

The Dynamics of Dalit women Consciousness in the Select Short Stories of Bama.

¹Jenitha Blessy. J & ²Dr .V. Bhuvaneshwari

¹Department of English, School of Social Science and Languages, VIT, Vellore, Tamil Nadu

² School of Social Science and Languages, VIT, Vellore, Tamil Nadu

(jenithablessy@gmail.com&vbhuvaneshwari@vit.ac.in)

Abstract:

The caste system is considered as a catastrophe in the Indian society. It continues to haunt the livelihood of the Dalits in India throughout centuries and till date to the present day. This terror of discrimination has coloured as well as undated the rational thinking of the Indian. The caste system has penetrated in every sphere of the socio-economic, religious and political fabric of the country. Dalits in India started voicing out this insidious crime against them. Their autobiographies proclaim the terror, agony and tribulations that they experienced in their lives. Moreover, Dalit women's voice stands unique in expressing their trauma against the social evil called the caste system. One such prolific writer is Bama. A convent nun turned writer, dedicated her entire life for the sake to enlighten the Dalit women consciousness. The main objective of the research article is to explore the psyche of the Dalits as well as the dominant caste. The research applies the method of textual analysis to explore the insight present in Bama's short stories. It also highlights the consciousness of the Dalit women as reflected in Bama's writings.

(**Key Words:** Dalit-consciousness, social evil, psyche, insight)

Introduction:

The lives of Dalit is constructed through the history of oppression which was produced by religious practice and turned to be a culture that held deeply in the belief systems and it is practised by all Indians consciously and unconsciously. The Indian society, been the most hierarchical civilisation in the world with its clear gradation in the exercise of power and privilege. Even in this modern era, people continue to believe that one set of people is officially and unofficially superior to another in a particular community. This social oppression is normalized by the mainstream Indian society containing only the high caste people. The most recent caste outrage in Tamil Nadu caught the attention of millions on social media. A Minister from Tamil Nadu asked a tribal (outcaste) boy to remove his sandals from his feet so that he can enter the temple. *The Hindu* news article reported that "The minister asked two minor boys, who were tribal residents, to remove his slippers so he could enter the shrine". (Rohan Premkumar, 2020). The report also stated that these boys are from the tribal village in

Theppakadu and they were children of mahouts at the elephant camp. Even the MLA's who stood there never opposed this act but rather they asked the photographers not to take any pictures of the event. This act was highly condemned by all the political leaders and political intellectuals this fateful event remains to be the brazen act of caste supremacy in 21st century modern India. It is clearly evident from the above case that the caste system is considered as a catastrophe in the Indian society. It continues to haunt the livelihood of the Dalits in India throughout centuries even to the present day. This terror of discrimination has coloured as well as inundated the rational thinking of Indian.

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Bama and her Works:

The Dalit feminist discourse is the embodiment of Dalit women writers who voiced out their protest against the social evil and social injustice and patriarchal system. Writers like Sharmila Rege asserts that "the Caste and gender matrix in Indian society merely pluralising the term patriarchy is not enough because the task is to map the category of 'women' is being differently reconstituted within regionally diverse patriarchal relations across- hatched by graded caste inequalities" (Rege et al., 2013, p. 36). Uma Chakaravarti argues that "we need to recognize the cultural oppression as it operates in the lives of Dalits and women, especially on women of the lower caste, is far more dehumanizing than economic exploitation, which we understand as the dominant feature by itself" (Uma Chakravarti, 2018, p. 7). Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi moon state the sexual violence faced by Dalit women "sexual violence against Dalit women is enormously public rather than domestic. Violence against Dalits is a constant existing threat because It functions as a means of punishment for Dalits who assert their rights against caste hierarchy" (Pawar & Moon, 2008/2014, pp. 13-14). Susie Tharu and Tejaswami Niranjana also highlight several problems faced by Dalit women. These writers sabotaged phallogocentric dominance in society. They pinned down the painful experience of being a woman in this society.

The Dalit feminism have emerged as a counter-movement to the mainstream literature as well as feminist literature and become a 'domicile of resistance'. The Dalit women writers use the mode of confession to embrace their personal narrative. These autobiographical mode of writings surpassed the classical form of narrative as they are considered as the most authentic form of writing. They flaunted the light of truth on the everyday plight of the marginalized lives of the Dalits. They also unlocked the new scope for alternative politics that of Dalit women. Bama a Dalit feminist articulated her experience of hurt, humiliation and history of negation in her works. Her narratives stated about the ordinary lives of the Dalits. Her texts conveyed the voices of the Dalit women and their insignificant status in society.

Faustina Mary Fatime Rani also known as Bama Faustina Soosairaj is a Tamil Dalit feminist writer who was born in 1958 in Pudhupatti, a small village in south Tamil Nadu. Her family converted to Christianity and abided by the church of Roman Catholic denomination. Agriculture is the family occupation of Bama. Even from her childhood, Bama experienced discrimination based on class, caste and gender Bama has read the books of Jayakantan, Mani, Parthasarathy and Rabindranath Tagore and these writers had influenced Bama in her young age to tell her story in her own unique way. After acquiring college education she becomes a school teacher. But after witnessing discrimination of students by teachers Bama decided to dedicate her life for the well being of the Dalit students she becomes a catholic nun. Even after that, she realized that the situation of the Dalits is not better. So she decided to walk away from the nunnery and nunhood. At first, She was depressed at the thought of her situation and her fellow Dalits. She decided to pen down her experience as a Dalit woman in urban and rural society. She created a pen name Bama and published "Karukku" (1992) her first novel. She emerged as a significant voice in the world of Dalit literature. Her writings exposed the atrocities she faced in her day to day lives. Her second novel "Sangathi" (1994) shifted her narration from personal to the general. While "Karruku" was her autobiography, "Sangathi" is a note on Dalit women's lives in her Dalit community. The novel critically recorded the oppression faced by Dalit women in their lives. Her writings did not follow the parameters of a traditional novel. Bama's third novel "Vanmam" (2009) meaning vendetta, exposed the internal conflicts and fissures in the Dalit sub-communities. She also wrote three collections of short stories "Kusumbukkaran" (1996), "OruThathavumErumayum" (2003) and "Kondattam" (2009). Every story has a distinct theme and settings. These stories chronicled the lives of the Dalits who are forced to live in a rigid situation earning for freedom and social justice. The short stories taken for the present study are "Wherever you look", and "The Verdict".

The Power Autonomy of Caste and Class System:

Workplace politics and discrimination is often not taken into consideration as oppression at all. The *Indian Express* report states that "vulnerable communities are

prone to prejudice in the workspaces". Further, the report also stressed that they are treated as vulnerable groups because they are women, religious minorities, people from the Scheduled Castes, and people with disabilities as vulnerable identities (Sarfaraz, 2018). Bama's short story "Wherever you Look" have dealt with this issue of systematic discrimination. Bama clearly defines how power autonomy plays a vital role in the workplace through the character of Sakunthala, when she says "you should be careful around her, you cannot express these ideas here she has powerful connections" (Bāmā, 2018 p.108). As Sakunthala briefs about the way of the workplace to newly joined teacher Prema. Prema, a newly joined science teacher in the government high school of Vempadu village was new to the custom of hierarchal domination in the workplace. She observes that even though the "PT assistant and PG assistants tend to fraternize together they have certain coldness between the ones who taught mathematics and science and those who taught other subjects" (Bāmā, 2018 p.107) Soon Prema realises that the teachers not only differentiate themselves in the name of senior and junior they also differentiate themselves with others on the basis of caste. On one occasion the headmaster arranged his farewell lunch for the teachers who worked in the school. Students of class nine served the meal to the teachers. When a boy named Kuppan served the food to midday meal in -charge Lakshmi, she scolded him in a loud indignant tone and asked another boy named Venkatesan to serve her the food. She said " De.. de! Why are you serving the food? Leave the vessel here and go, how can we eat food served by your hand? De, Venkatesan you come and serve the food da" (Bāmā, 2018 p.109). When Prema asked Lakshmi about the indifferent behaviour she simply said Kuppan was a son of a municipal sweeper Mayandi and so she did not want to eat the food he had served. Here, it is clearly evident that the problem of inequality is born out of caste and class system which played a powerful role in defining one's life. Here Bama classifies caste with the concept of pollution and purity. She gives a clear picture of how caste and occupation holds a status with social immobility. These features are strictly backed on the bases of religiously governed principles of "purity and pollution" which spontaneously rend with social structure and hierarchy.

The Seed of Caste Prohibition in the Young Minds:

Caste laws were made to prevent Dalits from entering into civic and social spheres of life. The hegemony of high caste become so pervasive because knowledge was prohibited for the Dalits. Ironically, though the Dalits occupied the lowest strata of society and were rendered as 'untouchables', the goods they produced were somehow accepted in some places. But the idea of pollution and purity makes the lives of the Dalits more difficult. This thought is enforced in young minds in order to raise them under their cultural heritage of discrimination. Bama's short story "The Verdict" talks about how the seed of hatred and untouchability are rooted in the young mind's. The story begins with a happy occasion where school children are taken to the cinema

theatre to watch a movie. On returning to the school few children stopped by the place called Pallathur village to fetch water as they were thirsty, but few children denied to drink water from that particular village. Soon, the incident was reported to the class teacher Mary. When she inquired about the incident she was stunned when the students told her “Teacher that’s what we are told at home. Do not mix with the children who live in those streets. Do not accept anything to eat from them. Do not even go anywhere near them” (Bāmā, 2018 p.15). The teacher was troubled by the thought of how the young minds are corrupted. Soon she informs the headmaster about the incident but to her disappointment, the headmaster says “ What's wrong with drinking water from the Cheri tap? Only in Cheri homes, you should not drink water” (Bāmā, 2018 p.16). Here Bama, states the condition of the Dalits simply remained as untouchables and they are also cast out of the society as an ‘unapproachable’ inferior subjects. The stress in the word ‘Cheri homes’ illustrates the social realism of Indian society. Bama also points out that Dalits are not treated equally in institutions of higher education where discrimination is practised by upper-caste students, teachers, faculty members and administrators.

Dalit Women Consciousness:

Bama is celebrated as a contemporary Dalit feminist writer. Her writings always celebrate the inner strength of Dalit women. While she explores the relationship between caste and gender in her writings, her short stories transmit a new dimension to understand the role of Dalit women writers in the modern era. Bama uses this new dimension of Dalit women consciousness in her writings to create a platform for voiceless margins. She employs her characters to voice out their idea when they see social injustice before them. She uses the character Premato assert against the ill-treatment given to Kuppan. She counsels the midday meal in charge Lakshmi by saying, “if I wanted to, I could humiliate you the same way right here right now. I could say... I am a PG teacher so why should I eat with a midday meal staff. If I were to say that to you how will you feel? Wouldn’t you feel hurt?” (Bāmā, 2018 p.110). Here, Bama is counselling her readers that it is not acceptable to abuse a child using his parent’s occupation. Bama’s consciousness awakens the reader’s minds through the character of Prema. When Prema voices her earnest opinion about hierarchal discrimination among the teachers by saying “ Just because a practice has been around for a long time, can you claim it must be fair or right? Whatever our higher qualifications may be, we’re all part of the human family aren’t we?” (Bāmā, 2018 p.107).

In addition, Bama also condemns the castist attitude which infected the young minds in the short story “The Verdict”. Bama through her character, teacher Mary describes how the castist mentality is nurtured in the young minds by their elders in the society. When Mary recalls “ I remember how I explained over and over again all human beings are equal. I talked myself hoarse about it- all a waste. It's not what's

taught in school but what is taught at the home seems to be learnt quicker by there children". (Bāmā, 2018 p.16).

Conclusion:

Bama being a Dalit feminist takes up the sensitive fact that Dalits issues must be taken seriously. She counsels her fellow Dalits who carries the burden of caste prejudices for centuries. In her writings, she often entwined with the history of her community and the current power equations of the society in which she lives in. She clearly states that the apparent problems of discrimination have deeper issues that are directly connected to personal upbringing. She also depicts that these issues that might lower a person's self-image, self-worth, behaviours etc. Bama in her writings gives importance to key issues the Dalits face in his day to day lives. She brings out an important element of discrimination to develop a fuller understanding of caste-infected social realities. The two short stories taken for the study have similar set up of story line as both are set up in school atmosphere but it delivers two strong issues of the Dalits. Bama turns our attention towards the Dalit children as new subjects of investigation who are seriously effected by the notion of inequality. Bama also illustrates that the Dalits are subjected to prejudices and stereotyping and she demonstrates the power-wielding mentality of the upper caste who think themselves superior enough to exercise power on others. Bama points out that the Dalits need to develop skills and knowledge in dealing with such prejudices and stereotyping. Furthermore, Bama in her short stories brought a realistic appraisal on Dalits themselves. Through these short stories, Bama had taken up her social responsibility and made sure that the Dalits wellbeing is connected with the liberation of their community as a whole.

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