

UNHEARD VOICES OF THE UPROOTED AND THE FORGOTTEN

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Literature a mirror that reflects society many times voices the hopes and aspirations of the voiceless. Literature is sometimes, born out of suppression oppression and repression. The literature by the marginalized community by their profoundness and veracity has attracted attention of readers, both of the downtrodden and the well-placed sections. The literature helps in creating an awareness among the suppressed people about the need to rise above their line to claim right to live with honour. Dalit writers make use of literature as a medium to express their sufferings, cultural exploitation and also their political positioning. The self-expressive writings of Bama, especially her novels, *Karukku* (1992), *Sangati* (1994) and *Vanmam* (2002) unravel the miseries of a Dalit woman in the socio-political and cultural domains. The focal point of Bama's novel, *Karukku* is the development of the Protagonist's mind and character from her childhood through varied experiences and the recognition of her identity and role in the world. It highlights Bama as a Dalit who moves towards self-discovery, self-definition and self-affirmation. Bama's *Karukku* is an autobiography in which she tells her personal crises as a Christian Dalit woman and the collective humiliations and oppressions experienced by her own community in the hands of caste Hindus.

Bama believes that the scar namely her low caste-brand on her ,will be erased, when she becomes adult and educated but her beliefs have gone into dust when she is being treated low of lowly in the catholic convent after her education and working as a teacher there. Hence she relates every incident that took place in her life as she suffers from strong mental agony. When Bama was in the seventh standard she was publicly humiliated and put to shame for a particular reason. As usual the children were playing in the campus after the school and they were running up to a particular coconut palm in order to touch its tip. When Bama's turn came, a coconut not fully ripened, fell with a thud. The next morning, in the assembly the headmaster called out her name and scolded her saying that she had shown her real colour as she was a paraya. She was accused of having stolen the coconut and was asked to stand outside the class. She was greatly humiliated for the theft which she did not do. Moreover, she was asked to meet the parish priest who was the correspondent of the school. The moment she finished narrating what had happened the priest's first response was "after all you are from the Cheri; you must have done it" (16). When she related the incident to her family members, her brother told her that acquiring education would erase that kind of humiliation. However much to her surprise Bama experienced humiliation after humiliation even after grown up and got education.

The humiliation that Bama had while traveling by bus causes a lot of pain and agony to her. Upper caste women never sit with the Cheri women or low caste women even in the buses. They either move to other seats or stand in the bus all the way. Bama's experience with a Naicker woman in this regard has become an unforgettable incident to her. She recounts sadly; "How is it that people consider

us to gross even to sit next to when traveling? They look at us with the same look they would cast on someone suffering from a repulsive disease. Wherever we go we suffer blows and pain” (24). She further adds: “Are Dalits no human beings? Do they not have common sense? Do they not have such attributes as a sense of honour and self-respect? What do we lack? They treat us in whatever way choose, as if we are slaves who don’t even possess human dignity” (24). This happened several times in her life still she was able to get a job in a school run by the nuns. Even there a nun asked her about her caste. The moment she told about her caste an expression of contempt came over the nun’s face. Bama was very eager to teach children from poor Dalit families because she had taken up her teaching profession with this aim. She wanted to liberate the Dalit children through education.

Bama wanted to promote self-esteem and social consciousness of her people. So she joined in a religious order which concentrated on uplifting the socially oppressed people namely, the Dalits. But soon she realized how she duped in her vocation. The school in which she worked had a lot of children from wealthy upper-caste families. The people of her community did odd jobs like sweeping, washing the classrooms and cleaning the lavatories in that school. The nuns catered only the needs of the wealthy children. Bama once again she became spell bound in that ambience. However, her burning spirit did not die. Bama speaks out the humiliations experienced by Dalit women in *sangati*. In this novel, she delineates the sufferings that the Dalits faced in the caste repressed society. She tells the woeful stories of many Dalits women one by one to make the readers aware of the triple suppression meted on Dalit women. The writer or the narrator as a little girl raises questions against the age-old practice of suppression meted on Dalit women and tries to produce solutions for many of the pains that the Dalit women experience.

Sangati depicted Dalit women’s oppression as a triple oppression namely caste, class and gender. The text also traces an account of the aggressive exploitation of Dalit women in terms of double day labour, domestic violence and sexual harassment by the upper-caste landlords, threat of rape by the upper castes is analyzed in terms of values of ‘overlapping’ patriarchy which maintains a strong sense of gendered spaces. Besides, the Dalit women are seen as lustful women who cannot be sexually controlled by the Dalit men. Therefore brutal patriarchy within Dalit communities is one of the issues which repeatedly appear in Dalit feminist discourses.

Bama in her novel *sangati* has used the narrative as a mean to voice the deprivation, exploitation and oppression of Dalit women in general and paraiya Dalit women in particular. She has articulated their pains and agonies caused by inequality, discrimination, and inhuman treatment to which they have been subjected to. Throughout the novel, bama describes the pathetic conditions of Dalit women and asks why they have been treated like nonentity, worthless creatures as if they were non-human species.

Dalit women are more likely to face the collective and public threat of rape, sexual assault and physical violence at work place and in public. Bama, in *Sangati* exposes how the upper-caste landlords in the village sexually abuse the

Dalit women. As these women have to work in their fields, many times they are silenced and became victims. The upper-caste landlords appease their sexual hunger by hunting the Dalit women who are working as coolies in their fields. In *Sangati*, Bama narrates one such incident that happened in her village Mariamma, a Dalit woman was molested by kumaraswamiyya, the upper-caste landlord and made her to keep quiet. He threatened her if she told anyone about the incident she would be insulted sexually in the public. Moreover she was sure that even if she would have reported it, the whole blame would squarely rest on her. However the landlord was horrified and afraid that Mariamma would report the matter in the village. Hence, cunningly he told the head of Paraya community that he saw Mariamma and Manickam behaved in a dirty way publicly and that was accidentally seen by him. The head of the community took the matter very seriously and considered it as shame on their community by ignoring the true words of many women. He called the panchayat immediately and asked the girl to beg forgiveness for her mistake, which was not at all committed by her. Thus she was subjected to utter humiliation in front of the entire village. The head of the panchayat ended the meeting with his precepts that women have to humble and modest. A woman is thus silenced. She has no other choice in her life. Her fate perhaps was not written by herself and by her father or mother but by the prejudiced male-chauvinist society.

Mariamma was forced to marry a boy simply because landlord who belonged to upper-caste accused her of the indecent that happened in the field. As a result she had to suffer her entire life right from the day of her marriage. She was daily beaten and humiliated by her ruthless husband, Manikkam and her whole life was destroyed. Nobody in the family or in the village bothered to see whether the accusation was true or not.

Among non Christian Pariyar, family matter is settled by village panchayat. The panchayat calls the father or brother of a girl and orders him to send a girl back to her husband. Nobody bothers to invite or listen to the girl. Their simple advice is to give a girl slap and tell her that she must live with her husband without any reservation or accusation. They are treated as commodities and are forced to live even with a drunken brute. The narrator's mother's sister was one such victim of marriage who committed suicide. Her grandmother painfully told her:

God created women only for the convenience of men. In daily practice, women have to make sure that men don't suffer discomfort that they are consoled and confronted, all their needs are looked after, and all their bodily hungers are satisfied. In short, they must be conscious every minute that men are the centre of their lives. (122)

Most Dalits live in poverty. Moreover, the Dalit men never bother about the continuous pregnancy of their wives. They think that their only duty as husbands is to give children to their wives. Besides this, they never take interest in maintaining their families. Hence the responsibility of taking the families falls on their women. Even the girl children are not spared from this deserted condition Maikanni is one such a girl child in *Sangati* whose sufferings are pictured to prick the conscience on every reader.

Besides doing household chores, the poor and innocent little girl Maikkanni has to go to the neighboring town to work in a factory to support her family whenever her mother gave birth to a child. She had to get up early before dawn, took a bus and reached the factory. This is epitome of the national phenomenon. This is so ironical even though Indian government has made so many laws to check this practice, so that such children should be in school. But still children like Maikkanni from socially and economically backward class and castes are found at workplaces. The pathos is that the innocent Maikkanni told: “who does my mother have, except me? My father has left us I must see to everything”.

Bama ends her book *Sangati* with a note of optimism and longs for a day when women would stand equal to men. She tries to offer solutions to the oppressed women by telling different incidents and events that occurred in the past and present. Ultimately, she says that the caste as a brand on them is like skin to a snake and that must be peeled off to establish their identities. It is the duty of every Dalit to peel off the skin through their emancipation. Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati* attack the evil nature of caste system, poverty and man's power over woman, in a strong and sensitive way.

Bama believes that it is only the cooperation among the Dalit women can help them to overcome their suppressed condition. The women are at times, an adviser, a friend, a mother, a guide and a philosopher to one another whenever and wherever the necessary evolves. They collectively fight against their men for their arrogant attitude on Dalit women. Bama one of the Dalit women tries her level best to announce her women that it is only through education and economic independence, their emancipation as individuals is possible. Moreover the basic concern of Bama is human dignity and human rights.

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