukku” or the serrated edges of the Palmyra leaf, she implies the bleeding caused by the knife like edges tearing into warm flesh. Her pain is more for she has been a victim and a witness in equal measure and she had to negotiate between one kind of reality that is known and the actual reality that is kept suppressed. She has had to read, like all the members of her ilk, between the lines; an illustration for which is extracted from the Foreword to *India Stinking* which reads:
The Government of India promulgated ‘The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act’ in 1993. However, to this day an estimated 13,00,000 people from dalit communities continue to be employed as manual scavengers across the length and breadth of this country— in private homes, in community dry latrines (CDLS) managed by the municipality, in the public sector such as railways, and by the army. In Andhra Pradesh, there are 8,330 manual scavengers employed in over 1,600 CDLS and over 1.5 lakh individual dry latrines. (vi)

One must also realize that reality is not always laid out as neat lines or located between the lines. In a complex reality like the Indian society, there are centuries old entanglements of vested interests, political interests, social and economic interests that have been twisting and turning making it difficult for anyone to achieve a modicum of clarity, especially, when this complex reality has been, subliminally most of the times, and at other times, overtly vitiated by a caste system within the Hindu society. One of the recent attempts to arrive at a reasonable level of clarity by decoding the caste equations is Dilip M. Menon’s, the blindness of insight: essays on caste in modern india (2006). Dilip Menon posits that the problem that social scientists and intellectuals and the media must not prolong their reluctance to engage with the actual causes that continue to keep alive a burning issue like the erasure of the dalits from mainstream discourse. The author points his finger at religion thus:

That Hinduism – as religion, social system or way of life – is a hierarchical, inegalitarian structure is largely accepted but what has gone almost unacknowledged in academic discourse is both the casual brutality and the organized violence that it practices towards its subordinated sections. (2)

What Bama attempts in her fictional revisiting of these real life situations is to animate the nodes of social life where communities come together for the transactions of interests. At these precise nodes of contact, the machinery that operates the microphysics of power are visible. Her mission has been to invest these nodes of social life with as much lived experience as she
could muster, so that, the tales of real life are more fantastical than the magnificent juggleries of the imagination.

Autobiography is a genre that has all the aspects of the novel. The similarity is not limited to the autobiographical novel. There is as much of Pasternak in Dr. Zhivago as there is D H Lawrence in Paul Morel. *The Bell Jar* has as much of Sylvia Plath as *David Copperfield* has Charles Dickens. Then there are the autobiographical coming-clean accounts like Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* or Sartre’s *Words*. The aspects of the real become so engaging when the real, historical character reappears as the fictional, novelistic character. The fictionality of the novel is apparently suspended by the veracity evoked by the voice of the narrator. It is amusing to see an occasional reversal of roles when the veracity of the autobiographical narrative unseats the novel’s fictionality by filling out the latter’s role with an expansive credibility that comes almost close to disbelief.

The genre that Bama heralds with *Karukku* is autobiographical to the extent that it is acceptable in the absence of the exact word to describe what she does with words. To the extent that Bama sources the episodes of *Karukku* from her personal experience it is autobiographical. But in showing a Brechtian “laying bare,” she illuminates the duplicity of institutions and institutionalized religions. Bama is a nun who chooses to leave the Christian monastery because as an individual the church is only a replication of the Hindu religion, where there are pecking orders and hierarchies that must be respected. She also realizes that the religion that, theoretically, champions ecumenism and universal brotherhood or sisterhood should cause in the custodians of the faith, the practice of segregation on caste-lines. As a faith that failed her, Bama leaves the order only to revisit her traumas with words that are forged in the smithy of her soul, and which sear the conscience of the empathetic reader.

*Sangati* (1994) followed *Karukku* as the continuation of an impassioned dialogue that started in 1992. It has “events,” as suggested by the title, that happen in her community. The solutions that remain at the level of suggestions in *Karukku* are further explored in *Sangati*. Bama focuses the most vulnerable component of the social reality: the Dalit woman. She is forced into a life where the freedom of choice is denied absolutely. The territories of the body
and the mind are ceded to the male who takes possession of them as a matter of right. This existential fix is preserved through a subtle operation of power to which the woman is forced to submit. Bama’s *Sangati* explores the possibilities for the Dalit woman to achieve a breakthrough. There are multiple levels of marginalization that the woman puts up with: the untouchability factor that segregates her as a Dalit, then, the segregation as a Dalit woman, and the segregation as an uneducated person who does not deserve to be privileged both within the family and without. *Sangati* makes a strong case for women’s education as a necessary condition for empowerment that would truly liberate the Dalit woman from the several degrees of bondage she silently suffers. Thus, Bama advances from self-knowledge to emancipation of the individual; from the zone of disillusionment through personal conviction to social respectability.

*Vanmam* (2003) is translated as “vendetta” by Malini Seshadiri. It should have been titled “animosity” or “ethnic antipathy.” Bama deciphers the caste-codes that have been ingrained into the psyche of the Tamils. She focuses the village of Kandampatti to study the caste equations involving the upper caste Naickers and the lower caste, Pallars and Parayas. Like the proverbial cat that kept the partridges divided, the Naickers keep the kindred communities separated so that they could strategically align with one of the communities to reap the advantage in the form of political power. What one observes is an overturning of democratic principles by a minority community that deviantly cobbles up a majority by pouring the poison of rancor and animosity between communities that are numerically the majority but for lack of education and tact are debilitated to act in an empowered way. *Vanmam* is a deciphering of this simple political ploy of the Naickers. But the repair is an arduous task involving communication between brothers who have fallen apart and who have been manipulated by the Naickers to live a life of mutual distrust. Bama discovers in the third novel, the words that can become unguents for the several social lacerations inflicted on the Dalit communities.

*Oru Thathavum Erumaiyum* is not a novel but a collection of short stories. It, originally, appeared as *Kisimbukkaran*. At the time of completing the study, the English translation had not been published and so the text was read in Tamil. As far as Alice Walker is concerned, she has
written a number of short stories as well as a number of novels. One can see the separation of
genres in Walker. However, Bama is an interesting category of writer. Her novels are quite
unlike novels in that they do not have a large narrative frame in which all the aspects like
character, motivation, location submit to the master design that becomes the plot. Her novels are
like short, intense events stitched together to form a novel manner of telling that is not one big
tale but a number of tales that add up towards a poignance. So, the collection of short stories by
Bama are themselves individual episodes that can be, following the pattern of her novels, read as
one composite narrative.

The present study reads the writers, Bama Faustina and Alice Walker after a pattern.
Chapter I presents an overview of the novels of Bama which is followed by an overview of the
novels of Alice Walker in Chapter II. Chapter III and Chapter IV take up the problems presented
by Bama and Alice Walker, respectively. Chapter V and VI are devoted to the manner in which
the two writers negotiate the problems in their respective cultural spheres. The Conclusion takes
stock of the discussion in the six chapters following the Introduction and also points to the scope
for further exploration in this area.
CHAPTER I
AN OVERVIEW OF THE NOVELS OF BAMA

Among the earliest references to the plight of the Dalits is made by Jawaharlal Nehru in *The Discovery of India* where he attributes the cause of social and political subjugation of the Dravidians by the invading Aryas. He reasons that that “brought degradation in its train… and it [the Dalit Situation] is still a burden and a cause”(84). While Nehru’s notes appear to carry a touch of condescension. Ruhoko Rashidi reads the significance of the colour black, with which, the Dalit is often associated. He notes, with amusement, in his essay “The African Presence in Indian Antiquity” that they portray the human as black because it is consistent with their habit of “portray[ing] and depict[ing] their gods and their idols black and their devils white as snow”. Rashidi was to later admit to Vijay Prashad, “I’ve given the impression that Dalits are Black people”. What can be deduced from these references is that the voice of the outsider is either coldly analytical or too amused and inaccurate. One needs to read the voice of the outsider. About one such voice Saraswathy Nagarajan says, “It was a search for identity that transformed Faustina Mary Fathima Rani into a writer. That was when Bama was born. Bama went on to be the beacon light of Dalit literary articulation. She and the writers she influenced have given to Tamil literature an identity which is comparable to the over in Marathi and Kannada. So much so, D.R. Venkatachalapathy in his “Overview of Dalit Literary Writing in Tamil” says that “Dalit creative writers have since [the 1990s] asserted themselves” (3).

Bama is the first Dalit female writer to invest hugely in the articulation of personal experience. In her autobiographical novel *Karukku,(2000)* she is a homodiegetic narrator. The novel captures the poignant moments she experienced in the caste-ridden society in Tamilnadu. She moves from the rueful personal stories to the appalling condition of her own people who have been lacerated by the serrated edges of a
biased society that visits upon them untouchability, segregation, isolation, humiliation, sexual harassment, exploitation and slavery. In the second novel, *Sangathi*, 2005 Bama becomes the voice of the Dalit women. She candidly narrates the harassment meted out to the Dalit women by the upper caste men and the men in the Dalit community. Even as Bama articulates the harsh reality of the Dalits she assumes a Dalit feminist position by espousing a positive sense of survival for the Dalit women.

In the third novel, *Vanmam*, 2008 Bama narrates the rift between two Dalit communities – *Parayas and Pallars* – and how they have been the victims of the politics of the upper-caste men. The devious ways in which the Dalits are manipulated cause a deep sense of isolation felt by Dalit women in their colony after the violence in the village. Bama faithfully captures the sufferings of the Dalit women even as she does not fail to appreciate the efforts taken by the people in the two communities to ensure a peaceful life through negotiation. The peace forged by the two Dalit communities enables them to win the battle against the upper caste people in the local body election. Her fourth product is a collection of short stories entitled *Oru Thathavum Erumaiyum* 2003. In this work, she painfully narrates the social evils and the atrocities unleashed on Dalit people, especially on Dalit girls. At the same time, unlike her other works, she sees many changes in the attitude of her people towards progressive ways. Bama’s novels and short stories reflect her revolutionary ardour and her conviction that the present order must be demolished for the ushering in of a new order.

*Karukku*, the first novel of Bama, is a witness account of the instances of violence against Dalits. It is an autobiographical novel. She saw the humiliation her grandmother and mother faced in the field and in the homes of the landlords. Despite the misery, Bama had a carefree childhood. But when she grew up, she understood the real colour of untouchability and tasted the bitterness of humiliation. Wherever she went, she could not escape the clutches of casteism. In fact, as a student, she was ashamed of her Dalit identity and she did not mention that she was a Dalit fearing that she would be shunned
by people, if she disclosed her real identity. Mathangi reviewing *Karukku* describes it “a poignant subaltern novel.”

Most Dalits live on the brink of destitution, barely able to feed their families and unable to send their children to school. Bama has witnessed such extreme poverty in her village. She too has suffered extreme poverty. She and her people have never tasted good food. *Kuuzh* is the only food they always had in their homes which they normally cook in the evening. If they cook at noon, it will be a big surprise to them. Bama gives a graphic description of their meager living and bare subsistence. “Usually, in our streets, no one cooked at noon[…] So grinding *masala* at noon-time was a real surprise” (K 7). Used to poverty-stricken life, they patiently accept and endure their hard lives. They accept, as their fate that they have to stick to the caste people, though they are neglected and denigrated. Bama painfully recalls, “Even for a daily meal, we have to depend on someone else. We dance to someone’s tune, even for serving of rice” (K 69). When there is no work in the field, they have to go the far off mountain to collect firewood and make a living by selling it. Moreover, they are dependent as a community. They are landless and work in the fields of the upper caste for their daily survival: “Most of the land belonged to the *Naicker* community. Each *Naicker’s* fields spread over many miles(K5).

Encouraged by her father, Bama was fortunate enough to pursue higher education. But her college life was a sad one since she suffered severe financial problems. She could not enjoy life as other students did. She was not able to mix well with other students since she was a Dalit. She felt embarrassed when she saw other students sporting nice dresses. She avoided attending college day party because she did not have a good dress. Even though her friends invited her, she refused, filled with a sense of shame. “All the final year students were invited to a party, which they attended, dressed in silk saris and decked out in their best things[…] So at last, I made up my mind and went locked myself in the bathroom” (K 65).
Bama is the victim of social isolation. Her colony is almost segregated and isolated from where the upper caste people live. For all their needs the Dalit people have to go to the upper caste people’s street, because the post office, the panchayat office, the milk-depot, the big shops, the church and the schools were in the street of the latter. Bama is bewildered at the artificial barriers that existed between communities and she wonders at the possible causes for such a schism. She says, “I don’t know how it came about that the upper caste communities and the lower caste communities were separated like this into different parts of the village”(K 6).

The maltreatment of the Dalits is not confined only to the adults. Even the children suffer the wicked prejudices of the grown ups. They are frequently made to sit in the back of their classrooms, bearing the stigma of untouchability. Bama has witnessed many incidents and she herself has been the victim of such evil practices. She studied hard, but no achievement in school or college would change what she was in the eye of the teachers or the hostel-warden or the people in the bus. Even if she was determined to earn respect, she was only a ‘Paraya’ – the outcaste. Perhaps, it was this growing realization that she would never transcend this identity that made her embrace it, not with resignation, but with a renewed consciousness. She decided to become a nun in the hope that she could teach Dalit children without any prejudice, which dogged her all through school and college.

Bama realizes that there is no salvation for her people even after they chose to become Christians. The converts from Hinduism to Christianity brought with them, their caste practice. They continued to live in the same segregated place, the same ‘cheri’ or ‘colony’ or ‘slum’. They worked in the same village, for the same wages, for the same masteres, enduring the same tyranny and abuse. Bama depicts an instance of such discrimination in the convent where she was a nun:

There were only a few days left for us to finish our training and to become fully fledged nuns. In a particular class, a sister told us that in certain
order, they would not accept Harijan women as prospective nuns and that there was even a separate order for them somewhere. I was thunder-struck… I lamented inwardly that there was no place that was free of caste. (K 22)

Bama became a nun with the intention of helping the Dalit people. She was shocked when she witnessed caste discrimination in the convent. The school, attached to the convent, was attended by students from rich families. People of her community were doing all the menial jobs like sweeping, swabbing, washing the classrooms and cleaning the lavatories. The nuns spoke insultingly about the low caste folks. They did not even consider the Dalits as human beings. Disappointed, Bama left the seminary. She hoped to teach in a village school. Over the years, she began to see how romantic she had been to imagine that being part of a powerful institution like the church would enable her to help Dalit children. She then remembered what her mother had said when she wanted to be a nun. “They will ask you to plant something upside down to show you are obedient. And you won’t do it, I know” (Hariharan 2003).

Bama lost hope after she left the convent. The world was so dark to her that she did not know where to go and what to do. She struggled hard and she had none to assist her. She did not have a job. There was a sense of total alienation from society. For seven years she was within the convent premises. The life style outside was different and she could not fit into this society. These were terribly painful moments for her. There was no hope for the future. Despite all these, she had the determination to survive as a respectable human being in society, “After seven years in a world unlike the real world, she grew up in, the real world she hoped to help change. Bama left the convent, only to find she did not know how to live” (Hariharan 2003).

In Karukku, she endeavours to open the eyes of the oppressed community that she rallies her crushed people to wage a battle against social evils and cruelties done to her
community. She recollects her past, the childhood memories of the ugly experiences and the way her people were humiliated and suppressed by men of the higher caste. She reflects over her past and the caste’s conflict with the upper class Christians. She looks back on her life from a moment of personal crisis, as she leaves the religious order to which she had belonged for seven years. She recollects her childhood in her village through a series of heavy reflections.

After she walked out of the seminary, her family insisted that she got married and settled down but she refused to do so because she did not forget the humiliation and hardships faced by women of her own community after their marriage. She did not think of marriage since she felt she was left in a desert. She had lost everything. She was a stranger to the society. She kept lamenting about life and harked back to her childhood days in the village. That journey back to her childhood was also a beginning of her literary career.

In Karukku, Bama speaks of her own experience as a Dalit woman. Giving the novel a cultural perspective, V. Padma writes that “the stories of individuals such as these function as voices of entire communities of people who have undergone similar experiences of discrimination.”(25). In Sangathi, which is based on her childhood memories, she is the voice of any Dalit woman who has been pushed to utter desperation by the violent treatment at the hands of upper caste men and men in her own community. In Sangathi, Bama speaks of various problems that Dalit women face in their daily life – hardwork, isolation, denial of freedom, marital disharmony, discrimination, slavery till death, beating and sexual harassment. Bama, as a young girl, witnessed many incidents which happened to Dalit women. She was only a mute witness to all kinds of atrocities to which Dalit women were subjected. They are marginalized within and without their community. Bama focuses how the Dalit women suffered and how they emerged from the sufferings triumphantly and survived as respectable independent beings.
Even for petty things, the Dalit man becomes so wrathful that he beats his wife mercilessly. Bama recollects one such incident of wife beating. Ananthamma, a Dalit woman, who was pregnant was once beaten by her husband. It is sad to note that her fault was she ate first, before her husband had had his meal. Bama notes, “[…] You’ll end up like that Ananthamma of West street, who was thrashed soundly and left lying there, that’s all […] And all this torture just because she caught some crabs from the wet fields and made a curry and ate it before he came home his meal” (S 30).

Bama also echoes the voices of the common people who at times wonder and regret why they embraced Christianity because they not only lost their hope of the climate of discrimination in changing but also lost opportunities in government jobs too. Churches which should integrate people without bias, differentiated the rich and the poor.

Traditional oppressions and collective attacks against the Dalits kept them from thinking about education positively. This makes them languish in the grips of the superstitious rituals. They blindly accept whatever the local priests and *poojaris* say. Bama with a heavy heart depicts the blind evil belief which ruined the people in her village. The first daughter of Bama’s maternal uncle, Mariamma, did not attain puberty at the expected time. Instead of taking her to the doctors, they took her to a local priest on the compulsion of other women in the village. The naïveté of the Dalit people is thus presented.

Dalit women are deserted by their husbands. Economically, Dalit women are poor as they are not able to fend for themselves. Forced by their parents, they have to put up with disharmony in marriage and lead a dependent life. Hence, their position becomes pathetic when they are deserted by their irresponsible husbands. Bama’s grandmother Velliamma herself was one such victim who was left with two female children. But from her down-trodden position, single-handedly, she fought back, struggled hard and brought
up her children. Her grandmother instilled in Bama the faith in the positive virtue of affirmation and self reliance.

The Dalit woman is marginalized through the act of discrimination. The society is in favour of the man. This marginalization exists at home as well. When a male child is born, there will be a grand celebration. But if a female child is born, it is seen as a curse. Bama herself has experienced favouritism in her family. Her parents gave a lot of attention to the male child and even would not allow him to cry. They would fondle the child and feed him with milk. But such special care and attention is sadly lacking in the case of a female child. Bama is very bitter about this partiality. When her brother fell sick, her parents showed immediate attention that she felt neglected. She felt sad about such bias and discrimination against a female child which begins at home itself.

Dalit women are not permitted to attend the Panchayat meetings and speak their minds. They live under many constraints and restrictions. They are compelled to lead a life of drudgery doing their household work, and menial job for others. They have no let up in their humdrum existence. Their lives are filled with hard work from morning till night and they have no entertainment. Bama says, “In our streets, there is any number of restrictions for women. For instance, even today, only men are allowed to go to the cinema. Never women” (S 105).

A sense of fear is instilled into the mind of a Dalit girl even as she is born. A Dalit girl is not only fed with milk, but also with stark dread. Interestingly, devils and evil spirits do not try their ploy on upper caste women. Dalit women are the victims to the grisly act of the supernatural elements. Virayi, a Dalit woman, was said to have been possessed by the devil when she returned home alone from the field. Kodangi, a village priest, tried to exorcise the devil that possessed the woman. He dragged her, holding her hair and wrenched it off. The entire village gathered there to see how she reacted to the priest’s treatment. She was a sympathetic object to the eyes of all on-lookers. Why
should a woman, said to have been possessed by the devil, be brought to the common place for such a gruesome treatment in the name of exorcism? Why is she exhibited as an object to the public? She is belittled and her status in the society is erased. Rosamma, a Dalit woman, jocundly says that even the devils do not have any respect for Dalit women.” Whatever it is, look, it seems that we are slighted even by Peys” (S 50).

Bama, as a grown-up woman, does not believe in such concocted stories about devils. The Dalit woman is facing untold hardships and pains within her home and outside her home. She is stamped as a mule. She gets up from her bed before dawn and has to do all the household jobs. She has to fetch water, clean the house, cook meal for her husband and children, feed them and send her children to school. Then, she has to rush to the field which belongs to upper caste men, to earn her daily bread. She returns home after the sunset and has to cook supper. She does not have any leisure time to relax. She is weary and exhausted that she desires to have a sleep. But, she is forced to satisfy her husband’s sexual pleasures. She cannot sleep a wink till dawn. The husband does not care if she is physically sound. All he needs is to have sex with his wife daily, causing much physical and mental pain.

The Dalit woman’s mind is weakened by exploitation, exhaustion and oppression. Her mental strength is drained. She is led to a state of numbness and acts as if she is possessed by devils. Bama admits that the mind of the Dalit woman is saturated with melancholy and anguish. She reads the psyche of her Dalit women thus. “[…] The stronger ones somehow manage to survive all this. The ones who don’t have the mental strength are totally oppressed; they succumb to mental ill-health and act as if they are possessed by Peys” (S59).

Bama also draws attention to the twin banes of ignorance and illiteracy that render young Dalit girls victims of sexual exploitation by men of the upper caste. The enormity of the situation becomes clear when one looks at the acute dependence of the wage-
earning Dalit woman on the wealthy men of the upper caste. As one whose fate is tied to the tilling of the rich man’s fields she must submit to ‘sin’ for her wages. If she refuses, she loses her job and faces inevitable starvation. Taking advantage of their vulnerability, the uppercaste men rape Dalit women who dare not lodge any complaint against the perpetrators. Their feeble voice is silenced by those who are powerful – economically, socially and politically. Inspite of the ignominy, the Dalit woman continues to work in the fields of the upper caste men. Bama is angry when narrates of an incident which happened to her cousin Mariamma, who went to the field to cut grass. In the afternoon, when she returned home, she went to a well, which belonged to an upper caste man, Kumaraswamy, to drink water. She was pulled by him. He tried to rape her. Fortunately, she escaped from his clutches after a struggle. But not many women are lucky as Mariamma. The Dalit woman thus lives out her precarious life teetering on fear and physical exploitation. The threat of sexual assault dogs her like nightmare.

The Dalit woman wonders if there is any protection for her chastity. The threat of sudden violation makes them go to the field in groups. This deep rooted psychological fear of molestation by the upper caste men drove most of the Dalit parents to marry off their daughter a little too early. That is, even before they became mature to be aware of the responsibility of wifehood. The lack of maturity rendered most early marriages foredoomed to fail. Bama, recollects her grandmother’s warning, when she was thirteen. She was warned by her grandmother to be careful about the upper caste men. “Women should never come on their own to these parts. If upper castes fellows clap eyes on you, you’re finished” (S 8).

The overwhelming nature of physical exploitation of the Dalit women, actually, comes in the way of a fair cultural evaluation of the community. For instance, it is not sufficiently established that the Dalits as a community, are flexible and less resistant to ethnic hybridity unlike the upper castes that sustain a discourse of ethnic purity for the sake of exclusion. If a girl from an upper caste family marries a lower caste boy, she is
accepted by the boy’s family. However, when a marriage takes place between an upper caste boy and a lower caste girl, problems occur as she is not accepted by her husband’s family. Subsequently she is mentally and physically abused and abandoned in many cases. In an interview Bama says, “We are willing to marry out of the community, but nobody is willing to marry us. Upper caste men look at Dalit women as polluting beings, except when they rape us” (Maheswari 2001). The duplicity of the upper caste male stands exposed by their own attitude of seeking the flesh of the Dalit woman and banishing all obligation towards the body. The promotional notes of Sangati by the Online book store, Amazon, works like a summation of the novel’s problems:

In terms of structure, it seeks to create a Dalit feminist perspective and explores the impact of a number of discriminations – compounded above all, by poverty – suffered by Dalit women[...] Economic precariousness leads to a culture of violence of women by fathers, husbands and brothers. Women fight back.

Bama’s third novel Vanmam projects the blood thirsty rivalry between two Dalit communities – Parayas and Pallars. It also reveals how the innocent Dalit women were encapsulated in the deadly protracted violence and how they emerged victoriously with self-determination and immutable courage, bearing police atrocities on the one side and poverty on the other side. They boldly balanced the imbalance though they were pushed to the state of being precarious during the time of riots. As much they were impuissant so much they were impudent. Bama shows them so.

Rights violations against the voiceless and marginalized sections of the society go unnoticed owing to the appalling indifference, apathy and declining social consciousness among the people. Various aspects of human rights have been enshrined and guaranteed in the constitution. And the judiciary has been actively involved in upholding the provisions, yet Dalits are victims of a systematic subversion of those constitutional provisions. Casteism is a very serious challenge. Unfortunately, society does not understand the proportions of exclusion and denial meted out to a human group.
The upper caste people in Kandampatti village turn the *Pallar* community against the *Parayas*. They become intolerant of the new consciousness about social dynamics that begins to dawn on the *Pallars*. The still ingenious *Pallars*, having succumbed to the ploy of the upper caste, develop malice towards the *Parayas*, forgetting the age-old traditional bond existing between the two communities. They attempt to reap the harvest of hate. This aggressive malice leads the *Pallars* into violent confrontation with the *Parayas*. The violence consumes many people on both sides. Sesurathinam, a Paraya, is killed in the bazaar by a twenty member gang of *Pallars*. As a sequel, tensions mount up in the village.

The furious *Parayas* set fire to many huts of the *Pallars*. The mounting malice did not end with that, but the rampage spread to the streets of the *Pallars*. As a revenge, the *Parayas* kill two *Pallars*. And in retaliation, the *Pallars* stab to death two more *Parayas*. Five lives are lost in the process. Roaring preparations are going on since the savagely cruel killing of Sesurathinam. The police should have anticipated the preparations that were afoot in full public view of the village. The police react heavily and effectively but only after the rioters have inflicted much damages.

Police security is beefed up in the village to check the mounting tensions. But, the police men listen to the tunes of the upper caste men who safeguard the *Pallars* and that the police did not take any searching measure in *Pallars’* houses, whereas they did in *Parayas’* houses. In fear of police atrocities, all the men in the *Paraya* colony escape to a nearby wood. In a desperate move, the policemen arrest the women folk in the *Paraya* community and they are put behind the bar. The policemen spared the *Pallars* due to the strong backing of the upper caste men. The policemen, instead of identifying the real culprits, arrested innocent *Paraya* women including the victim Mary, wife of the deceased Sesurathinam.
In the lock-up, women are beaten up mercilessly. The policemen go beyond the powers vested in them. The extremely exploited human rights contest which holds that not to bring any woman to the police station during odd hours, in order to compel a suspect to surrender. The Paraya women request the policemen to free them, but their requests have seemingly fallen on deaf ears. They found it sickening when their pleas were rejected, but they pleaded persistently in plaintive tone. With adding more pain to their wounds, a policeman kicked Sellakkizhi, one of the victims, with his boots that she suffers an abortion. “Due to God’s grace, she was carrying this baby after seven long years. Now those cursed fellows have kicked her in the belly with their boots and killed this baby too”(V 86).

The Paraya women are prisoners of circumstances. They are seen running from pillar to post seeking justice. The policemen are emblematic of a brutalizing system. They operate on the basis of discriminating between their favourites and the others. There is evidence of the preferential treatment of the police when they deal with the Parayas severely while at the same time being lenient towards the Pallars. In the Pallar colony no woman was arrested due to the support extended to them by the upper caste men. The Paraya women are subjected to the most dehumanizing experience in the lock-up. These traumatized women suffer the humiliation silently as they hail from poor Dalit families.

Vanman describes an incident in which the policemen did not even allow the victim Mary to see her husband's dead body. The police behave in a most wickedly inhuman manner when they both deny Mary the permission to mourn her dead husband as well as punish her by extending her prison term. Public confidence in the police is at an all time low due to the biased and harsh treatment. It is the treatment meted out to them that hurt the Dalit women. What makes the situation grave is the denial of two kinds of Justice: the absolute and the secular. When Mary is denied permission to see her husband the police commit a violation of absolute justice. By remanding her, the police
deny secular justice too. What Mary’s case brings into focus is the multiple levels of victimization that a Dalit woman is subjected to.

The litany of police excesses do not stop with the Paraya woman. They unleash a combing operation going from house to house and rounding up the Paraya men. The policemen reproached women with unparliamentary words when their search proved futile. Their remarks are loaded with insinuations against the Paraya women. Even the children were not spared. The brutality of the police inflicts both physical and mental suffering on the Paraya community. The volatile encounters break into wordy duels that further result in more repressive procedures. The police find it hard to stomach the ‘justifiable’ accusation of the Paraya folks that they are hand-in-glove with the upper caste. The reaction of the Dalits against the police is the result of a lack of emotional maturity. Their lack of emotional maturity renders the Dalit community, especially the women folk, vulnerable to gross human rights violation and intrusion of privacy.

The silver lining in these dismal situations is the capacity of the Dalit woman for laughter. Misfortune is always accepted with a light heart. The Dalit woman practices a native variety of philosophical acceptance in the face of frustration and defeat. While most become desperate or even lose hope, the Dalit woman summons the courage to negotiate the darkness and look for alternatives. Thanks to their resilience they are able to tide over their sufferings and difficulties. There is distinctive change in their commitments. In the absence of their male counterparts, with painstaking effort, they look after the family. When they were badly in need of money for the trial in the Court, no one came forward to extend a helping hand. There was not even a promise from anyone to look into their grievances. The Paraya women collected money from every Paraya house in their colony and boldly faced the trial. No man in their colony was available – all left for distant places to avoid being arrested by the police – to bury three bodies of the deceased in the violence. Surprisingly, the Paraya women themselves came forward to bury the bodies, digging out pits. It shows the bold nature of Dalit women
despite leading a sordid and prosaic life. Even the policemen wondered at the strong will of the Paraya women. “The policemen were astounded to see the women doing the burial themselves. These she-donkeys have so much guts, eh, they remarked” (V 87).

In Vanmam, Bama emblazens how Dalit women fight against all odds. Most of the Dalit women are engaged in the agricultural sector without assured income and social recognition. Their husbands booze with their pals while without food and rest, the women battle the miserable circumstances to look after their children. The family is dependent wholly on their meager earnings. They are at the end of their tether trying to make ends meet. Sometimes, when they have no work in their village, they have to go to the towns and far away villages, searching jobs. When they reach home, their face is devoid of radiance because of their exertion at work. They immerse themselves in their work with all their zest. They overcome all obstacles and discouragements with the sole aim of making their homes. They make a world of their own where they work with a fierce spirit to survive as respectable human beings. Bama echoes the spirit of her women: “The women do their part too. They go outside the village to gather wood, sow groundnuts, cut or winnow sesame seeds, or weed the fields. They leave by the town bus, and get back the same evening”(V7).

The Dalit women have such an intimate encounter with life that in addition to having the skills of survival, she also develops artistic talents that are, generally, kept hidden. During festivals, however, these women shed their inhibitions and take the stage for dance and singing performances. Sometimes, they outdo the men and earn all-round appreciation even from the men who earlier attempted to thwart them. Vanmam refers a programme arranged in Kandampatti village in connection with Easter festival. Gnanappu, fifty-year old Dalit woman, performed the folk dance, ‘Kummi’ with other women on the stage, where men performed first. After the dance was over, everyone gathering there clapped their hands, appreciating Gnanappu and the dancers. Men standing around the stage were literally stunned and talked in praise of the women.
“We’ve been under estimating our women, they declared proudly. If they let their minds to it, they can turn pillars into dust and dust into pillars” (V 51).

Bama records with greater accuracy the dramatic changes that come over the Dalit men and women who have a newfound enthusiasm in education. The rapid changes in the status of the Dalits is keenly recorded by Bama. Education opens the window that admits the light of realization to fall into the consciousness of the Dalits. They realize, through education, that they do possess a lot of talents that are put under the basket. Once they were mute witness to the upper caste atrocities. Now, due to the access to education, they possess a fierce spirit. They have the courage to protest vehemently against the upper caste men. Anthony, a Dalit boy, takes exception to the intimidating tone of some upper caste men, who warned the Dalit boys not to speak, laugh and play when they walked on the streets of the upper caste people. He asks:

What’s there so special about you people? If you’re here, we shouldn’t laugh, is it? We shouldn’t talk? This is a free country. We will talk anywhere we like. We will play. And we will win. See, we’ve won this volleyball cup. Take a good look at it’. As he spoke, Anthony held the cup above his head and twirled around. Immediately, the others clapped and whistled. (V 18).

The ferment of change is evident in the attitude of the Dalit youth. They commit themselves to the mission of development of social consciousness and helping in improving society. The Dalit boys strive to bring about a radical change to their life for which they work with a zealous spirit. They, however, realize that change can be possible only with the sense of solidarity in thoughts and deeds. Their fervent spirit has no boundary. When it comes to social service, the enthusiasm of the Dalit youths can never be underestimated. For fame they will sacrifice their own lives. The Dalit boys brought many changes in their colony in Kandampatti village through their tireless commitment.
Their service yielded them name and fame. Jeyakodi, a Dalit woman, praised the various deeds of the Dalit boys. “Only because these educated fellows did something about it, our village has improved so much. Otherwise, would this water-tap place look like this now? Look at the streets. Are they the way they use to be? Really, we have to praise our boys a lot” (V 48).

In Kandampatti village it is the upper caste men who are elected to the post of Panchayat president in every Panchayat election. This is despite the fact that the Dalits constitute a majority. The upper caste decides that they would never prevail in the election if the two communities – Parayas and Pallars – went to the hustings together. They cleverly drive a wedge between the two communities. Already, some ill feelings between the two communities was simmering. The upper caste men fuelled this anger. The animosities that result in violence between the two communities must be understood in the backdrop of upper caste instigation.

But, such machinations thrive, only for a while. Eventually, the Dalits realize their strength and potentialities. They – Parayas and Pallars – forge a new bond, forgetting their old scores. They alter the political equations in the election by scooping out a new and so far unexplored political space. This space was created because the lack of political representation was too frustrating for the Dalits. The fact that there are no permanent friends or enemies in politics has been vividly demonstrated by the electoral ties forged by them. They finally re-emerge from their bitter past.

For the first time in the history of Kandampatti village, a Dalit is elected to the Panchayat President. This is the first victory to the Dalits and they realize that they could change political equations provided they are united. This shocks the upper caste men. Those who tried desperately to drive a wedge between the allies had failed. Bama, authoritatively says,
“Upto this day no one except a Naicker has ever become Panchayat President in Kandampatti. To be honest, for a long time I myself had taken it for granted that the post belonged to the Naickers… that only a Naicker could be president. Today, our brother Kaalaiyan has become President. This is our first victory. Those who had deliberately driven us apart…, who had warmed themselves at the fire of our enmity… are now burning with jealousy. This unity of ours must stand forever. We pledge our continued support to Kaalaiyan. V 134)

Violence is not the answer to violence. We should not underestimate the emerging strength of the Dalit people’s collective spirit against atrocities. A lot of injustices have been perpetrated against them, but they are a forgiving people and want to settle old scores through negotiation, not legal action. They realize that nothing can be achieved by malice. After the violence, they live on the edge of a cliff and as far as an eye could see there was no streak of prosperity in sight. So they decide to settle their old scores through reconciliation. They convene a meeting of the two communities. The representatives from the two groups express their willingness to shed misunderstandings. The meeting of the two communities assuage the ruffled feelings of people on both sides. They sink their differences and they promise not to give any room for animosity. And also, they did not want to get tied down with the cunning game framed by upper caste men. Finally, they emerge out of the smog of innocence and ignorance and they develop strong determination and hopes about the future. Hope brings with it anxieties and apprehensions. Yet they face the odds with clarity of mind and a strong determination.

The change the Dalits aspire for brings about a marked shift in the tone of their voice from the blatantly sad to the poignantly pleasant. An ethereal radiance could be found on their face. They have made sacrifices and such acts do have their rewards. C. S. Lakshmi, reviewing Vanmam for The Hindu calls Bama, “Chronicler of Dalit Life” and
chooses one of the most powerful and moving passages of the novel as excerpt; most moving because it is filled with hope for the marginalized:

May be someday the Kandampatti chavadi will make place for young girls and women together and Kuttiamma who eagerly reads out the brother’s letter to her parents and asks for a reward of a rupee to buy raw mangoes – not the squirrel-bitten ones but the flat sweet ones – can look forward much more.

Bama’s fourth contribution to the Dalit literature is “Oru Thathavum Erumaiyum”, which is a collection of thirty small stories. In this collection, she highlights many social evils such as untouchability, slavery, exploitation and the abject capitulation of the Dalits to the upper caste. Bama, however, chooses to exhibit the innate strength and courage of Dalit youths, their bold protestation against domination by the upper caste and their revolutionary spirit to destroy the deep-rooted social orders established by the upper-tier people to keep the Dalits forever in a state of subordination, ignorance and illiteracy. She wants her people to come out from the centuries long barricade – that has been keeping them from seeing the rays of hope and realizing their inborn potentialities.

Bama, with a strident tone, exposes the prevailing uncertain condition of her people. Muthukaruppan, a Dalit man, lives with his wife Kaliamma and two children. The whole family works in the farm of Gopalswamy, an upper caste man, who pays them a very meager salary for their dawn-to-dusk toil in his farm. They lead a dependent life due to non availability of resources in their store. Muthukaruppan meets a tragic end when he is drowned trying to rescue a cow of his owner which swam off to the middle of the village pond. It is very painful that the owner did not attend his funeral for the reason that the deceased was a Dalit. Bama clinically pictures the heartless behaviour of the upper caste men. Instead of expressing condolence at his death, Muthukaruppan’s owner blames him: “How will he attend the funeral of a ‘Sakkiliyan’. Even message was
conveyed to him through someone, he blamed the deceased saying won’t cow come back on its own?” The foolish boy got into danger himself” (OTE 10).

Kaliamma, wife of the deceased, is left to fend for herself and her two children. The owner gives a hundred rupees as solatium. It is the pitiful affair that a poor Dalit’s life is valued at just a hundred rupees. The victim failed to realize that his life is more precious than the cow. He could have got back home leaving the cow there, but, as he was afraid of the punishment that may be meted out to him by his owner, he takes the risk of venturing into the deep water and gets drowned. It is a more pitiable and pathetic that a Dalit life is regarded less than the life of a beast. It is evident that Dalits are esteemed lower than anything else and there is no scope for love and compassion in the heart of the upper caste people.

Bama examines the psyche of the Dalit under these circumstances. She exposes the mind of the victim, Ramayi, whose father Muthukaruppan drowned in his effort to save the cow. Ramayi, the elder daughter of Muthukaruppan, expresses happiness to her friends over the hundred rupees given by their owner, not worrying about her father’s death. “Our boss gave hundred rupees at our father’s death. Now my mother has hundred rupees, you know!, Ramayi said excitedly licking the sugarcandy in her hand” (OTE11).

Chellakkizhi’s, an eleven-year old Dalit girl’s cruel death remains a standing testimony for extent to which upper caste will harm Dalits, especially, Dalit girls. She is the only daughter of her parents who want her to have higher education. It is their wish that turns out to be the cause of her death. Jaganathan, in whose farm Chellakkizhi’s father Erolappan works, promises to educate his daughter. Believing his words, Erolappan sent her to Kuppampatnam town where she stayed in the house of Jaganathan’s second daughter. Erolappan did not know at that time what lay before him. After eight months, he receives news of his daughter’s death. Before he reaches the town, her body is buried. All his dreams about his daughter’s bright future are shattered. He
feels that he is in the midst of a dark world. He cannot recover from the sudden trauma caused by his daughter’s death. There is none to console him or to show sympathy.

First Erulappan was made to believe that his daughter died of disease. But, he is frozen to hear the truth about her death. She was mercilessly killed by the daughter of Jaganathan. She was not sent to school, but she was forced to do domestic work from dawn to night. She was not able to bear the extremities of subjugation meted out to her by the members of the family. She was confined in the house as a slave. She felt terrible agony in her heart, but she did not disclose it to anyone. She was harassed and beaten by the two sons in the family. “That girl was brought promising her education in school, but nothing was done. Restless job. The sons of the lady would beat the girl, lifting her skirt, even for a small fault” (OTE 34).

The ‘haves’ cannot understand the agony of the ‘have-nots’. Bama sympathizes with men and women who undergo hardships and sufferings. Dalit girls undergo sexual harassment by the upper caste men. It has become evident in the case of Chellakkizhi. While beating was the order of the day, she was forced to have sex with the two sons in the family. She was mentally and physically harassed by them. The matter is when one sees that a minor girl is persuaded to have sex. The little girl is often molested not only by the two sons, but by their friends also. The innocent girl was trapped in the vicious grip of the sadomasochists. She had no escape from brutal aggression. She believes that death is the only solution from such extreme trauma that she chooses the lap of death than to be crushed by the barbarians. Bama says: “Often, her two sons and their friends, who come to see them, would also behave to her immorally. Mother also knows. But she will turn blind eyes” (OTE 34).

Agony, when shared, is mitigated. But, Chellakkizhi suppresses all her agony and she is unable to share her trauma with anyone, since she was prisoned in the house. She struggled with devils and beasts for eight months. Finally, she was killed by the lady with
a club while she was grinding flour. The girl, who was more fond of school ground, was sent to the burial ground. The flower was nipped before it could bloom. The picture is pathetic. Here every word cries with pain; here, there is no verbal description, but silence speaks. Eruippaan’s eyes are wet. But, what can a Dalit do in the face of organized and well laid treachery of the privileged castes. Eruippaan wanted to see a radiance on his daughter’s face, but there was darkness on his own face when he left. Unable to bear the irreparable loss, he hanged himself. “The next day, a body was found hanging by a red saree in a neem tree in the owner’s backyard garden” (OTE 36).

Bama, who always sees the weaker and bleak side of her people, does not fail to look into their bright and optimistic side as well. She spearheads the campaign for social recognition and identity for the poor Dalit people. She changes her tone from poignancy to vibrancy. She feels inexpressible ecstasy when she exhibits strong and bold characters in both Dalit men and women.

Pachaiamma, a Dalit woman, confidently argues with an upper caste woman, Gangamma who tries to subdue her. Everyone in the village is afraid of Gangamma due to her caste status and richness. But, Pachaiamma is bold that she cuts grass from Gangamma’s garden. Even when she is caught red handed, she argues with Gangamma with undaunted spirit and outsmarts her. “Though everyone in the colony is afraid of Gangamma, Pachaiamma alone does not have even a bit of fearness” (OTE 13). This kind of boldness, seen on a Dalit woman, shows how the table can be turned. What message Bama wants to convey to the society, through the character of Pachaiamma is that the Dalit woman wakes up from the long numbness that has been gripping her for many centuries. Nothing can hamper her spirit for she is awake now.

Pachaiamma derives strength and courage from the sad occurrences of the past. It is her innate quality that has been lying inactive that gives her the impulse to fight on. What becomes the most striking gesture is that she feels she is superior to the caste
woman Gangamma. It is a good augur that a Dalit woman possesses superior attitude. It is evident in Pachaiamma’s words. “What will she do? Even a hair can’t be shaken. If Gangamma leaps ten feet, this Pachaiamma will do eighteen feet. Sure” (OTE 14).

The Dalits gradually come to realize their innate power. They trust in the adage: ‘unity is strength’. Powerful feeling and strong determination never bring failure. In the past, they broke into a run in fear of caste people. The situation has changed now. In the changing climate, caste people are not able to stand before Dalits. Pachaiamma and Gangamma had a verbal duel. The infuriated Pachaiamma went to the extent of beating her. Other Dalit women also join hands with her. Gangamma fled away sensing her insecurity. “[...] Pachaiamma became angry, hearing this. She went to beat her lifting the food carrier she had. Other women also gathered there. Gangamma ran away panting without uttering a word” (OTE 16).

Dalits are filled with an overwhelming sense of outrage. Their fire of fury cannot easily be extinguished. It is not an ordinary fire; it is a volcano. It bursts forth and the lava gushes out to drown and burn casteism – a symbol of tyranny and oppression – with its heat. This kind of new awareness and fury are seen in the speech of Amachi, a twenty-year old Dalit youth, when he confronts an upper-caste man in the bus who asks him to leave the seat for him. Amachi refuses despite the man’s insistence. He is resolute in his speech and spirit. His speech hurts the upper caste man who does not expect such a reaction from a Dalit boy. When Amachi is pestered the second time, he rhetorically says, “I will not get up even if you stand with your head downward” (OTE 24).

A kind of unperceptible excitement is felt by Amachi. He has a feeling of a warrior who defeats his foe in combat. He does not forget the ill-treatment meted out to his people by the upper caste. Uncountable times, his people would have been pushed to insult and shame. Seizing the opportunity now, he retaliates in the same measure. He
proves Newton’s third law ‘Every action will have equivalent and opposite reaction’. He feels proud of his timely retaliation. ‘[…] He laughed loudly’ (OTE 24).

In India, Dalits remain a cultural minority despite their being the numerical majority. In America, Black people are culturally marginalized though they are the numerically majority. The problems and the struggles in both races are similar. Both races suffer centuries long oppression and intimidation. The overview of Bama’s novels is performed so as to form an idea about the different accents of suffering, subjugation and humiliation of the Dalits. The following chapter is an overview of Alice Walker’s novels so that one gets to see the pattern of repression and denial of justice in the context of the African-Americans.