

Dalit Consciousness in the works of Bama Faustina Soosairaj

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Abstract

Literature produced from the Dalit writers is a new emerging trend in the Indian literary scenario often called as 'Dalit Literature' which has emerged to enable the development of new consciousness and identity among Dalits. Dalit writers write from several regional languages into English which contributed their segment of regional transformation to the new echo of just awakened Dalit consciousness. The idea of Dalit consciousness is a central concept in both the creation and evaluation of Dalit literature. Dalit consciousness has emerged during the late 19th and early 20th century in South India. It is a revolutionary consciousness which is based on the ideas of equality, liberty, justice and solidarity rather than pleasure. With the emergence of Dalit consciousness and Dalit voices across India during the last three decades the term has received considerable attention in the realm social sciences. Dalit consciousness opposes gender bias as it opposes regionalism, casteism and linguistic biases and issues. Bama Faustina Soosairaj (1958-), a Tamil novelist, is a leading name in the growing Dalit literary tradition in India. Her works are weapons of words, flags of consciousness, lamps of awareness and paths of empowerment. Some of her writings are *Karukku* (To wound the feelings), *Sangati* (Events) and *Vanam* (Revenge) which are the sources of awakening to the Dalits and oppressed of her community.

Key words: Dalit consciousness, gender bias, casteism, linguistic biases, empowerment.

The present paper focuses on Dalit Consciousness in the works of Bama Faustina Soosairaj. Literature produced from the Dalit writers is a new emerging trend in the Indian literary scenario often called as 'Dalit Literature' which has emerged to enable the development of new consciousness and identity among Dalits. Dalit literature is the mirror of the caste society. It is through Dalit literature that the reader is aware of the social reality and inequality. Mahendra Pratap Rana states in *Hindi Dalit Literature and the Politics of Representation* (Sarah Beth Hunt) (2014):

Literature is the mirror of the society. Human society used this mirror to organize and improve itself, to avoid repeating its mistakes in the future. Thus literature can be literature in true sense of the world only when it has the determination to remove social discrimination, to eradicate caste and establish an equal society. (Rana 28)

Short stories, poems, street performances, novels and various other genres are the vehicles to voice out the protest of the Dalits. Dalit literature, "expressed grinding poverty and often miser-and yet it reflected pride in the way in which people had survived and sometimes fought under these conditions" (Omvedt xiv). Dalit writers write from several regional languages into English which contributed their segment of regional transformation to the new echo of just awakened Dalit consciousness. The idea of Dalit consciousness is a central concept in both the creation and evaluation of Dalit literature. Dalit consciousness has emerged during the late 19th and early 20th century in South India. It is a revolutionary consciousness which is based on the ideas of equality, liberty, justice and solidarity rather than pleasure. With the emergence of Dalit consciousness and Dalit voices across India during the last three decades the term has received considerable

attention in the realm of social sciences. Dalit consciousness opposes gender bias as it opposes regionalism, casteism and linguistic biases and issues. It is a revolutionary consciousness which is based on the ideas of equality, liberty, justice and solidarity rather than pleasure. Quoting Limbaley's explanation from *Towards the Aesthetics of Dalit Literature* (2010):

The Dalit consciousness in Dalit literature is the revolutionary mentality connected with struggle. It is a belief in rebellion against the caste system, recognizing the human being as its focus. Ambedkar's thought is the inspiration for this consciousness. Dalit consciousness is an important seed for Dalit literature it is separate and distinct from the consciousness of other writers. Dalit literature is demarcated as unique because of this consciousness (32).

Bama, Angelou, Santha Bai, Sharan Kumar Limbale, Toni Morrison are the best example of marginalized ones in their respective countries. Dalit women writers and Black women writers have been in search for meaningful isolation scored meaningless and moral decay. The journey made by Dalit women writers and many other contemporary Black women writers marked a new herald of women's writings from the pockets of Dalit and marginalized worlds. The best example for Dalit women today are Mayawati is an Indian politician who served four terms as Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh as head of Bahujan Samaj Party, which focuses on a platform of social change to improve the welfare of weakest strata of Indian society, the Bollywood actress Aishwarya Rai Bachan, Meera Kumari, the first Dalit Lok Sabha speaker from 2009-2014 and the Member of Parliament for five times and writer, Prof. S Prasanna Sree is a poet, activist

and who wrote tribal script more than eighteen languages and Bama Faustina is a teacher as well as Dalit writer and so on.

Bama is a leading name in the growing Dalit literary tradition in India and her two sided struggle is directed towards cultivating self-respect among people in her own community while emerging an important voice of protest. Dalit patriarchy became an important subject of concern in Tamil Dalit literature. As Sarah Gamble opines about the term 'patriarchy' in *Feminism and Post Feminism* (1998) that:

'Patriarchy' refers power relations in which women's interests are subordinated to the interests of men. These power relations looks on many forms, from the sexual division of labour and the social organization of procreation to the internalized norms of femininity by which we live. Patriarchal power rests on social meaning gives to biological sexual difference (Sarah 3).

Bama Faustina Soosairaj (1958 -) is a Tamil novelist. She was born at Puthupatti village of Virudunagar district in Southern Tamil Nadu in 1958. Her real name is Faustina Mary Fathima Rani and Bama is her pen name. Her works are weapons of words, flags of consciousness, lamps of awareness and paths of empowerment. Some of her writings are *Karukku* (To wound the feelings) (1992), *Sangati* (Events) (2000), *Vanam* (Revenge) (2002) and the collection of short stories *Kisumbukkaran* (Prankster) (1996), *Oru Thathvum Erumayam* (A Grandfather and an Elephant) (2004) and *Kondattam* (2006). Her contribution to Dalit literature is significant. She writes from marginalized sections of the society. Her works have been translated into English, French and several other languages.

Bama brings her voice forefront through her autobiography *Karukku* which narrates Bama's life through her childhood to adulthood. She has found right space to articulate the laborious efforts and the suffering of Dalit women. She believes that Dalit's emancipation is only possible through Dalit's empowerment and Dalit can emerge as a powered class if they are provided quality education. Quality education for Dalit's is a burning issue. Bama says, K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu quotes in (NAPS):

Karukku is just a narrative of her experience not conscious literary work. I did not really have any intension of writing, but after I left the convent I was broken person, I had no job, no place to go to, my ideology and attitude, everything had changed. I was not able to blend my life with outside world (Bama 92).

Karukku means Palmyra leaves with their serrated edges on both sides are like double edged swords. This novel is a narrative of trauma, pain, resistance and atrocities unleashed on Dalits, specifically on the Paraiya caste. A significant aspect of this work pertains to the oppression at the hands of the church. *Karukku* depicts how Dalit Christians are not allowed to sing in the church choir, are forced to sit separately, away from the upper caste Christians, and are not allowed to bury their dead in the cemetery within the village. Paraiyas who converted to Christianity in order to escape castiest oppression at the hands of orthodox Hinduism are shown to be greatly disillusioned as they are not able to escape caste oppression within the church fold. Bama traces her personal disillusionment with the church and her walking out of a nunnery after seven years of stay as she fought injustice, unchristian and discriminatory conduct of church towards Dalit Christians. By depicting the experiences of Dalit women she tries to seek her identity of her own in literature. Bama, in her preface, reveals:

...events that occurred during many stages of my life cutting me like Karukku and making me bleed; unjust social structures that plunged me into ignorance and left me trapped and suffocating; my own desperate urge to break, throw away and destroy these bonds; and when the chains were shattered into fragments, the blood that was split then; all these taken together” (Bama 2000 xiii).

It is through her autobiography, Karukku, Bama tries to awaken Dalit women from their inertness:

We who are asleep must open our eyes and look about us. We must not accept the injustice of our enslavement by telling ourselves it our fate, as if we have no true feelings; we must dare to stand up for change. We must crush all these institutions that use caste to bully us into submission and demonstrate that among human beings there are none who are high or low (Karukku 25)

Her second book *Sangati* (1994) is originally written in Tamil and translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom in 2005. The word ‘Sangati’ means news or events or happenings. The novel is an exploration of the life of Dalit men and women through various happenings and confrontations to which they come across. Lakshmi Holmstrom, in the introduction of this book, presents the theme of the novel as: Sangati moves from the story of the individual struggle to the perception of community of Paraiya women, a neighbourhood group of friends and relations and their joint struggle. In this sense Sangati is perhaps the autobiography of a community (xv). Bama Faustina’s *Sangati* analyses Dalit marginalisation, discrimination, isolation and humiliation from common tradition of life. The novelist has presented the role of caste traced the role of caste and

class in the lives of Dalits. *Sangati* deals with the ill-treatment of Dalits by the upper class people, domestic violence among the Dalits and economic equality through the various events that happen in the lives of the Dalits. One such incident is the sexual harassment of a girl named Mariamma when goes to collect firewood in the fields. When she returns from the fields and stops to drink water from a pump set, an upper caste fellow, Kumarasami Ayya, “an evil man, fat with money” (20), finding her in his field, molests her. Any how she escapes and rescues herself. Moreover he tries to protect himself by alleging Mariamma to be with a village boy, Manikkam in a very awkward position. People gathered to punish the culprit but no one asks for any clarification from either from Manikkam or Mariamma. Further they have levied a fine of Rs. 200/- on her father, Samudrakani who knows very well that her daughter has done nothing but bears everything silently and shouts at his daughter,

Well girl, you heard what he said, didn't you? Why are you standing there like a stone then? Beg forgiveness, you bitch, I have suffered enough shame because of you. (23)

Mariamma suffers and keeps silent to save herself from a blot.

There are various incidents of wife beating which is very uncommon in the lives of Dalit women and they undergo domestic violence and tormenting in the hands of their husbands with no reason. Wife- beating and hitting are happen not only in low caste household but in upper- caste families too. The low caste people do not give importance for the reputation and status because they have to toil hard to run the entire household without the support from their husbands and as a result their frustration dispenses in the form of quarrels and abuses in the streets. Bama makes it evident that only few women fight with their men like this. “Most of them put up with all that violence and suffer a life

of hellish torment” (67). In contrast to it, upper- caste men and women are conscious about their dignity in society. Their women “submit to their men all the time and are shut in and controlled, like snakes locked up in boxes” (111).

The economic condition of the Dalits is utterly pitiable. Meena Anand in *Dalit Women: Fear and Discrimination* (2011) writes in this connection:

Dalit women have the most horrible position in Indian society even today, though the rigidity of untouchability has been relaxed to many extent... Women are compelled to go for hard labour with discrimination of wages, sexually abused frequently and have to go for dirty and odd jobs. (23)

Though the Dalit women work hard inside or outside the house like men and are real wage earners but they do not get their due but “whatever work they did, were paid less than the man. Even when they did the very same work, they were paid less”. (18) Their plight is very clear in the words of Patti that, “We have to labour in the fields as hard as men do and then on the top of that, struggle to bear and raise our children. As for the men, their work ends when they’ve finished in the fields... We only toil in the fields and in the home until our vaginas shrivel.” (6) Thus Bama has narrated various incidents in *Sangati* to bring Dalit consciousness to face the odds of life especially in the lives of Dalits.

Vanamam (meaning Vendetta) published in 2008 and was translated into English by Malini Sheshadri. Through this novel unlike her earlier novel Bama brings out Dalit consciousness by asserting the need for unity and solidarity of the suppressed for a better future. The events take place in a village called Kandampatti in Tamil Nadu. In this novel the Pallars and Parayas abuse each other and entangle themselves in the web of hatred,

unaware of the mechanics of the landlords. The landlord Naickers nurture and keep alive the enmity between these two communities. Both the Parayars and Pallars are the labourers in the fields of the landlords. Though they work hard, they are half-fed. Commenting on the predicament of these two groups, Bama writes, “The Parayars toiled hard day and night to turn even barren land into fertile fields”. (6) In addition to starvation they have to face the atrocities of the landlords and the communal clashes which may erupt any time. To end this long suffering Bama believes that youngsters should be educated. Through education they can liberate themselves from the shackles of slavery and improve their status. They have been following the age old practice of offering homage to Naikers. “On every Pongal festival, with great festivity, they would set out for the landlord’s house with their families taking with them offerings of a rooster one or two large pumpkins, four, five stalks of sugar cane, and a measure of rice” (7). The young educated youths of Paraar forced the elders to stop the practice ten years ago and it was eventually followed by Pallars also. The need of solidarity and unity is well expressed through the character Anthony while unveiling the statue of Ambedkar:

Educate! Orgainze! Agitate...we must all get an education. We should be aware of social realities. We must realize how society has marginalized us, discriminated against us. And having realized that, we must unite and fight the injustice. We must not be afraid to fight...we will make a new world. We will create an equitable society free of caste. (6)

Similarly, Bama expresses her aim in the novel. “Marginalized people, those when 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” (vii).

Finally both Parayars and Pallars are united when election held in Kandampatti. So far in the history of Kandampatti, only Naickers have contested for the post of President and won. The enlightened Parayars and Pallars have chosen Kaaliyan of the Pallar Street as the joint candidate. They have campaigned together and won in the elections. Bama attributes this victory in Kandampatti and opines that it is the symbolic of the Dalits' victory at national level if they are united. One of the minor characters of the novel Kaalimuthu affirms: "It's not enough that we have won in the Panchayat election. The Dalit voice must resonate in the state legislature and in the national parliament... we must capture the levers of government power. Let them be the first step towards that goal." (134) Through this novel Bama recollects Surve's immortal lines, "now we alone are the heroes of history, of all the biographies too- henceforth..." (qtd. in L.S. Despande 71). Thus the novel *Vanam* occupies a unique place as it brings to the fore the centuries of the issue of caste and not simply the atrocities of Dalits. The novel depicts of the Dalit victimhood and focus on the nature and function of caste in Tamil society. Bama has the firsthand experience of oppression on Dalit women. So she wants to break all the barriers of social and cultural system by bringing Dalit consciousness among the Dalits to face the challenges through education.

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