

HISTORICAL STUDY OF EMPOWERMENT OF DALIT WOMEN: A TESTIMONIAL PERSPECTIVE

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“It has been a great joy to see Dalits aiming to live with self-respect, proclaiming aloud, “Dalit endru sollada; talai nimirndu nillada”. You are a Dalit; lift up your head and stand tall”. - Bama

Dalits do not write to please non-dalits. The literature was not intended for this; its foremost purpose was to address directly the Dalit people. It speaks for them and to them. - Gangadhar Pantawane

In India, both men and women got equal rights. However, this is only one side of the picture. In theory and before the law, men and women are equal but in practice women were subjected to all sorts of discrimination. Women struggle for their sheer survival. Friedrich Engels, in his work, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884) attempted to locate the subordination of women to the genesis of private property. Men hunted, fished, provided the raw materials for food and made the tools necessary to do works. Women cared for the house, prepared food, clothing and looked after the children. They were both masters in their field of activity. Whatever was produced was shared equally among the members of the house. As wealth started to accumulate, the relationship between men and women also changed. Since production became the more important than the administration of the household, the power of women began to wane. And women became necessary slaves, the new labour force.

Then the word ‘patriarchy’ came into exist. It is a social system in which the male is the primary authority figure in the society. In simple, it refers to ‘the absolute rule of the father or the eldest male over his family’. Women were treated as the souls of dependence and it can be proved with a couplet from Manu, the ancient codifier of Hindu law:

Duteous girl obeys her father,
Husband sways the duteous wife,
Son controls the widowed mother,
Never free is a woman's life (137).

Apart from their responsibilities, there is always a systematic discrimination prevailing against women like inadequate nutrition, denial of education, property rights, child labour and even domestic violence etc. Sexual violence acts as a powerful weapon in restricting women's freedom. They were oppressed both physically and mentally by the society and even by their own family members. As women, they were degraded and exploited in all the aspects of life.

While comparing to upper caste people, the minority ethnic groups in India are subjugated and treated as low. This description of the 'oppressed' in our society fits those who have undergone various struggles asserted their identity as Dalits (Dalit means "broken"-*Pastor's Search for Dalit Theology*). The term 'Dalits' has now reached all the corners of India. It has also drawn attention of foreign literary persons and academicians. After the writings of Dr. Ambedkar on the tragedies and agonies of Dalits, the Dalit writings came into existence.

The Dalit writer stands as a testimony for the experiences of his/her community. At the same time these writings also bear witness to the vast transformation in the lives of the Dalits. The themes of Dalit literature are the natural outcome of their real life experiences. Most often the author's own life experiences constitute the creation of the central character and incidents of the narrative. The goals of Dalit Literature have made it a powerful, emerging trend in the Indian literary scene.

Similarly, in an interview by K.M. Sheriff, with the Gujarat Dalit writer Harish Mangalam, he says that,

Literature written by Dalits is Dalit Literature. But literature written by writers who come from the Dalit communities has the authenticity of experience and the ring of truth. There is a saying in Gujarat: Jode jene dankhe, enej vednani Khabar pade – 'only the one who wears the shoe knows where it bites.'..... The works of non- Dalit writers, though sympathetic to Dalits, are always likely to have a hollow ring. Fellow travellers will always be fellow travellers. (69)

In an essay *Bama's Karukku: Dalit Autobiography as Testimonio*, Pramod K. Nayar argues that "Indian autobiography must be read less as an individual's "life-writing" than as a Testimonio..... Like Testimonio, Dalit writings are narratives of trauma, pain, resistance, protest and social change..... The writing proceeds from a lived experience of poverty, violence, rejection and sufferings" (83). It is about 'witnessing' and speaking for the

community.....

John Beverley, in his article “Through All Things Modern”: Second Thoughts on Testimonio says:

Testimonio means a novel or novella-length narrative told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real-life protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a “life” or significant life experience.

Dalit works may be considered more as a Testimonio than an autobiography. Their experiences as become the testimony. Bama’s *Karukku* is well thought as the testimonial life writing. It shares the tale of pain, so the personal testimony becomes the exact chronological witnessing of a social structure of traumatic oppression. In an interview with Bama on 26 April 2001, “*Recognition for the Language of My people is The Biggest Award I Can Win*” she describes *Karukku* as:

The story told in *Karukku* was not my story alone. It was the depiction of a collective trauma – of my community – whose length cannot be measured in time. I just tried to freeze it forever in one book so that there will be something physical to remind people of the atrocities committed on a section of the society for ages.

Dalits were agricultural labourers and they work on the lands of the other caste people and their wages are minimal. They could not repay the debts to their landlords. So they kept them in bondage and beaten brutally. They eat only coarsest of food, forbidden to use their utensils, or to eat with them or to visit their houses or allowing them to enter one’s house. They lived outside the village, segregated in the separate quarter known as Cheri. The Paraiyars were excluded from temples; their touch, even their shadow was considered polluting. They are otherwise known as “the born slaves of India”. Upper caste people treated them very badly. Their presence even their foot prints were defiling.

Arundhadji Roy’s “*God of Small Things*” clearly projects this as:

Mammachi told Estha and Rahel that she could remember a time, in her girlhood, when Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom,

sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprint. In Mammachi's time, Paravans, like other Untouchables, were not allowed to walk on public roads, not allowed to cover their upper bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas. They had to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed. (35)

For their eyes and the eyes of others, they indicate the "Fifth category" of people even outside the Varna system. The majority of the Paraiyar were still agricultural labours. The minor positions in villages like grave diggers, watchmen and scavenger were reserved for Paraiyars.

Even though Dalits were suppressed in general, Dalit women suffer more than their men. As Gail Omvert, a feminist sociologist called Indian Dalit women as 'the Dalit among Dalit'. The best way to understand the life of a dalit woman is to experience it, as a dalit woman. The hardship of Dalit women is portrayed in Bama's *Karukku*. The word Karukku means a palmyra leaf which has the serrated edges on both sides. They are like the double edged swords. In childhood, when Bama was sent to gather firewood, the palmyra leaves scratched and torn her skin. Likewise social structures and inhuman activities wounded her a lot.

Dalit works has various stories within a story. It is like a different episode. It talks about the trauma that a Dalit women facing in her life on the daily basis. The different forms of violence against Dalit women can be divided into two: (i)Violence in Community and (ii)Violence in family.

(i)Violence in Community can be divided as: Sexual harassment and assault, Physical assault, Verbal abuse, Sexual exploitation, Rape, Forced prostitution, Kidnapping and abduction.

(ii)Violence's in the family are Female feticide and infanticide, child sexual abuse and domestic violence from the family members.

The majority of Dalit women undergo all types of abuses in their life. The following are the mixture of examples from different Dalit works on the violence's against women. In *Sangati*, Bama tells the hardship of women as "When they come home in the evening, there is no time even to draw a breath... because all day they remain busy with other domestic works like: to collect water, to cook food, to fed hungry children and husband etc. after doing all this they do not sleep soundly as at night they have to satisfy to their husband... night after night

they must give in to their husbands' pleasure. Even if a women's body wracked with pain, the husband is bothered only with his own satisfaction" (59).

In *Karukku*, Bama narrates the story of her grandmother. She works hard and brings the unwanted food which the upper-caste women use to throw away. She uses to place a vessel and the upper-caste women used to tip the food from the distance. If she needs water to drink, the upper-caste woman would pour it from four feet height and she has to drink it with cupped hands. It is not only the situation of Bama's grandmother; it is the general things in the whole community. Their passive response would be "These people are the maharajas who feed us our rice. Without them, how will we survive? Haven't they been upper –caste from generation to generation, and haven't we been lower-caste? Can we change this? (14).

Beasts of Burden, Koveru Kazhudaigal, Imayam first novel portrays the story of a young girl Mary. She belongs to the family of Vannan. Because of her mother's illness she engaged herself in collecting and washing clothes. She was highly exhausted and afraid to enter the upper-caste street to collect clothes. A well-known Kothukkaran, Chadayan, called her to collect clothes but unfortunately Mary becomes the feast for his sexual hunger. She pleaded but of no use. He turned a deaf ear to her cry.

It's the vannaati, saami
 I'm a woman who will soon be married, saami
 My whole family will be ruined, saami
 I could become pregnant, saami
 I'll kill myself, saami
 I touch your feet, ayya
 Think of me as the daughter of your own body, ayya
 If you want, you can kill me, burn me to ashes(101)

Mary pleaded but cannot shout as the whole street may blame her. She ran home and informs her mother. But she did not question the upper-caste people. Instead she blames God. Likewise in Bama's *Sangati*, Kumarasami Ayya, the upper-caste landlord tries to seduce a Dalit woman named Mariamma. But she escaped and her friends advised her not to inform anyone. But Kumarasamy afraid that she may spoil his reputation. So he complains the village Headman (Naattaamai) that Mariamma and Manikkam misbehaved in his field and they declared Mariamma is a criminal and she asked her to beg for forgiveness from Kumarasami

Ayya and insist her to pay a fine of twenty rupees. At that point she explains the incident that Kumarasami tried to misbehave with her but it is of vain.

Even from birth, there is gender discrimination. As children, the girl babies are discriminated. In *Sangati*, Bama portrays the attitude of Dalits. “If you are born into this world, it is best you were born a man” (6, 7). Dalit women seem to be the root cause for the gender discrimination in their society. While breast feeding, they feed male babies more than girls. They nurse boy babies with greater care. Even after growing up, they respect boys, provide them good food and allow them to play. But girls must stay at home and do all house chores like cleaning vessels, fetching water, washing clothes, sweeping, gathering fire wood, looking after the babies. Even in games, girls are not allowed to play boys’ games like kabadi and marbles.

Although, Dalits are suppressed by the upper-caste people, in their family, Dalit men treat their women so poorly. As husband, they ill-treat their women. In *Sangati*, a girl Mariamma does not like the marriage and says “I would rather hang myself with a couple of lengths of rope than marry him”(41). From day one, she gets beating from her husband everyday and another woman Thaaayi suffers similarly. Her husband uses to drag and beat her with stick or belt along the street. When someone comes to rescue her, he replies, “Who are you to speak for this mundé? She’s my wife, I can beat her or kill her if I wish. You go and mind your own business.” (43). Sometimes the husband does not mind that their women are in family way. They beat them in their belly and abuse them. But Dalit women use their words as weapon to fight against their husband.

In *Vanmam*, Bama explains the suffering of Dalit women in the hands of the Police. “On the pretext of searching the houses for the men, they would enter and talk vulgarly to the women and even misbehave with them. The women wanted to run away from the village... but run away where? So they stayed and suffered” (88). Without the knowledge of the police they meet the women in the prison. When the polices know that, they mercilessly beats them and drag them to streets and all the women has swelling and black bruises all over the bodies as the blood clots and congeal under the blows. Irudaya Mary cries, “Even our husbands have never beaten un like this. Are these fellows beasts from the jungle ... are they drunk or mad ... how can they hit us like this ... see how the blood clotted and turned black...” (89).

In the midst of all the struggles, Dalit women do not complain about the way of living. Often they celebrate their womanhood like the first day of menstruation, wedding ceremony and child-birth. They enjoy swimming, gossiping and playing. But while comparing upper-caste family women, they enjoy more freedom. They do not want others to see them as lower caste. They want respect and they want others to call them by name and not by their community. In *Beast of Burden*, the central character Arokkyam, a washer woman and her family often questions and laments, why people mention the word *Vannaati* woman. The children do not want to beg the upper-caste people for food. Even in the concluding message of *Bama's Karukku* she says:

Each day brings new wounds, but also new understanding, new lessons that experience teaches, sufficient mental strength to rise up even from the edge of defeat. I have seen the brutal, frenzied and ugly face of society and been enraged by it. But at the same time, I have danced with joy because of the sweetness and simplicity of a life that is in touch with nature. Even though I have walked hand in hand with anxieties, I have also recognized a strength and zest within myself, flowing like a forest stream, and this has refreshed me (105)

Even though Dalit women are oppressed by the society and family members, they want to empower themselves. They want to break the long bondage that they have been experiencing throughout their life. They search for their own individual identity and want to fulfill their desires. Respect and dignity are the main elements which they want from the society.

In this modernised world, with education and employment as a useful weapon, there is a marvelous transformation in the lives of Dalit people. There is an enormous change and revolution in their lives. They are not slaves or bonded labourers any more. In *Vanmam* (as well as *Sangati*) Bama celebrates the Dalit women and through her writing hopes to influence Dalit women readers to shape their lives positively. Her works lay a lot of emphasis on empowerment of Dalits through education. *Vanmam* (2002), Bama's third novel, deals with communal clashes between two Dalit communities in her native village. She also commemorates the journey that they have made towards self assertion and empowerment. In their own way they have succeeded in surmounting the obstacle of upper caste tyranny and hegemony.

Bama says in an interview to Suchetra Behal: "I identify myself as a Dalit woman writer ... There are many writers available to write about other issues but few for Dalits and there are

many issues that have to be tackled. If and when Dalits are respected and treated as equal human beings then only can I write about other things.” (The Hindu).

Sivakami. P, a famous Tamil Dalit writer in her recent work *Cross Section* (2014), *Kurukku Vettu*, describes a new perception of Dalit work. She represents the problems of female desire and the search for a space for expression of woman’s free spirit. She portrays the main character Saro as a middle-class working woman. It deals with the dilemma between her loyalty to her husband and her deep love for a another man. In an interview, Bama says, “Dalit men should encourage Dalit women, treat them as equals and hold on to Dalit culture again. Dalit women do not actually depend on Dalit men because they are equally earning members, face the same problems and are very bold.

Now with the help of the Cultural Studies, the whole world can recognize the oppressed groups in various geographical areas and they visualize the changing trends in the life of the particular ethnic group. The ‘Transformation of Dalit consciousness’ that readers witness through characters are empowered and they also show the transformation that they undergone as a writer. The strong message of hope runs at the end of the works, that through change anything is possible. Thus, the recent works of Dalit writers portrays that Dalit women has uplifted and empowered. In the concluding message of Sangati, Bama explicit her dream as there will be a day where men and women will live as one with equal rights and injustices, violence, and inequalities will come to an end. While comparing to the initial days, Dalit women identifies their self and stands as a testimony for the whole community. But in certain cases, Dalit women are still oppressed and degraded. Instead of pains and trauma, if Dalit women focus on the optimistic development, they can highlight their inner strength and vigour. We can also see a dalit woman in a position of leadership, Mayawati, the first Indian dalit woman Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh and I would like to conclude with the quotes of Madeleine Albright, "It took me quite a long time to develop a voice, and now that I have it, I am not going to be silent." . Dalit people gained their voice and if a Dalit women suffers anywhere in the corner of world, they will join together and raise the voice for the betterment of their people.

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