

Vol 2

INCULCATING HUMAN VALUES THROUGH ART, LITERATURE, CULTURE, MANAGEMENT AND TECHNOLOGY

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Dalit activism was already rampant in Maharashtra since the 1960s but in this decade, self-assertive proclamation of Dalit rights through creative activism came to the forefront in Tamil Nadu. Like many postmodernist feminists, Second Wave Feminism helped Dalit feminist writers to realize the phallogocentric nature of the literary canon and rewrite the body in order to subvert patriarchy.

Dalit feminism is a "dialogue of dissatisfaction", "a politics of dissimilarity" from mainstream Indian feminism. It talks not only about the marginalization of Dalit women but also about Dalit males who consider it their sole responsibility or prerogative to talk about the rights and status of suffering Dalit females. In this scenario, Dalit women like Bama, take upon themselves the responsibility to pen down the suffering of Dalit women. They record their own experiences to depict the position of women who are triply marginalized.

For the Dalit women, body is the site of insult and objectification; hence body is often utilized as the site of protest and to challenge societal androcentrism. Raakkamma reacts in this manner because it is her only means of escape. Only by resorting to a violent (characteristically patriarchal) rhetoric and publicly projecting the objectified body by stripping it bare of its gendered delimitations and revealing the wounds of oppression can women like Raakkamma reclaim organic functionality. Their revelation of the menstruating body part publicly is a performance of overturning culturally stereotyped notions of shame, thereby proclaiming that shame is not associated with the natural functionality of a biological body but with the violence afflicted on the biological body.

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Novels of Bama: A Social Critique

Vivekanand Wahule

By the early 20th century, the issues revolving around oppression of women were "resolved" by the Hindu nationalist discourse by formulating an alternate nationalism within the realms of the private household which also served to nourish patriarchy that was being throttled to some extent by colonial intervention and liberal indigenous reformism till then. One of the most important aspects of the Second Wave feminist movement and Dalit Feminism in India is to understand the sexual politics and identifying caste-based hetero-patriarchies.

From 1990 onwards, Dalit movements and Dalit creativity started to flourish most significantly.

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Thus, the body becomes the major prop in the "physical" performance of dissent. As Sharmila Rege argues,

The Dalit Feminist standpoint is about historically locating how all our identities are not equally powerful, and about reviewing how in different historical practices similarities between women have been ignored in an effort to underline caste - class identities, or at other times differences ignored for 'the feminist cause' (Rege 8).

Bama also introduces Dalit women characters like Sammuga Kizhavi and Maikkani who portray different survival strategies in the face of hostility instead of allowing the self to be subjugated: the former resorted to mischievous tricks like extracting free rides in expensive cars of high caste men contesting the elections in exchange for the pledge to vote for them, but ending up voting someone else, urinating in the water-pots of upper-caste landlords et cetera. Maikkani, on the other hand, learnt to manage both household work and work outside in the fields of landlords and in match factories in order to support her family. Deprived of a proper childhood by constraints within the home, an abusive alcoholic father and poverty, she learnt even as a child to earn and fend for herself. Girls like Maikkani attained maturity even at a very tender age and learnt to protect themselves from lecherous men at workplaces, support their families in the absence of a headman and yet find happiness without complaining about the unjust deprivation they have speaking of the brutalized body and representing the body as the site of embodied suffering through self-narrativization

becomes an essential human rights discourse as is evident in Sangati. Nayar says that the process of transformation of a narrative of personal suffering into the mouthpiece of collective suffering is accomplished through two representational strategies, namely, performance and witnessing (Nayar, *The Poetics of Postcolonial Atrocity: Dalit Life Writing, Testimonial, and Human Rights*). "Staging" is a per formative technique in which Acknowledgement, Translator's Notes, Editor's Notes and Prefaces are used to authenticate the performance of narration and open a dialogic interaction with the reader who becomes a part of the text through the act of reading.

Bama's re-reading and interpretation of the Christian scriptures as an adult enables her to carve out both a social vision and a message of hope for Dalits by emphasizing the revolutionary aspects of Christianity, the values of equality, social justice, and love towards all. Her own life experiences urge her towards actively engaging in alleviating the sufferings of the oppressed. When she becomes a nun, it is in the stubborn hope that she will have a chance to put these aspirations into effect. She discovers, however, that the perspectives of the convent and the Church are different from hers. The story of that conflict and its resolution forms the core of *Karukku*.

The confessional, conversational mode of writing adopted by Bama in *Karukku* and *Sangati* is a significant milestone in Tamil Dalit fiction. It departs from the literary, invariably refined and therefore elitist vocabulary of literary discourse that stands alienated from the marginalized subjects. Bama employs the vocabulary and spoken idiom of the marginalized in her literary works



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thereby underlining the ideological underpinning that regulates the matrix of identity, self-articulation and literary discourse in Dalit writing. She writes about those hitherto marginalized in literary discourse in a language that has been held unlitrary.¹ She at once interrogates dominant literary practice and articulates the experiences of the oppressed in the language of the oppressed.

Barna writes about Dalit women in her novels in her capacity as a Dalit woman herself. She thereby makes it evident that writing from the margin- the act of writing for a Dalit woman - is a political act. She seeks to subvert dominant perception, representation and articulation of Dalit women's lives. In our analysis of Barna's writing, we shall trace the close link between education, writing and empowerment that Barna posits as tools that could liberate women of her caste from leading a degraded, repressed existence perennially.

"The primary motive of Dalit literature is the liberation of Dalits, in particular, and the liberation of the oppressed, in general. It is fundamentally a cultural activity coming under the broad movements of Dalit political liberation. It is cultural politics. It takes the form of protest" (Bama 98).


Thus the present paper notices two important developments in Dalit testimonial narratives like *Sangati*: Bama not only privileges a plethora of voices over a singular pervasive narrative voice, but also represents women as agents of assertive changes beyond their subjugated status as victims of multiple oppressions. While orthodox upper-caste Hinduism denies to acknowledge Dalits as equals

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and deprives them from religious rites, passages and festivals, the plight of converted Dalits, who were persuaded to convert by promises of free education of their children, is no different. Barna ruptures questions of credibility of the conversion of *paraiya* Dalits to Christianity throughout the narrative through conversations between Dalit women belonging to different Scheduled castes as well as through the narrator's consistent dialogic interactions with her grandmother Vellaiyamma Kizhavi. The information that surfaces from their stories, experiences and anecdotes confirm how caste prejudices and patriarchy are retained even within the church. The rules forbidding divorce, the unsympathetic behavior of parish-priests towards Dalit girls choosing their own life-partners, the attribution of menial works of the church to Dalit women, their restricted presence within the church precincts and forbiddance from participating in church-plays only reflect the pervasive hypocrisy of a society which internalizes caste-based, religion-based and gender-based dominations. Moreover, Dalit women are subjected to physical violence both in public and private spaces. The writer Ambai observes that Barna

"employs absence of easy flow of narration as a deliberate structure. In Barna's Karukku / words and images hit you as lumps of soil breaking down on one's head with a thud They hit you hard as stones would. They hurt. They cause pain. This work could not have been written in any different way" (36).

There is no opportunity for complaint or protest, because in that case the council of village elders would invariably hold the girl responsible and force


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her family to pay fines in cash and kind for her "offensive" and "transgressive" behavior. In the private space of the home, the Dalit woman would be regularly subjected to psychological and physical domestic violence including marital rape. The thwarted manhood of Dalit men, subjugated in the public realm by upper-caste landlords would reclaim its abused status by exercising masculine authority on the Dalit women's bodies. The bodies are relegated to the status of commoditized or sexualized objects of usage, transformed by a conventional patriarchy into sites meant for channelizing frustrations and insults. Within the orthodox familial structure, the Dalit woman is entrapped within the traditional subordinate role meant for fulfillment of sexual, reproductive and domestic duties.

Thus, for Dalit women writing ceases to exist exclusively as a creative aesthetic pursuit but also as a weapon to channelize creative fervor into political activism. Dalit Feminist authors like Bama highlight the importance of writing to reinstate the identity and establish the individuality of certain communities of oppressed women existing universally and timelessly. Texts like *Sangati* reflect the "politics of liberation" and become exemplary of Dalit culture which utilizes *naattupuraiyal* (folklore) forms of art, thereby creating an alternative, oral tradition-based poetics of writing. "Narrative Transcuration" is a creative literary expression, a subaltern cultural response to neo-colonial modernities, in which marginalized communities creatively produce oppositional cultural artifacts in dialogue with dominant cultural forms to combat the latter (Rama), for example *Nakshikantha* of Bangladesh

and Andean textile iconography of Latin America. It can be said that Dalit testimonial narratives serve as exemplars of "Narrative Transcuration" through construction of alternative linguistic and formalistic structures of narration as well as through writing about the "physical" and "emotional" performances of dissent of Dalit women. *Sangati* remains an important contribution to the corpus of South-Asian feminist narratives while being relevant to the cultural praxis of universal feminist narrative discourses.

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