

## Ponnuthayi as Personification of 'New Woman' in Bama's Ponnuthayi

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### Abstract

Ponnuthayi is a typical and highly acclaimed short story of Bama draws the attention of the male chauvinists towards the ill-treatment inflicted upon innocent women and ultimately demands for equality. Above all there is message that let the Dalit women live with peace and self-respect. Bama pinpoints the struggles in the society that inequalities in gender, caste, class and sexual discrimination should not exist. Ponnuthayi contributes in broad, to dalit situation and is particular dalit feminism. The dalit situation articulated in this novel cannot be taken in to account as an absolute picture or condition of the life of a dalit woman. It is just a fragment of the total pragmatism. Above all a women's modesty should be saved an ultimately let her live with peace, happiness, independence and self-respect.. Her use of regional dialect enables the reader to comprehend her custom, her culture and her regional identities. Bama's writings reinforce new language, a new genre and a new radical circle.

**KEYWORDS:** Personification, Male Domination, Dalit Women, Struggle, Feminism.

India is a land of multi cultures, multi languages and many traditions. A few Indian writers whose works of translation have become famous include, Tagore, GrishKarnad, Thakahi Sivashankaran Pillai, Sivasankari, Bharathi, Bharthidhasan and La.sa. Ramamirtham. Among these national leaders, regional writers like Bama have gained wide recognition through the translation of her works. The identification of these writers has different women cultures. But writers of Dalit literature should be listened to and cared. Bama is an eminent Tamil dalit writer who has brought in new awareness about the oppressive nature of many dominant groups like high caste communities (non-dalit communities), caste fanatics, religious fundamentalists, religious sectarians and many others. Dalit literature not only reveals the angst of being dalit in a caste driven society but also simultaneously records a revolutionary discourse which challenges the hegemonic caste. The general impetus of these writings is to expose the agonized and marginalized existence of Dalits. Though her writings were written in Tamil, mostly, they were translated in to Indian languages and English. Her use of regional dialect enables the reader to comprehend her custom, her culture and her regional identities. Bama's writings reinforce new language, a new genre and a new radical circle. In this regard however, with the exception of literary works of writers like Bama Gunasekaran Urmila Pawar, Imayam, Sivakami, English translation of the works of other Dalit writers of various languages, a new genre and a new radical circle. In this regard however, with the exception of literary works of writers like Bama Gunasekaran Urmila Pawar, Imayam, Sivakami, English translation of the works of other Dalit writers of various languages are not available in common.

*Ponnuthayi* is a celebrated short story which exposes the pathetic life of dalits and mirrors the poor life situations of dalits and their social taboos. Ponnuthayi, aged 40, is a

robust married woman with her four children. She is quite good looking with dark complexion. When the other women of their village work as wage labourers for land lords, Ponnuthayi maintains her integrity by selling products as street vendor. She is a strong willed woman who never bothers about others. She is an extraordinarily brilliant self respect woman who fights the other people who do injustice to her. While Ponnuthayi was selling coconuts, other women of her communities teased her disparagingly. Ponnuthayiretorted: "I never go looking for a fight, but if a fight comes my way, I never leave it. If you want to buy, buy, otherwise shut up! Who are you to talk about business"! (94)

She further reiterates that she is a woman of upright lousness and honest, bold and straightforward: "That is my business. Why should these people born of whores talk about me ?.....If anyone speaks about me with their tongues between their teeth, I will slice them off".(94) She seems to be the personification of goddess Kali and in the most appropriate sense, a 'Modern Woman'. Others are shaken to have fear because she is a woman of well balanced, because she is never at a fault. Her desperate cry for survival in her community does not even elicit sympathy from the people of her. In an interview Bama ascertains the real conditions of the dalit women.

All woman in the world are second class citizens. For Dalit women, the problem is grave. Their Dalit identity gives them a different set of problems. They experience a total lacks of social status; they are not even considered dignified human beings. My stories are based on these aspects of Dalit culture.....The hard labour they have to do all their lives. Other problems are the same for all women. The Dalits particular caste.....more agony and land labour can be attributed to them. Dalit women have to put up with a triple oppression, based on class, caste and gender. They die in order to live. (Limbale,116)

Mookandi is Ponnuthayi's husband who has no love for his wife and children and no respect for the matrimonial bond. An irresponsible and reckless person, he is a drunkard and insincere in his work as a coolie. He is a glutton eater who grasps the resources of his wife too. Without her Knowledge, Mookandi sells her milking cow and then as a useless fellow, he cripples the economic conditions of the family too. Violence against dalits, extreme forms of caste discrimination and even untouchability and bringing disgrace to woman is common in any region of dalit dominated communities by the dalits themselves. This is the irony in which Bama records her anguish and hopes for rejuvenation in the life styles of dalits.

Ultimately she leaves her husband and hands over the children to him. Circumstances force her to take up this crucial and pathetic decision. She never cares about the society because she is absolutely free from any corrupt practices of the society. Crushed by the 'so called' societal convention, untouchability, humiliation, fear, hunger, disease and ignorance, the majority of dalits continue to live in the country side. The underlying tone of Ponnuthayi is so touching while leaving her children: "Are the children only mine ? It was to ward off his violence that I gave birth to them, one by one. After two I wanted to stop, but he objected and brought me back"(p 96 )

The words of the Protagonist reveal the fact that the only past time for a male is sexual relationships with the spouse and the violence applied by the males against women is so absolutely casual. When Ponnuthayi abandons her children by leaving them with her husband, a social custom among the dalit women the words spoken by her husband are piercing and unparliamentary. But Ponnuthayi gives him a fitting reply: "I'll do whatever I want to. who are you to question me ? Did I give birth to the children without your help? Try and bring them up"(96)

The male dominated society tries to retain the 'modern slavery' as a social custom and accepted system. The untold miseries that the oppressed dalits had to suffer through five millennia. The Indus Valley civilization or the culture of ancient Tamizhkalam or Sangam Age record evidences that the dalits or the Adi-Dravida were once rulers of a geographical territory of Kerala and other territoria in some partsof South India. They had mastery and proficiency in arts and crafts, science, political administration and statecraft .(535-Sanal Mohan, Navativizing the History of Slave Suffering) But everything is of no use. System practiced by the dalit community itself does not have the broad outlook towards the women. To them, women are subjugated and unworthy and they are the symbol of sex and meant for procreation and the enjoyment for men.

The characters depicted in the short story-Arthiyamma, Kkuruvamma, kannniyamma, Kupusammy and Govindan stand for the common opinions and 'so called ideologies' represent their different voices for and against the society, particularly, the community. Kuppusamy, a villager, who has been watching all the indecent ways and means applied on Ponnuthayi records his dissent voice and unlawful opinions: "Is he a man? What a fool! She took him to the police station and got him beaten up and he still lets her live! Useless fellow! I would have strangled her in the police station itself".(98)

Kuppusamy's voice too becomes representation of the male dominated society. Kuppusamy does not feel much for Ponnuthayi for the physical injuries and the inflictions of shame done against her. According to Dalit Culture by MSS Pandian:

The inequalities and negative identity of dalits continue with little change, even today. Every community has its own social inequalities and taboos. But nowhere else can one find the majority in society being treated as inferior on the basis of birth-based ideas of purity and pollution. In Hindu caste society, there is no space for equality at all.....(p 151)

When Mookanditorutres Ponnuthayi, nobody becomes a saviour and instead they blame only. Ponnuthayi for her actions. Ponnuthayi runs to the police station to save her life and modesty and as a consequence, Mookandi is brought under custody: "Sir, my husband is always torturing me. I left him to live on my own years ago. Today he came and harassed me again, beat me and split head. Only you can do something now"(97)

As a woman she demands justice and wants to have peace of mind. The undertone of her pitiable words communicate us the strong rebellious nature of woman, when she becomes a determined force to establish her self-respect. While, Amma. Don't fathers know how to bring up their children? Let them try. It's enough that we

women have to marry stones and grass". (99) As a consequence, she goes to extent of taking blade and slashing the wedding-Knot around her neck and removing the thali.

Ponnuthayi's rebellious nature, strong minded action's revolutionary ideals and a mind to save her self-respect lead her rise as a 'New Woman'. Her many sided personality proves that she is a strong willed woman. It is proved beyond doubt when she cuts-off her martial-knot and removes the thali. She does not care the society always which never came to her rescue. Thali is a symbol of identity of marital relationship between a husband and a wife in India, particularly in south India. The society too gives much more importance to this marital bond. It is a strong convention in practice that till the death of a woman's husband, the thali should be around her neck. If somebody removes the thali from her neck while the husband is alive, it is understood that she discards her marital status and gives up her conjugal rights. Ponnuthayi's action are extreme in one sense that she retorted to this kind of life, because of the conditions of the society. The end of the story is a turning point which could be treated as a death blow to the 'so called' conjugal rights. Ponnuthayi detaches herself with the 'thali' and consoles her mother who is wailing and weeping.

"Amma will you stop your wailing? Do you want the whole village to know what has happened? I am going to town; you go to the pond and pick some tender greens from its banks to feed the lamb. Innocent dumb creature, it's so hungry". (100).

The Tamil ethos echoed in the story may be societal oriented but when could such pathos come to an end is a million dollar question. Boldly she takes up the profession of a petty shop which is normally not by woman of Tamils. Changes could be possible, when there is determination. Yes, Ponnuthayi starts her small shop at the cost of her 'thali', a symbol of Tamil culture and heritage. She stands like a pillar of power and represents as a 'New Woman': "The 'thali' that had lain around her neck for ten years occupied the entire shop now, in the form of goods to be sold" (100).

This short story explores the idea of transformation of rejection into resistance. It is being emphasised that Ponnuthayi leaves her children and husband with a strong will to live in this world as a self respect woman. She stand like a pillar in her decisions and never expects the society to help her. Her new life starts with a vision to have a peaceful life. It is a naked truth that the economic inequality plays a major role in the life sphere of Dalit women-hood. Despite the position of dalit women, the power structure of their society mainly concerned with or it is or oriented towards patriarchal set up. The caste courts, temples and churches are male dominated and rules for all errors and mistakes are very different for man and woman. Bama as an individual in the society has a heavy heart in recording her life experiences.

My mind is corroded with many anecdotes: Stories not only about sorrows and tears of Dalit woman, but also about lively, rebellious culture their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter than but rather to swim vigorously against the tide....About their and hard labour, I wanted to shout out these stories. (Limbale,119)

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