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THE VOICE OF THE MARGINALIZED – A STUDY OF BAMA'S 'KARUKKU'

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ABSTRACT

Literature is the mirror of life. It is deeply influenced by the social and economic issues in society. It moulds itself variously to serve the needs of the society and also acts as a vehicle to bring about an evolutionary change in the society. Dalit literature is one such genre which voiced the humiliations, exploitations, marginalization, and rebellion of the downtrodden sections of the Indian society. It is the realistic reflection of the oppressed classes. Dalit literature evolved out of suffering. Discrimination on the basis of caste since ages made certain sections in the Indian society vulnerable to oppression and suffering. They have been struggling for existence in the caste driven society. The prolonged suffering of the downtrodden has given voice to some of the members of this segregated section of the society. The harsh realities of life, their horrid experiences made them raise their voice against their suppression, revolt against the oppressive forces and find a respectable place for themselves. Taking inspiration from the male writers in projecting the life of the downtrodden and the tremendous response they received from the thinkers for their raised voices, women writers also have come up into the open articulating their experiences, sufferings, humiliations and exploitation in all walks of their lives. This paper focuses on Bama's first novel, Karukku, a semi-autobiographical sketch in which she presents the humiliation of women in the Paraiyar community, the lowest of the lowest section in the society, on the basis of caste, religion and gender.

INTRODUCTION

One of the major aspects of the twenty first century is the emergence of the subaltern from the margin to the centre. In this context one has to focus on the rhetoric made by Gayathri Spivak 'Can the subaltern speak?'. The subaltern who had hitherto confined to the margin finds expression and tries to come to the centre. The postcolonial literatures has given rise to

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the voice of the subaltern which in turn gives rise to an intense expression of acute suffering combined with rare sensitivity that led them to have great desire to revolt for their emancipation. The postcolonial literature itself is a critique on these lines. It is a protest against all forms of exploitation based on caste, creed, colour and occupation. It is a revolution against the racial based oppression as found in Western society or caste based oppression as found in India.

India, well known for its rich and varied culture, an epitome of 'Unity in Diversity' where people of different languages, cultures, religions and castes live together in 'so-called' harmony, has been a mute witness to the atrocities on women irrespective of their social status. In India, women are considered as incarnation of 'Shakthi' since times immemorial. They are worshipped as Goddesses, revered as epitome of strength. But in reality they are considered as the weaker section of the society. This raises a plethora of questions about the attitude of the society towards them. They are looked at as a weaker sex and forced to play a secondary role in the society and are often neglected, discriminated, oppressed, and relegated to the status of a 'nobody', the uncivilized 'other'. If this is the position of women in general, what would be the trauma of dalit women who are the oppressed among the 'oppressed'. Their life has a world of difference between theory and practice.

The Government of India has abolished untouchability long time back but in some parts of the country this practice is continued conspicuously and in some parts unconsciously which has virtually dehumanized a significant section of the Indian society thus depriving them of their persona, human rights as well as fundamental rights. If this social stigma brings havoc in the lives of dalit men what about the dalit women who become victims of double colonization – first colonized as a dalit women, later as mere women. Dalit women are one of the marginalized segments in the Indian society and their condition is more vulnerable than that of the non dalit women. Since majority of these women are engaged in menial and inferior jobs such as sweeping, scavenging, working in dumping grounds, rag-picking etc. and are not in a position to assert themselves, they become easy prey to evil-minded vultures in the society. As they are in the lowest of the lowest strata of life facing the harsh realities of suppression, struggle for existence and torture at the hands of not only the men of upper castes but also the men of their own class. They are thrice alienated on the basis of caste, class and gender. For the work they are engaged in along with their male counterparts, they get minimum and unequal wages. They face perennial problems that crop up due to oppressive forces at home – some among them are lack of education, early marriage and health problems resulting from bearing and rearing of children at an early age.

The word Dalit derived from the Sanskrit language means the grounded, segregated, suppressed sections of the people living in society yet isolated in many ways from the

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mainstream society. Their habitats are on the outskirts of the villages with no access to education facilities or civic amenities required for a decent living as human beings. At every stage of their life, the marginalized have to face lot of hardships. According to Webster, “they are placed socially, culturally, economically and politically at the lower rung of a hierarchical social ladder. Every effort is made to keep them there through enforced poverty and social degradation” (Webster, 1992:31). They are dalits because it suits the convenience of the higher castes to keep them at the bottom. In the case of women, their status is still ignominious and reprehensible. They suffer not only for being ‘dalits’ but also for being ‘women’ and they are not exempted from torment and persecution.

But the suppressed cannot be suppressed for long. They learn to raise their head; they learn to look directly into the eyes of their tormentors. Their silent and tormented eyes become livid with anger and frustration. They learn to protest first with their eyes and now with their voices. The unheard voices are ready to make a clarion call and they want their voices to be heard. Now the subaltern communities found a new name by coming together with the outlook that they are not inferior to anybody thereby refusing the sub-human status levied on them by the high social order. Subaltern literature being the most powerful form of literary expression today, has acquired a prestigious position in Indian English Literature. It focuses on writing that includes socially marginalized characters and descriptions of their life and experiences. Influenced by the postmodern literary movements, it questions mainstream literary theories and upper caste ideologies and explores the invisible zones of neglected issues. They have become aware of their intellectual ability to creatively reflect on and analyze their conditions historically and sociologically in their own language representing ‘themselves to themselves and to others’ in their own terms. Taking cue from the male writers in their own society, the women have tried to give expression to their voices and have become successful in getting identified as an established group of women dalit writers.

In his rhetoric ‘Women in India’, Swami Vivekananda tirades men for writing about women, their problems and their sufferings. He strongly believes that only women can express their feelings, suffocations, subjugated status and humiliations in an authentic manner. In the wake of success of women writers in India, dalit women writers in recent years have tried to raise their hitherto unheard voices. In Telugu literature, women writers like Challapalli Swaroopa Rani, Jyothirmayi, Leela Kumari, Vijaya Bharathi etc. have written critiques on the dalit question. Jyothirmayi responded in an interesting way to the first line of a famous poem by Gurajada Apparao’s ‘Desamante mattikadoi, desamante manushuloi (Nation means not earth but human beings). She points out “yes, we know that nation means people, but you should know that there are differences between those people”. On the same lines she has responded to Sri Sri’s ‘Maroprapancham pilichindi’ (another world has called) “at least this world should be free from caste-class differences”. Thus the mute voice of the subalterns has

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come to be heard. Some such voices that have shown their prowess by becoming the mouth piece of their respective communities are the two Tamil writers Sivagami and Bama whose works have been translated into English.

Bama began her career as a writer of the oppressed classes with the publication of her first novel *Karukku*, a semi autobiographical sketch in 1992, for which she received Crossword Award. This novel was followed by '*Kisumbukkaran*' in 1994, '*Sangati*' in 1996 and '*Vanman*' in 2003. Bama with her experience and exposure to the miserable life of her '*Paraiyar*' community tries to expose the perennial issues like caste, religion and gender in all her novels. Her stories and novels give a glimpse into the lives of the subalterns. Bama gives expression to the inhuman treatment meted out to the lowest of the low castes – the Paraiyars. Her work is the voice of all marginalized communities who struggle to overcome inequalities that have been imposed on them from times immemorial. It is the powerful voice of a subaltern subject who reflects the vivid experiences of herself and of those who are victims of social and linguistic marginalization. Bama records some of her own personal bitter experiences that moulded her character and made her what she is today. The pain and emotional suffering she had been subjected to since her childhood made her write in the preface of her book '*Karukku*': "In order to change this state of affairs, all dalits who have been deprived of their basic rights must function as God's word, piercing to the very heart. Instead of being more and more beaten down and blunted, they unite, think about their rights and battle for them". She further continued "the driving force that shaped this book are many: events that occurred during many steps of my life, cutting me like '*Karukku*' (rugged edged palmyra leaf) and making me bleed..." (p. xiii).

Bama gives expression to her experiences in the godforsaken community by presenting vividly some incidents in detail from her childhood to adulthood. As a child, the humiliation she had met at the school – sitting far away from the children of other communities, the abusive way she was treated when anything was lost or done innocently – made her confused and a series of questions bombarded her mind. The teachers, the head master or even the priests have no sympathy for them: "after all, you are from the Cheri. You must have done it. You must have done it." (p. 17). She is disturbed to the maximum when her own family members talk in favour of their masters for whom they work. They treat them as Maharajas and they accept their wretched life with a simple shrug. They have no voice even to join their daughter when she questions the inhuman way they are being treated – eating the leftovers of their masters, water being poured from the height of four feet to be drunk by them with cupped hands, their confinement to the five streets at the outskirts of the village far away from the main streets where the Naickers and the other caste Hindus live, her disillusionment when her fellow travelers refuse to travel in the bus sitting by her side etc. When her parents ask her to conceal her caste, she vehemently refuses to do so. She is being identified as a

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person of Paraiyar Community and she does not want to lose that identity: “But why should I pretend to these people that I am from a different caste, all the same, the pain I felt was not a trifling one.” (p.64).

Even as a college student, she undergoes humiliating experiences when she is treated contemptuously by her fellow students for getting scholarships and for wearing the same set of clothes for a week due to her poor social status. She is stigmatized for being born in the lowest of lowest caste. She takes up Christianity and becomes a nun thinking that she would be free from all sorts of humiliation at least now. But she is disillusioned with the way she has been treated in the convent. Even there where nuns are supposed to take care of the downtrodden, casteism plays a key role. Dalit Christians are looked down upon by the Upper caste Christians. Here Bama gives graphic details of how Dalit Christians are not allowed to sing in the church choir and how they are not allowed to bury their dead in the cemetery within the village behind the church but are made to use a separate graveyard beyond the outskirts. The paraiyars who converted to Christianity in order to escape casteist oppression at the hands of the orthodox Hindus are shown to be greatly disturbed by this as they are not able to escape a different type of oppression within the Church fold. She leaves the church in great disappointment with the feeling that the missionaries have no real sympathy for the downtrodden.

Now Bama wonders what her next step would be and where to find her identity. Truly and rightly, she finds her ‘self’ in expressing her opinions, raising her voice, questioning the society for their discrimination in the name of caste, creed and gender. She has taken up writing as her vocation and stands as a spokesperson for the people of her own community. She protests against the age old oppression and questions as to for how long they should lead this ignoble life. Will there be no redemption for them? Will there be no one to raise their voice and question the authority of the caste Hindus and the people belonging to the upper strata of life?

But Bama has an answer to all these queries. She has been successful in finding her vocation, her identity, has given a name to her community, has given a voice to the hitherto voiceless. This is not simply the narration of Bama’s story. It is the narrative of the subversion of the authority of the upper classes. Through her writings, Bama was able to reflect the voices of the Paraiyar community in an open and fearless discourse bringing to her caste a sense of dignity and honour. Through her writings, she attempts to create an identity and selfhood for herself and for people like her. She interrogates dominant literary practices and articulates the experience of the oppressed in the language of the oppressed thereby making it crystal clear that the writing that started at the margin has reached the centre and created new socio-cultural identities and ideological bases for autonomous reflection and self-action.

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