

Understanding the Life of a Dalit Woman through Select Works of Bama Faustina

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ABSTRACT

The caste system in India is pervasive and prevalent even today. Dalits have been historically, socially, economically, and culturally oppressed for centuries. Dalit literature was thus born out of a desire to throw light on the conditions of Dalits in the country. An even lower position is accorded to Dalit women as they belong to the most discriminated, and deprived section in the society. Many women writers, activists and feminists have raised their voices against gender discrimination, social inequality and injustice towards them. Dalit women are doubly marginalized because of their caste and gender. Both the Dalit Movement and the mainstream Feminist Movements have failed to address the issues and struggles of Dalit women. This impetus gave rise to Dalit Feminism. Dalit feminist writers in their works, especially autobiographies, have tried to exhibit the oppression by the upper caste Hindus and the maltreatment by the men of their own caste. Many Dalit women writers like Urmila Pawar, Gogu Shyamala, Kumud Pawde, Bama Faustina and Baby Kamble portray this discrimination in their works. The proposed paper is a study of Bama Faustina's works, focusing on the emancipation and empowerment of Dalit women and talks about the rights and privileges of women in general. It focuses on *Karukku*(1992) and *Sangati*(1994), which portray the life of Dalit women in a nuanced manner. Both of these works shed light on caste and gender oppression, and the intersection of the two.

Keywords: *Bama Faustina, caste, Dalit women, discrimination, gender, resilience*

1. Introduction

India's social fabric is entwined with discrimination against its so called 'lower-caste' population. India has seen a sharp escalation in violence against Dalits in the last few years. It has become a closed social hierarchy, in which the status of an individual is decided by their birth (Sharma & Geetha, 2021). Every year, the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) registers a six-to-eight-fold rise in the rate of crimes committed against Dalits as compared to the crime rate in the preceding years. These crimes include violent incidents such as assault, murder, and rape constituting the majority of some 193,000 crimes reported against Dalits (Sadanandan, 2018).

Simultaneously, in a study done in 2018 by Thomson Reuters Foundation it was found that India ranked as the most dangerous country for women because of its high prevalence of sexual violence, child marriage, human trafficking, lack of access to justice in rape cases, and female feticide (Goldsmith & Beresford, 2018).

With the ideological ascendancy the notion of 'biology is destiny' has become a myth with current perspectives. Women's search for the self is invariably engaged in resistance to prevailing notions of women's 'nature'. Women's fixed role as caregivers was ideologically

determined by their biological capacity to bear children and that was through a fixed set of codes represented by 'categorizers'. Dalit feminist writers (and activists) in India do have deep-seated faith in the wheel of justice, which may have got stuck for a while leading to the oppression of the powerless, but will turn to re-establish a just society.

When these two marginalized identities combine, what births is an individual who is at a disadvantage in a society which is still obsessed with a male child, and privileges the upper-castes. From the 1981 incident of Phoolan Devi, to the more recent suicide of Dr. Payal Tadvii, Dalit women have been facing the brunt of the society. They become victims of intersectional oppression due to their caste, class, and gender position (Sharma & Kumar, 2020).

According to Rai (2016), the main challenges that the Dalit women face are unequal access to resources, illiteracy and lack of educational opportunities, negligible political participation and empowerment, being victims of violence of sexual, physical, and emotional nature, and restricted access to justice.

Dalit women issues thus become social, rather than being personal, and their problems are not acknowledged by either the mainstream Indian feminist movement (which

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was majorly initiated by women from upper castes) or the mainstream Dalit movement which focuses on the issues that plague the entire community. The mainstream feminist movement did not address the specific problem faced by the women of the Dalit community which included caste discrimination, poverty, and sexual exploitation (Sharma & Geetha, 2021). Uma Chakravarti (2018) has stated that "Upper-caste men have had sexual access to lower caste women, an aspect of the material power they have over the lower castes". The Dalit women writers themselves have presented multiple cases of violence against them. Pawar (2008) states 'At the slightest pretext, the husband showered blows and kicks on her. Sometimes he even whipped her.', and '... the poor women would take her children and cross the hills and valleys at night, her face broken, body swollen, bleeding and aching all over, and reach her mother's house'. These indicate how Dalit women are submissive partners in their relationships who fulfill the lust of the male partners, and are unpaid servants of the household. Thus, the *savaranisation* of the women's movement and the masculinization of the Dalit movement led to the exclusion of Dalit women from both, and subjected them to oppression from all ends (Rege, 2003).

Due to this marginalization, Dalit women felt the need to represent their lived experiences and perspectives to transform the Dalit consciousness (Sharma & Kumar, 2020). The present paper aims to understand the life of a Dalit woman through the stories shared by a prominent Dalit feminist writer.

2. Analysis

The intersection of these subaltern identities and the zeal to reverse the narrative, and in turn bring a revolution in these ideas, is a famous Dalit feminist writer, Bama Faustina Soosairaj. In a conversation with Jayadeep Sarangi, while speaking about Dalit literature, she vividly captures the tragedy, resilience and spirit of being a Dalit in India,

"It is the literature of oppressed people, telling about their pains, agonies, disappointments, defeats, humiliations, oppressions and depressions. It also speaks about their vibrant culture, dreams, values, convictions and their struggle for annihilation of caste in order to build a casteless society. It reveals their resistant and rebellious character, their strength and stamina to live amidst all odds and their resilient nature to love life and live it happily. It brings out their inborn tendency to celebrate life and to fight against the caste-ridden society by breaking through this inhuman system without breaking themselves. It liberates them and gives them their identity. It heals them and strengthens them to fight for their rights."

Bama, through her stories, has redefined what it means to be a woman from the political perspective of being a Dalit.

Much like what white feminism is to the discourse of feminism in the West, *Savarna* feminism is to the discourse of feminism in India. Due to this marginalization in the feminist movement itself, a new sect was born, known as Dalit Feminism, of which Bama herself is a strong advocate of, "...the life of a Dalit woman is totally different from a non-Dalit woman. So, Dalit feminism is a must." Her stories and novels have intricately captured and presented a nuanced and rather raw experience and existence of being a Dalit woman in India. Her stories are filled with accounts of resilient and resisting women.

A trend that has been observed in some of the creative fields and especially Dalit literature is that mostly the authors' work is influenced and is an extension of their personal lives. This is especially of relevance in Dalit literature as their stories or rather lived experiences bring to light the atrocities, they face for being a part of a particular community. Bama is also no different, as her first book *Karukkuchronicles* around her own experiences of being a Christian Dalit woman growing up in a village in Tamil Nadu as a part of that community. However, one thing that sets this book apart is that unlike most biographies, Bama does not provide a linear or sequential account of the events that has shaped her life, it is rather a sporadic presentation, thus making the reader an active co-constructer in the story as she leaves the onus on the reader in building and making meaning on their own of her story. This, in my opinion, is an attempt to not provide any sense of comfort with the reading as she makes the reader understand that the life of a woman, that too a Dalit woman is not an array of comfortable-uncomfortable situations, but rather of a perpetual discomfort and them putting effort every day to find a sense of comfort, just as the reader has to put in effort in finding or rather building their own sense of comprehension.

Karukkure refers to the searing edges of Palmyra leaves. This Tamil word also refers to embryo or seed which indicates freshness and newness. This book highlights or brings to light the atrocities caused by caste, class and gender discrimination. It is not just a narration of Bama's personal journey but rather also an account of pain and dejection, disillusionment from a promise of freedom and dignity given to one on account of them being Indians. It is a narrative of her betrayal by her religion. The novel traces the spiritual development of a child as a Catholic, and her realization of herself as being given the identity of a Dalit, and what it means to be a Dalit woman in a village in Tamil Nadu. As Bama herself states in the preface of the book: "The driving forces that shaped this book are many: 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 spilt then; all these, taken together." Bama becomes aware of the concept of untouchability in her third standard when she sees an elder from her community giving snacks to other people through a string that is without touching the snack itself. Although she tries to convey or write these incidents with humorous overtones, as while describing this above-mentioned incident Bama writes she could not stop laughing at the site, these incidents are wrapped with great pain which has been a cause of misery in Bama's life.

Karukku also focuses on the importance of education for the community. It was Bama's elder brother who made her realize that the only path to equality for them is by gaining education. Through the nine chapters in the book, Bama touches and reflects, and in turn makes the reader reflect about the different aspects of her life. While the first one sets a stage or the background of the stories. She describes her village, and what the profession of her community was. She tells these by sharing small anecdotes as well. It is in the second chapter that Bama touches upon the issue of untouchability as experienced by her community and this starts with the above-mentioned snack incident. She speaks about how caste prevails in every institution, and lower caste children are discriminated even in schools and churches. Even governmental policies of identifying such individuals were humiliating to say the least as they would inevitably create an us v/s them amongst the students, making the other students look at them with contempt and sometimes disrespect. The third chapter majorly deals with the conflict between two communities and how these conflicts ultimately benefit upper-caste men. The fourth chapter revolves around the topic of work. It presents a social critique of how work is done and valued in our country, and how there is an unequal distribution of resources. In this chapter she speaks about her grandmother who was a servant at an upper-caste home, and how children as young as eleven had to start working in her community only to be able to merely survive. Survival for their community came at the cost of not treating their bodies as made of flesh and blood, but rather as machines. The other chapters deal with what the people in her community did in their free time, her own journey of becoming a teacher, her relationship with her faith and her life in the convent. *Karukku* thus, is a story of the struggles of a Christian Dalit woman.

Bama has explored the inter-relationship between her own identity and that of her community through her work. Whereas her first book explores her own journey within Christianity and her finding and realizing her identity as a Dalit woman, her second book

Sangati, talks about the Paraiya community which faces dual oppression, and thus this book deals with the concept of the community's identity. This novel has an autobiographical leaning to it, but is the story of a community.

Sangati was originally written and published in Tamil in 1994, and was translated into English by Laxmi Holmstrom. The word in itself means events, and the narrative covers a number of incidents in the lives of women in the *Paraiya* community. It is also a multi-generation account of how women in different ages and from different times have been oppressed, and how this subjugation still continues at the time the author wrote this book. It is not the autobiography of a person but rather of an entire community. The book does not have a central plot, it rather revolves around the pain and sorrow of Dalit women, which also provides a glimpse into their lively and rebellious nature, and their passion for life despite everything that life has thrown at them. The women in these stories are wage earners who experience a pay gap due to their sex. This disparity in pay due to one's gender is prevalent even today. Men on one hand, not just earn more money for the same kind of work, but also have the autonomy to spend it as they please, however these women have to bear the financial responsibilities of their family with the little that they earn. The novel also explores the constant sexual harassment and abuse that women face in their places of work, and at home as well. She presents the caste and gender discrimination that these women are subjected to from not just outside but from inside their own community as well.

Sangati deals with the gender bias that women face throughout their lives. The female child is considered inferior, and lesser than the male. Games played at a young age lay foundation for gender roles, as Bama, a young girl of twelve sees that the boys play *kabaddi* and with marbles, while the girls play revolve around household chores and duties. The narrator starts as a young girl who observes the events around her. When she grows older, she speaks on the need for change and action, to bring justice against the atrocities faced by women in her community. Moreover, the boys are seen as permanent members of the family, while girls are seen as transient. Elder female child are often given the responsibility of their younger siblings. An added layer that Bama brings out is the realistic portrayal of the physical violence that Dalit women face at the hands of their male family members. She expands it by focusing on the psychological damage that these instances cause.

The lives of Dalit and non-Dalit women are drastically different as reiterated by Bama. According to her, upper class women live in far vulnerable circumstances as compared to Dalit women. There is a sense of pride Bama exudes for the economic mobility that women in her community have. There is also more acceptance of widow remarriage, and there is no alienation from the mainstream. These are some 'privileges' that the upper caste women do not enjoy. They face gender oppression but enjoy the caste privileges. The Dalit women on the

other hand, face caste discrimination during the day, and gender discrimination at night.

The novel is unique in the sense that while the first part focuses on the horrible state of Dalit women and the atrocities they face every day, the second presents a rather positive identity of a Dalit woman focusing on their inner strength and resilience. Through *Sangati* Bama shows the mirror up to the heart of Dalit women. She brings forth a collective consciousness about bringing a change in the lives of Dalit women in varied facets of their life for their betterment. However, Bama is also clear that the change has to begin from the community itself, no one else is going to help these hopeless women of her community, it is up to these women themselves to take charge of their lives and bring about the change they seek to see. The core theme is the deplorable state of the women in her community. But she also presents a positive identity of these women, which focuses on their strength and resilience.

3. Conclusion

Thus, Bama through her writings sensitizes the readers towards the experience of living life as a Dalit, and the conditions and atrocities that her community is subjected to at every facet in this society, be it the educational institutions, places of work or places of worship. It provides the grim reality of living life as an oppressed section of this country. However, her stories are not just accounts of marginalization and pain, but rather also a celebration of Dalit women's life, resilience, and resistance.

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