

Dalit Feminism in the Selected Stories of Bama

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Abstract

Women's oppression is the most widespread and the deepest form of oppression in society. Patriarchy has assumed that women are naturally inferior to men lacking rational thought. As she is biologically endowed with the supreme task of reproduction to carry the human race forward, it is considered to be imperative to subsume her individuality to serve the needs of her husband. The issues agitating women belonging to different cultures are different. Unlike their Western counterparts, Asian women generally do not debate over issues like family, motherhood and sex. For millions of Dalit women, Dalit Feminism has created a pulpit to preach the gospel of freedom for them to come out of their existential subordination and trauma of untouchability. Bama is a leading Tamil Dalit woman writer. Bama's pen is like a sharp-edged weapon to cut the weeds of untouchability and patriarchy which have thickly grown over the centuries in this ancient land. Most of the women in the works of Bama emerge victorious breaking domestic, social, religious, political and sexual shackles which so far have been like millstones weighing on them. They have transformed themselves from passive, battered, voiceless females into self-confident, assertive, modern women who compete with men in all spheres. They have marched ahead from erasure to assertion and from being victims to victors and this victory is the ultimate goal of Dalit feminism. This research paper focuses on Dalit feminism, and the emergence of the new woman in the short-fictional creations of Bama.

KEYWORDS: Dalit, feminism, new woman, double-colonization.

The world of women as Simone de Beauvoir observes in *The Second Sex*, "is everywhere enclosed, limited, dominated by the male universe; high as she may raise herself, far as she may venture, there will always be a ceiling over her head, walls that will block her way" (325). Women's oppression is the most widespread and the deepest form of oppression in society. Patriarchy has assumed that women are naturally inferior to men, lacking rational thought. As she is biologically endowed with the supreme task of reproduction to carry the human race forward, it is considered to be imperative to subsume her individuality to serve the needs of her husband. The male principle in the Indian Sankhya philosophy has placed more values on the "seed" than the "land". In the Hebraic tradition, every woman is said to enter history with a piece missing. Aristotelian tradition too defines a woman by what she lacks. This lack tradition has been reinforced by Sigmund Freud in the modern age by his concept of "penis envy" in women. Based on this assumption of inferior position, women are called the "subalterns".

In fact, women all over the world have been relegated to the position of the "other" "marginalized" and in a metaphorical sense "colonized" by various forms of patriarchal domination. However, the issues agitating women belonging to different cultures are different. The differences between the political priorities of the first and

third-world women have persisted to the present, although the interconnection of various forms of social oppression materially affects the lives of all women. There are two different special voices shouting in the wilderness for liberation—the Dalit woman in India and the Black woman in America who are under the triple-subjugation of caste or race, gender and class. It is therefore imperative to isolate the problems specific to these triple-subjugated women and work for their emancipation and empowerment. Postcolonial studies and post-modern feminism grant these subaltern groups the needed space to break their cocoon of fear, low self-esteem and stifling diffidence in order to assert their dignity, individuality and human rights. For millions of Dalit women, Dalit Feminism has created a pulpit to preach the gospel of freedom for them to come out of their existential subordination and trauma of untouchability. “Dreams they have and nightmares they confront. They explore their long past to trace the fossils of their forefathers’ existence and also forge their future. Their literature is indeed a creative excavation for their heritage,” says J. M. Waghmare (17).

Bama (1958-) is a widely acclaimed Indian Tamil Dalit woman writer. She has been using her pen as a powerful weapon for the past twenty-five years to fight for the rights of her people—the Dalits. Bama is the pen name of Faustina Mary. She is regarded as one of India’s most challenging voices. She has written four volumes of short stories along with four novels. Bama’s pen is like a sharp-edged weapon to cut the weeds of untouchability and patriarchy which have thickly grown over the centuries in the ancient land of India. Most of the women in the works of Bama emerge victorious breaking domestic, social, religious, political and sexual shackles which so far have been like millstones weighing on them. They have transformed themselves from passive, battered, voiceless females into self-confident, assertive, modern women who compete with men in all spheres. They have marched ahead from erasure to assertion and from being victims to victors. This victory is the ultimate goal of Dalit feminism. Hence it is important to know the concepts of Dalit Feminism before delving deep into the emergence of the new woman in the short-fictional creations of Bama.

When asked to distinguish Dalit feminism from mainstream feminism, Bama tells *Littcrit* journal “All women in the world are second-class citizens and Dalit women experience a total lack of social status; they are not even considered dignified human beings. Hard labour and agony are their lot in life. Other problems are the same for all women” (33:111). In her essay “Dalit Women: Problems and Prospects” Bama writes, “Since our society is not only a male-dominated society, but upper-caste male-dominated society, a Dalit woman’s problems are unique, she is a Dalit among Dalits” (329). Dalit women’s experiences have become the central concern in Dalit feminist literature. An urgent agenda of Dalit feminism is to send a signal to the higher caste people to put an end to untouchability. It also empowers Dalit women to hit back if their male partners hurt and humiliate them. Dalit feminism recognizes and praises Dalit women who carry out their responsibilities without expecting any reward. It celebrates a woman’s individuality, along with family and motherhood. It aims at subverting the conventional norms of social and religious hierarchy. Dalit women are asked to jettison conventional values of female beauty and create for themselves a new and natural image of womanhood. It encourages Dalit women’s use of words as weapons. It is concerned with eco-friendliness and the safeguarding of native culture.

Bama's stories proclaim what real woman power is and what it can achieve. They are packed with pathos but the thread of humour running through them softens the harshness of their world. The unique trait of Bama's Dalit women is that they do not hesitate to resist tyranny in any form either at the familial or social level when they are not loved and respected as human beings. The new Dalit woman is powerfully presented by Bama in her stories of four volumes. However, for the sake of brevity, the researcher of this paper has selected only two famous stories such as "Ponnuthayi", (named after the heroine) and "Molakappodi" ("Chilli Powder"). Both the stories are taken from Bama's second volume of stories named, *Oru Thathavum Erumaiyum*. (An old man and a Buffalo)

Ponnuthayi evolves from a woman trapped by male tyranny and social restriction to a revolutionary figure, effecting action and strategy to bring freedom to herself and other fellow sufferers in her community. She is an uneducated, dark, Dalit woman who lives with her husband Muukkandi and their four children. Although very poor and illiterate, she is dignified and self-reliant. She becomes a vendor of coconuts and vegetables and sells them from house to house. Unmindful of others' critical comments on her "business" instead of working on the farms like other Dalit women, she continues to do her work with determination. Nobody dares to criticize her to her face because she would at once retort to them with very strong words. When her drunken husband sells their cow without her consent and beats her black and blue, she goes to her parents' house, leaving her four children under Muukkandi's care. The villagers abuse her saying, "What kind of woman is she? Not having a bit of love for her own children! Roaming around like a man!" but she is not worried about any comment. If anyone dares to speak about it to her, she asks a very pertinent question, "Are they only my children? It was to quench his lust that he had children one after another. When I went for the family planning operation, he didn't allow me to do it. So now let him bring them up" (64). Muukkandi struggles with his four children day and night.

One day he picks a quarrel with her, beats her and bashes her head. Ponnuthayi wails loudly and runs to the police station with blood dripping all over her. She sees to it that her husband is arrested and put in prison. Once again people start talking ill of her. Even her parents shout at her for her action and advise her to fall at his feet and live with him. They remind her of the age-old proverb, "A husband is a husband even if he is a stone or a blade of grass", but she replies at once, "I'm fed up with my marriage to a stone or a blade of grass all these days" (68). Her ensuing act reveals her determination to face any challenge in life all alone. Saying so, she cuts off her "thaali" (wedding icon), sells the gold in it and sets up a small shop in her village for her livelihood. She proves her real mettle as a bold, practical woman without any unnecessary sentimental attachment to her "thaali" or any such symbol of slavery associated with marriage. She is truly an independent, intelligent, courageous and self-confident woman, wielding her words as weapons against those who criticize her. Ponnuthayi represents the emergent new woman who can shake off the tyranny of a husband with the sale of her "thaali" to buy the things for a new shop she plans to open.

Pachayamma in "Molakappodi" ("Chilli Powder") is a typical Dalit woman who is gifted with an indomitable spirit and a cheerful disposition. She dares to defy the landlady Gengamma who is a terror to all Dalits in the village. Pachayamma not

only encroaches on Gengamma's fields to cut grass for her cattle but also boasts of her adventure there to the other women of her place.

She is no mere individual Dalit woman but she represents the Dalit women in her hard work, resourcefulness, courage, wit and humour. While accused of theft, she at once asks a pertinent question, "Are we going to build a flat-roofed house? Or are we going to make jewellery? It's only if we steal something that we are able to have some gruel. With prices soaring so high, are we able to buy anything to eat?" (18).

It is for cutting grass on Gengamma's land for her cattle that she sprinkles chilli powder into Pachayamma's eyes. In the stream of abuses that she hurls at Gengamma, one sees not only the contempt in which she is held by the oppressed and ostracized Dalits but also their determination to resist their marginalization which they recognize is tantamount to dehumanization. Their resistance is offered not only in terms of their language which finds expression through Pachayamma's idiolect but also through their audacious deeds which their defiant urination in front of the police station underscores.

The women here are shown to be doubly marginalized – in the first place they suffer from gender bias and in the second they are ostracized from the mainstream on account of their caste. Dalit feminism fashioned by Bama in her stories boldly opposes the dominant culture and challenges traditional evaluative norms. The seminal purpose of Bama's fiction is to empower Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular to take up their rightful place in the process of building an egalitarian society. She exhorts Dalit women to action and says in *Sangathi*, "So we must take up the challenge ourselves" (66). Her message is:

We must be strong. We must show by our own resolute lives that we believe ardently in our independence ... we must never allow our minds to be worn out, damaged, and broken in the belief that this is our fate. Just as we work hard so long as there is strength in our bodies, so too, must we strengthen our hearts and minds in order to survive. (59)

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