

Identity Crisis in the Select Novels of Bama

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Abstract

This paper portrays identity crisis in the select novels of Bama. Bama shows the victory of the Dalit woman against all kinds of social barriers in her novel, Karukku. She focuses problems, but only so that they offer the reader a prospect into the negotiations of the individual who wants to win over humiliation, survive and become a respectable being. She quits the comfort of the Seminary and she gets away her identity as a nun. These are intentional moves of the strong individual to fight a social evil giant monster, casteism. By becoming the part of the social struggle, she writes home to her community a message about struggle, about survival and the triumph in the form of a respectable identity.

KEYWORDS: Identity, Crisis, humiliation, survive, monster

Bama shows the victory of the Dalit woman against all kinds of social barriers in her novel, Karukku. She focuses problems, but only so that they offer the reader a prospect into the negotiations of the individual who wants to win over humiliation, survive and become a respectable being. She quits the comfort of the Seminary and she gets away her identity as a nun. These are intentional moves of the strong individual to fight a social evil giant monster, casteism. By becoming the part of the social struggle, she writes home to her community a message about struggle, about survival and the triumph in the form of a respectable identity. She reiterates the need to keep alive the spirit to fight all forms of discrimination. P. Devarajan in "For better or verse", reads:

And the ideals Bama admires and applauds in Dalit women are not the traditional Tamil female ideals of *accham* (fear), *naanam* (shyness), *madam* (simplicity, innocence), *payirppu* (modesty), but rather courage, fearfulness, independence and self-esteem.

While Karukku represents the larger community of Dalits, Sangathi specifically, focuses the smaller constituency of the Dalit women. Sangathi examines the wounds that hurt the Dalit women. Those are wounds caused by rejection in marital relations; a strained communication between the woman and the man. The woman in the Dalit home is subject to untold physical and mental harassment. Bama intervenes in this inconvenient relationship and arbitrates on what can liberate the Dalit woman from the clutches of the male whose acts of violence do not appeal to abate. Bama suggests, as the first voice of feminist rebellion, the idea of 'divorce' as a multi-dimensional form of release for the

harassed woman: physical, legal, moral and social separation that is the result of the woman's own choosing. In the process, Bama reflects on the possibilities that lie before the Dalit woman for a new life.

The first novel by Bama Karukku is so poetic. The reason to call it a poetic novel is that it employs pregnant images that one finds only poetry. The compressed images spring to life and bloom to the fullness of their significance at the instant of a reader's touch. One such telling image that is redolent with social significance is the reference to "Kabbadi"; a game Bama loved to play and cherished for its value as an image of Dalit resistance and survival. This is a game in which the home territory is fiercely guarded from physical encroachments and infiltration: in the contest of the game, the forays by the member of the rival team are called "enemy raids". Such raiders are either allowed to dance through the territory without any loss of home members or they are cleverly led into the trap by deliberately opening a deep corridor on one side so that the enemy can be finished once and for all. There is then the exhilaration of the home members crossing enemy lines, challenging their boundaries, and making deep inroads for a kick.

Bama departs from the homogenization of Tamil Culture when she chooses to modify the slogan that looks at the Tamils as one monolithic entity: Tamizhan as one monolithic entity: tamizhan endru Solada; talai nimirndu nillada. She likes to think that Dalit identity must be reclaimed from the sea of neglect before any overtures are made towards an assimilation into the large entity of Tamil Culture. For this reason, she modifies the clarion call of the hegemonic Tamil Culture by making revisionary intervention: "Dalit endru Sollada; talai nimirndu nillada" (K156). This way, Bama not only challenges the upper castes but crosses over the boundaries that segregate the communities and vanquishes the divisive forces. A writer like Bama, who is writing against the grain, is also writing against the grain of mainstream Tamil Language where she needs to defy the shibboleths. In this regard, she has something in common with Alice Walker which is endorsed by Ammu Joseph in "Women's Words and Worlds" thus:

A contentious debate on language was sparked off by Tamil writer Bama's assertion about her use of the Dalit dialect, which conservative readers and critics often view as 'bawdy', too earthy, unsuitable and unworthy' for use in literature. When some writers suggested that a glossary was necessary to make such writing comprehensible to readers familiar with the more standard literary version of their respective languages. U S feminist writer Gloria Steinem, pointed out that several translators of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* have used the language of similarly disadvantaged communities in their own countries to retain the flavor of the original.

Bama takes two identities very seriously: Bama the woman and Bama the writer. She makes separate choices: as the woman as well as, the writer. As a woman she chooses to remain single that would give her the space to champion social causes. As a married person, she would be encumbered by domestic responsibilities. So on the personal front, with respect to marriage, Bama chooses the austerity of being single. On

the other hand, as a career choice, she chooses the career of a writer. On the face of it, it is a career that entails restraint, discipline, rigour. However, it also promises the ample creative space for examining, explaining, enlightening the reader in her community and society, at large, about the problems that beset the Dalits. This single woman as a writer with a single-minded goal becomes a model for the Dalit Community. Talking to reporters, Bama, once said, "Dalit people welcome me. They are curious to read my writing and for the younger generation, specially women, I am a role model" (Behal 2003).

One may observe, with respect to Bama, that it is not only her characters who are marginalized and treated as out-castes. It is not only the Dalit women who form the central concern of Bama who are treated as 'outcastes' Bama, the writer, is herself an 'outcaste' if one understands her position to, linguistically, transcribe the dialect of her community thus inviting the displeasure of the mainstream Tamil novel with her non-confrontation. Vaijayathi Gupta in "The Guarded Tongue" raises this issue:

A major challenge to women's writing in all different vernaculars has been the attitude of their readers and critics, which is a direct reflection of the societies in which they live and for whom they write. Critics who review their work still treat women writers as 'outcastes'. Literary critics, mostly men, ignore the dynamic vitality in women's writing and treat it as recreational and decorative.

These are murky and harsh situations that persuade Bama to fight for justice and equality for Dalit society, especially for women who have traditionally been harassed and oppressed. She does not want to be a mute spectator like other women in her community, but she boldly exposes the bitter experiences that she has faced as a student, as a teacher, and as a nun. She writes for her community, creating awareness among those neglected in society. In an interview she clearly states her objective of remaining single and writing novels. She highlights the present humiliation and suffering of Dalit Community, especially the Dalit women. "The existing family system would not give me the space I needed to do my kind of work. So I choose to stay single. My ambition is to communicate the dream and aspiration of my people, who have remained on the fringes for centuries in Indian history" (Dutt 2003). Virginia Woolf made the historic call for "a room of her own" understanding as only a woman writer can, the enormous challenges against which she works. More than a century after Woolf made that remark, Urvashi Butalia, in "Books" would suggest that the situation has not changed drastically: Virtually all autobiographical accounts by women describe how difficult they find the act of writing. This isn't something specific for women of course, for writing may be difficult for anyone, but in many ways, it is symptomatic of the condition of women.

Karukku is the vehicle that carries the tenor of Bama's Dalit responses. The writer's voice and the novel that enshrines this voice, together, make Bama a metaphor for the sufferings of the Dalits as a community; the sufferings of the Dalit as an

individual as well as the suffering of the Dalit individual who is a woman. When one begins to see the Dalit as suffering multiple degrees of oppression, one begins to fathom the significance of a creative vehicle like *Karukku*. It is not the mere accomplishment of a literary task but a cultural expression that holds the complex patterns of the Dalit reality. So, when Bama experiences happiness over the success of her novel, it is not the announcement of a literary event but the declaration that for the voice of the Dalits to be heard, one needs to make a determined assault on the bastions of traditional thinking and rigid casteist and communal practices and attitudes. It is in this frame of mind that one can get the actual significance of the recognition for *Karukku*. Talking to reporters, Bama once said:

Today, I am overwhelmed with Joy. *Karukku* is the encounter of a woman in a caste-divided society. I started the book in 1992 when I was facing a lot of crisis. Now that it is into the print and has won an award. I am sure I have a wider audience [...] The problem of people in remote villages will come to the fore. (Meghdutan 2003)

Karukku, in many respects, is the novel where the vision and voice of the Dalit writer, Bama germinate. She strikes out bravely against a number of traditional standards. When she breaks her silence with *Karukku*, she demolishes two important social standards; that the Dalit cannot write or contribute the realm of creative literature which is an occupation sacred to the privileged classes; the next, would be the courage to speak as a woman and be accepted in a, largely, patriarchal world of letters; and she also, in the process, crushes with the force of her creative abilities the patronizing and, often, subjugating Dalit male attitudes that have worked always against the literature of the woman. Providing a perspective on Bama, the writer, Wandana Sonalker in "Towards a Feminism of Caste" says that "Bama's narrative, 'to a great degree', does not deal with herself, but the context of dalit life in which she grew up and acquired a certain self-awareness".

Bama demolishes the conviction to take on those very institutions for their backward and dehumanizing tendencies. Two such institutions are the religious institution of Christianity as well as the socio-cultural institution called marriage. She leaves one form of single-blessedness for embracing another form of single-blessedness. In other word, she leaves the Christian Seminary whose insistence on chastity and poverty do not hold any solace for her quest for meaning in life. She chooses the empowerment that comes with the refusal to marry. And she acquires the assurance of the confident, liberated rebel who would not flinch from exposing the hypocrisy and duplicity in the religious institution like the Seminary.

While Bama makes *Karukku* the complex symbol of her personal struggle and journeys towards survival, in *Sangathi*, the accents change. In the second novel, Bama decides to examine and navigate the social sphere in which the institutions of her community are located. However, the learning from her personal travails does have a bearing on her concern for her community. She extends the hard lessons of her experience to her own community so that they benefit from following them.

Bama examines the psyche of the Dalit woman in Sangati at a greater depth than she does in Karukku. Bama's concern for the Dalit woman stems from her understanding, from her own bitter experiences, that unless the individual reaches a point in life, unless that individual is faced by circumstances to that point of real despair, the individual is not going to experience the possibility for response and reaction. Pechiamma, in Sangati, is an engaging case because one can see her being pushed into such a situation in life where there is only a thin line between complete surrender leading to resignation and survival that stems from the courage to defy enormous inimical social forces.

Bama wants Dalit people to put an end to all the atrocities unleashed on them for centuries. She wants them to erase the stigma of their birth and show the world that they can live with dignity. She has gained dignity in her life and is widely acknowledged for her undaunted spirit. She wants the same spirit to be demonstrated by the Dalit woman. For many years they have shown amazing patience which had only kept them in a miserable plight as down-trodden people. They should not allow others to trample upon them. Hence Bama tries to lift the Dalits from their abject misery. Even as she instills courage, she wants them not to harbour any rancor or hatred in their mind. It is her ardent desire that they should fight with dignity for their rights. She envisions a future society in which they can live in peace. She wants her people to rewrite Indian history and hopes that they will inject a new meaning into the veins of history and civilisation.

Bama suggests two distinct movements that the Dalit woman will have to initiate. She will have to initiate a movement inwards as well as a movement outwards. The movement outwards would fetch for the Dalit woman an understanding of the equations with the other social orders like the upper castes. This movement would also enlighten them above the space for economic independence that society would be inclined to allow the Dalit woman. The movement inwards would enable the Dalit woman to come to an understanding of her own powers: physical, mental, intellectual and artistic.

Bama implies through the novel, problems that are more subtle and not easily discernible to the casual reader. She implies that the differences between freedom and liberation is as much in the intensity with which the individual responds to his or her situation as it is in the difference between subordination and submission. The axis of power that seeks to control shifts from the perpetrator to the suffering individual which makes liberation an ideal. Freedom on the other hand, remains a distant ideal or goal which the suffering individual hopes to have but will always be subject to any concession offered by those who keep the Dalits under their thumb. Until the individual resists or reacts to his or her situation, it is a state of submission. Bama takes the reader to those spaces in the dynamics of the upper caste-Dalit relations where the patterns of subjugation by the upper castes are tested now and then by remarkable individuals who feel that a personal response is a rare opportunity to make a strong social statement that will kindle any sympathetic reactions.

Bama feels it is a sin to suffer injustice in silence. She takes the weapon of words which can lay out the injustices in black and white, with words. Her people will fight

against the odds that have kept them in discredit. She is a warrior, conqueror of ideas, restorer of social dogmas. She leads a hard life like her people, but she does not want to be a mute spectator. She initiates social and political reforms. She completely revolutionizes the worlds of human thought and behaviour for all times to come. In the collection of short stories, Oru Thathavum Erumaiyum, she scales a new peak in showing her people's resolve to survive at all costs and also she exhibits their undaunted spirit to fight against the odds. In her interview to Sathianathan Clarke, Bama says:

There are other Dalit hearts like mine with a passionate desire to create a new society made up of justice, equality and love. They, who have been oppressed, are now themselves like a double-edged Karukku, challenging their oppressors... Instead of being more and more beaten down and blunted, they must unite, think about their rights, battle for them.

Bama, the novelist has discovered that the latent potential in every individual needs to be kindled and activated. She understands that the strength to withstand and overcome the crisis is buried within individuals who must not be allowed to drift towards despair. As a writer, she believes that her words have the capacity to lift such individuals, teetering on the verge of despair to realize the power within to survive the crisis. And as a writer she has faith that all crisis will yield positive solutions and that order will emerge out of chaos.

Bama feels an urge in her, she cannot give out, what she feels without fear or favour. She feels herself one with the down-trodden. She adores the poor and at the same time, lays the rich in their naked colours. Her robust optimism and faith in humanity inspires to surge forward in life. She inspires everyone with hope, courage and confidence. The Dalit women who recover their burning spirit, inspire the Dalit men, especially youths. Earlier the Dalits responded to their crisis in an unorganized and haphazard way. Now, they balance the pull powerfully. They derive power instinctively. They are able to see the society that corrupts them. They become criminals or rebels. For centuries, Dalits are being robbed and corrupted by the dominant society which is mainly responsible to make the Dalits rebellious. It is not a chosen path, but one that was thrust upon the community. There is no turning back after having embraced the new path that promises them a social identity. Nothing can stop them from being outspoken and outrageous in the eyes of the upper castes. Dalits are filled with an overwhelming sense of outrage. Their fire of fury cannot easily be extinguished. It is not an ordinary fire, but it is a volcano. It bursts forth and the lava gushes out to drown and burn the casteism, a symbol of tyranny and oppression.

It is a universally accepted fact that youth alone can transform a society. Young blood knows no fear. They have rich reserves of energy and action. A broad outlook is their powerful weapon. They have one goal one direction now. The loss of the past becomes one loss and the golden time in the Dalit colony becomes one dream also. Light of hope is seen in the midst of mighty upheaval. Strange things happen and the barrier breaks down. Dalit identify themselves and in the identity diversity dissolves.

Bama does not allow her people to fall forever. She lifts them up from the fall and places them at a new height. She proves that survival is possible only through negotiating hurdles. Her people finally break away the shackles and establish themselves as dignified people. They stand tall in the midst of many problems. Having focused how Bama negotiates the marginalization of Dalit people, I move on to the sixth chapter to show how Alice Walker, Bama's Western counterpart, negotiates the marginalization of Black people in the world, in general, and in America, in particular.

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