



The World Of Dalits In Bama's Novels

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Literature is nothing but an experience of the writer and is, as goes the general opinion of it, a reflection of the society the writer is living in. When the experience finds its better expression in best words in best order, it becomes a literary work. The greatness of the literary product lies in the ability of the reader to find his / her own experiences with that of the writer. The literary work is good when it tries to probe the deeper questions lying at the reader's heart.

Dalit literature is all about caste which is different from class in the sense that it is born with the birth of a man in Indian scenario. Though class, like caste, a social division, people are grouped, as Dr Jane Pilcher and Dr Imelda Whelehan Fifty Key Concepts in Gender Studies argue, "into different classes according to their relative position in an economically-based hierarchy" (13). While class is a division of people into many in terms of, as in the Marxist sense, their relation to the means of production, being either workers who own nothing but their labour power, or capitalists, who directly own the materials, machines and settings through and within which productive activity takes place, caste is dichotomy, i.e., division into two – upper caste and lower caste.

Dalit literature portrays the contrasts and conflicts between the upper and lower castes. Dalit literature is, as is generally thought to be, not just a literature on dalits, rather it is a literature of Dalits by Dalits. To ascertain this comes the opinion of the famous Dalit writer who asserts in his Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature that it is "writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness" [19] laying emphasis on consciousness adding to the definition. He further proclaims that "the form of Dalit literature is inherent in its Dalitness" [ibid]. It is both aesthetic and political in its expression and assertion, respectively.

Dalit literature is not just literary practice, but a social movement, treating literature as a battlefield to fight against injustice and the Dalit writers choose to write anger: the anger of not having born a Dalit, but the anger at the treatment of the caste-Hindus for their being Dalits. This earthy literature has made itself to be the exercise of freedom, through the

writers' points of view, insights, interests and their aspirations. Its coming into the context of Indian mainstream literature made the latter to be no longer the product of the elite group, ie., the so-called upper castes in the Hindu terminology and the Dalit writers continue to cause a great furore with their pellucid presentation of the plights and problems of their people, breaking the notion of unity in diversity, which India continued to boast of. The caste system is deeply embedded in the so-called Indian Upper-Caste people's psyche in such a way that makes them take pride in being in the upper-caste ladder of the caste system. The Hindu dharma has designed certain codes for castes on the basis of Varna Ashrama and designates roles and responsibilities of each and every one of them, leaving the Dalits at the end of descending order of the caste system.

The caste system in India has been nothing but a means of exploitation of those who have been placed low in the caste scale, particularly the Dalits, in the hands of the upper-caste people. It enables the caste-Hindus to exercise their utmost power over the Dalits to get things done by them. This centuries-old practice continues to exist even today as it has served the interests of the upper-caste people who have for themselves certain values which are both convenient and advantageous for them and which help the caste-Hindus plunder the rights and properties of Dalits.

In India, a Dalit is a Dalit, no matter where and what he or she is and they are destined to subjugation and sufferings and are subjected to humiliation and tortures, barring boundaries. What is pathetic to note here that injustice and humiliation to Dalits is far more evident in the land of self-respect called Tamil Nadu, where the mere existence of the majority of the Dalits itself is an uphill struggle and their dream of freedom remains a mere dream.

In subaltern literature, an inescapably dominant theme is the insatiable quest of the "self" or identity. In the process of emancipation and empowerment "identity" is the panacea to overcome the pains and pangs experienced by Dalits, which have been enforced by the people belonging to the dominant socio-religious-cultural society. Oppression in any form saps creative and spiritual energy of the oppressed resulting in the deprivation of the very humanity.

It is a misfortune and irony that in an independent and democratic country like India where the Varnashrama Dharma rules the roost for centuries leave a multitude of human beings at the mercy of exploiting individuals and communities. A great majority of oppressed people is robbed even of their basic and legitimate rights to live as human being.

Bama depicts various incidents that enable the powerful upper caste people to suppress the powerless dalits. The binaries in her works made her differ from other writers of postmodern period. Bama talks about the caste hierarchy in her works. Bama belongs to the marginalized section of the society and so she demands equality and more than equality, she demands "equal individual dignity" in her works.

Bama gives an elaborate and exhaustive account of the suppressed conditions of her own people with due focus on oppression. She fights for the liberation of her womenfolk through her inherent strength and fortitude. Hence, in all the works of Bama, she concentrates her theme on the upliftment of women.

Bama puts forth the ill-treatment meted on her women folk and offers solutions for it. According to her, education and economic independence are the best and unfailing weapon to overcome their subjugated conditions. Her ultimate wish is 'Emancipation' of women.

Bama deals with social, political, economical, and cultural aspects of her society which are found in the discriminations leading to ill-treatment of the suppressed people, namely the dalits and women. She has a deep love and concern for her people which forces her to faithfully pen picture their woes and pains and offers solutions to the various problems encountered by them.

Bama strongly believes that the sure and successful weapon to break the shackles built around them called custom and tradition is education and freedom of expression, which alone would empower the voiceless to voice against the ill-treatment. The novels of Bama taken for analysis viz., Karukku, Sangati and Vanmam show Bama not only as a feminist but also a staunch social realist who boldly and faithfully presents the prevailing social disorders. Attacking the social disorder, she demands a sea-change in the suppressed domain for **the welfare and development of the** nation.

The milieu of her novels is only small villages in Tamilnadu. Yet her novels are microcosm, showing the realities prevailing in other villages of India. Her very first novel Karukku showed the signs of not a budding artist but a mature writer who is sure to interest, instruct, delight and teach a multitude of readers in future.

Karukku is a semi-autobiography in which she speaks out her personal crises as a Christian dalit woman and the collective humiliations and oppressions inflicted on her community by the caste Hindus. Sangati is the biography or the history of her community which speaks of the agony and anger of dalit women caused by multiple oppression.

The subjugated dalit women are exploited and oppressed not only by their men but also by the upper-caste men and women which makes them doubly exploited and marginalized groups and which necessitates, argues Bama in Sangati, an immediate socio-cultural change. In Sangati, Bama questions the self-assigned male supremacy which gives them power and right to harass women physically and mentally.

Bama wonders whether it is a strategy of self gratification that the men achieve by way of wielding power and authority over their women because it was absent otherwise in their lives. Voiceless and powerless in the fields as the bonded labourers, they let the suppressed steam out by torturing their women at home. With a **free rein to his** fastened masculinity by way of beating and torturing the wife and imposing strict rules on his girls, the men tend

to show their superiority.

Even the educated girls who raise their voice in public places do passively endure this ill-treatment just to sustain domestic harmony. Bama questions this tendency of dalit men of her community in Sangati in which she elaborates the triple abuse of dalit women, namely physical, emotional, and sexual. The remedy to cure this malady prescribed by Bama is the autonomy and individuality of the dalit women.

Her women characters revolt and retaliate against their bad-tempered, alcoholic, and violent husbands and the male-chauvinism of upper-caste men. Other women tussle to walk out of the wedlock leaving their acrimonious husbands. Bama's pen-picture of a wife resisting her husband when she receives a physical assault is realistic and so interesting.

In Karukku and Sangati, Bama cracks the whip on the society for its discriminatory treatment of dalit people on the basis of caste. She strongly believes that the denial of the legitimate rights to the dalit citing God and religious practices still keeps them in subjugated conditions. She blames the upper-caste people, the church authorities, and bureaucrats in these novels who strive hard for the continuance of subjugated conditions.

However, wisdom dawns upon her later that **it is not only** the authority but the divisions within the community which obstruct the growth of dalit community. Hence in Vanmam (2002), Bama turns her accusing finger against her community and also charges **the caste-Hindus** in Vanmam who tactfully exploit the dalits for their selfish purpose. As a true social realist, she pinpoints the mistakes wherever and whenever she finds.

Bama herself states in the author's note of the novel that "**Marginalized people, those who have been pushed to the very edges of society, have to put aside their internal enmities if they are to reclaim their self-respect and their rightful place in society – that was the message of my novel**" (Vanmam vii). Bama openly chides **the hypocritical nature of the upper-caste men who adopt** divide and rule policy to exploit the dalits.

The upper-caste men make a cunning use of **the age-old internal division existing** within the dalits themselves. Hence the title Vanmam itself, which means "revenge", is highly symbolic and the events and incidents of the novel described are realistic. In fact, Bama has turned her attention from a border sense of dalit feminism to the sense of dalit upliftment as a whole.

In fact, Vanmam tells the time condition of a village called Kandampatti in Madurai district. The name of characters of Vanmam are, of course, fictitious but the incidents and events therein are mirror-like reflections of the day-to-day affairs of that village, Kandampatti, which, in turn, represents many villages of this kind. It **is, in fact, a**

microcosm of a bigger world.

Hence it is a wake-up call for the Dalits to be united, otherwise their life will become still precarious in the prejudiced society dominated by upper-caste landlords. The significance of Vanmam along with several recent Dalit writings, including some of Bama's short stories, lies in a radical departure from the mere representation of Dalit victimhood and the focus on the nature and function of caste in Tamil society.

Dalit literature as a distinct literary genre in the mainstream Indian literature in English, though relatively a new category emerging only before three decades or so, has achieved to make its reverberations both in the literary and political worlds, at least in India. It is no longer marginalized as the people portrayed in it. It continues to exert its influence among scholars and readers, alike.

Many a new approaches, along with the theoretical developments within Dalit studies taking place within Dalit studies, demands readers of Dalit literature to view Dalit literature not simply as a literature on Dalits, but as a very critique of social order of India. Bama offers solutions to the various problems that her people face in the day-to-day affairs through "Collective and Cooperative" voice which alone can get them equal opportunities in every walk of life.

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