
Decoding Feminist Dalit Aesthetics in Bama's *Karukku*

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Abstract:

Though Dalit Literature, as a weapon and a political tool against caste violence, is a modern phenomenon with Baba Saheb Ambedkar being regarded as the father of Dalit Literature, its roots can be traced to a much earlier time period when voices of resistance were subtly articulated in the writings of Bhakti movement, back in the eighth century. Bhakti writers like Kabir voiced the caste prejudice in a subdued form where, after voicing their woes, they devoted themselves and their faith to God. The Bhakti movement was thus not a radical reformative movement, even when it voiced the caste bias. Many reformers from within the fold of Hinduism later on emerged to remove the horrible practices of untouchability, but none of them were radical in spirit. Caste, as such, was deeply embedded in the Hindu religion and was sanctioned by religious scriptures like Manu Samriti and Bhagavad Geeta. As such, reforms within the religion proved ineffectual in completely omitting the blot of untouchability.

Introduction

In the early 20th century, the Indian socio-political milieu saw the emergence of a very powerful and thought-provoking leader who questioned the Indian caste system and wrote a complete critique of the same from economic, political, and social standpoints. The leader, who was later lovingly addressed by the Dalit population as Baba Saheb, became the hope for a number of Dalits in India, who made him their ideal. Ambedkar's political writings gave inspiration and a strong foundation to the Dalit movement and Dalit Literature. Dalit Literature, in its modern sense, has, thus, spread its wings in Maharashtra with the Mahar agitation led by Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar. Dr. Ambedkar, a prolific economist, politician, and jurist, advocated political rights and social freedom for Dalits in India in strong and effective terms.

Finding its inspiration in Ambedkar, the Dalit movement got its impetus in the Indian political scenario. As a result, a number of Dalit writers emerged to voice the terrible horrors and sufferings they and their people had to face because of the inhuman culture of caste. Though these writers were giving voice to their individual tales of suffering and horror, at the same time, this was the voice of their whole community, which was spread all across the Indian horizon. Individuals and

communities thus became one, and Dalit literature simultaneously became a political tool uniting all the Dalits across India.

Dalit literature first saw its emergence in Maharashtra, where, under the leadership of Ambedkar, Dalits became politically aware and strong. This new literature was not submissive in nature like previous Bhakti movement writers but was very radical, progressive, and strong in voicing the anger against caste. The emotion of anger, in fact, was the central creative agency behind the rise of this modern Dalit literature. In Maharashtra, radical poets, who were later on called Dalit Panthers, voiced the spirit of anger. They were taking their inspiration from African Black writers as well and were calling for Dalit pride. Namdeo Dhasal, Arun Kamble, and Raja Dhale were a few prominent Dalit Panthers.

After Maharashtra, Dalit literature saw a renewed focus in other regions like Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and later on, in Punjab and other parts of North India. Baburao Bagul, Madara Chennaiah, Iyayam, Daya Pawar, Om Prakash Valmiki, Bama, Shivkami, etc., emerged as prominent Dalit voices.

One interesting facet of these writings was that most of this literature was written in the regional languages. As such, Dalit aesthetics was a strong attack against Brahmanical aesthetics that put more emphasis on the idea of Satyam Shivam and Sundaram. It was a revolt against everything that was elite, and the writers wilfully chose the regional languages and colloquial style and vocabulary in place of dominant languages like Hindi and English. Most of the Dalit literature, thus, available in Hindi and English languages, is literature in translation. The renowned critic of Dalit Literature, Sharankumar Limbale, has explained how Dalits have been reduced to a non-entity or, at the least, animalistic in behavior in elite Indian Literature that strives to portray beauty through literature. Limbale asserts that Dalit Literature cannot aspire to portray 'beauty for beauty's sake' and the main actors are poor Dalits who toil hard in their lives. As such, anger and pain are the main creative tools that make up the aesthetics in Dalit Literature.

So far, elite Indian literature has been dominant among writers who followed the aesthetics of Rasa theory, starting with the renowned name Kalidasa. Premchand, Mulk Raj Anand, and Raja Rao emerged in Modern Indian Literature, which was dominantly Brahmanical literature, altogether ignoring the question of caste and Dalits. Central characters were mostly upper-caste Hindus, and the literature discussed the social problems faced by elite classes. Where Premchand and Mulk Raj Anand reflected upon the caste prejudice, and reflected upon the problems faced by the downtrodden class, works like *Kafan*, *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, etc. portrayed Dalits as people who have no morality or agency in them and are devoid of any sense of justice. Dalit literature revolted against such portrayal. Limbale strengthened the foundation of Dalit literature by giving a central role to the emotions of anger and pain.

When writers like Bama Valmiki, Narendra Jhadav, Baby Kamble, Limbale, and Pawar started voicing their personal stories, they came out as rich biographies that grabbed the attention of the Dalit world. Autobiographies emerged as a natural genre of Dalit Literature and a very powerful one, as even when they were written as tales of personal suffering, they were voicing the common lot and could easily relate to the whole community. As Limbale stressed in his work, *Community and Individual* became one of Dalit's autobiographies, and the genre became a very effective tool for political change.

When it came to the Dalit woman writers, the concept of oppression got more complicated as it was now addressed to two different perpetrators: caste on one hand and gender on the other. The struggle of Dalit women was thus double-edged and more complicated. Dalit woman was thus double marginal among the subalterns. All Dalit women's autobiographies narrate the story of such double oppression and the subtle ways of its enactment. Five strong faces of Dalit women, who not only through their activism but also through their valor, have occupied the space in Dalit aesthetics. Sant Soyarabai Soyarabai was a Dalit(Mahar) who lived in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century near Pandharpur, of Solapur district of Maharashtra. She, in one of her *abhangas*, reproaches God for her status which doesn't permit her to enter the temple. She openly criticizes the spiritual transcendence of the caste and gender hierarchies from which there was no escape in everyday social life. She intends to target the religious philosophy of the Bhakti Movement, which provides an egalitarian devotional space that appeals to the most oppressed sections of society. Her awareness and caste consciousness of marginalized status in society situates her as one of the radical Dalit woman writers of recent times.

Like Soyarbai, Nangeli, a Dalit woman from the Ezhava caste, is one of the prominent figures in Dalit literature who seeks to draw close attention to society, which seeks to reduce her from a woman to an animal. In order to preserve her dignity, she opposes *mulakkaram* (Breast Tax on Dalit women) by cleaving her breasts and serving them to pay her tax to the society that determines the tax upon a woman, leering at its shape and dimensions to calculate the figure owed.

Dalit Feminism seeks to designate the place of Dalit women at both the intersections of caste and gender. The pace of Dalit women's literature until the 19th century was blurred, and on larger grounds, it was influenced by mainstream feminist writings. The unfair means of treating Dalit women by society were largely noticed and debated but subsequently ignored. To designate the voice to the miserable conditions of the Dalit women who suffered social discrimination and sought to draw a potent line to their voices through their autobiographies. *Karukku*, by Bama, under *Marginal* literature, in particular, *Dalit* literature, is one such widely read work. This was an autobiographical work by Bama, initially written in Tamil and then followed by translation into many languages like Malayalam, Telugu, Kannada, and English.

Bama, through *Karukku*, comprehends the pain she has experienced during her lifetime. To describe the plight of her inner struggle she makes a close line to the dehumanized, "The book was written as a means of healing my inward wounds; I had no other motive" (*Karukku* iv). Upon making a close connection between her Christian belief and practice, she reckons with acute firmness to resist the caste discrimination caused by patriarchal society and religion thus breaking her belief of the just society she experienced as a child. She narrates one of the incidents she experienced:

The elder (outcaste) went straight up to the Naicker(Upper-caste), bowed low, and extended the packet towards him, cupping the hand that held the string with his other hand. Naikar opened the parcel and began to eat the days. After I had watched all this, I went home...I told the story in comic detail. I fell about with laughter at the memory of the big man...But Anna was not amused. He said everybody believed that Naickers were upper caste and, therefore, must not touch Parayas. If they did, they would be polluted. That's why he had to carry the package by its string (*Karukku* 15).

Here, she witnesses a society that has no sense of regard for the Dalit community. She seeks to show how they have been treated as the 'other' human flesh or as robots that can be utilized to achieve personal gains.

Bama, amidst the tense and awful situations of quarrel and fighting between upper caste and lower caste communities, portrays the picture of women of her own community, 'the Parayas' and 'the Chaliyas,' who stand forth as a savior and manage to hide their men from the police. During their absence, these women perform all the acts and duties of their husbands. She states, "The Police were furious that the women were smart enough to continue working and taking care of their children even without their men" (40). Bama, in the novel, touches upon the issues of women performing all the roles of father and mother, as well as social and economic security.

The significant aspect of this autobiography throws light on 'religion', which, initially for six to seven years, adheres to and recounts her interests, but after experiencing its confinement, authority, and corruption, Bama distances herself away from it. Bama, being Dalit Christian, highlights how the festival celebration of their community was largely ignored and neglected by the upper caste community. She portrays the incident:

For some reason, the Nadar community would never join in on any of this. They never made any contribution towards the festival...when the procession went along their street, they only peeped at it as the Hindus did, and stayed inside their houses. They never joined in the Dalit celebrations (100).

Bama highlights the very ill effects of the society and education system, which acts totally opposite to its basic principles. In order to show the meek face of religious schools, she narrates:

I finished my education and started to work. By chance I took up a post at a school run by nuns...all the children who attended that school were from poor families. All three forth of them were from Dalit families...they ran a boarding school which was nominally for the sake of destitute children, but in fact they made those children do every menial task that was needed (103).

Bama stresses upon empowering the 'weak' sides of Dalits, where with a ray of hope, she gives a solution to overcome with humility, "Because we are born into the Paraya jati(caste), we are never given any honor or dignity or respect. We are stripped of that, but if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities" (17-18). She intends to prove that the whole world can change its attitude towards women if she, through education, empowers herself. She states how the attitude of her parents changed, which had earlier declined, and her father scolded her, "You listened to the nuns' advice and joined the college, so now ask them to give you money; go on, go to them" (75). While narrating her story, Bama stresses the attitude of her parents, "when they (parents) saw my marks, when they realized how alerted I was at my work, the teachers and nuns praised me, and a week later my mother brought me clothes, my box and my bedding" (75).

Bama, through her autobiographical sketching, has painted a picture of women who are brave, enthusiastic, and courageous enough to handle odd and tough situations. Throughout this autobiographical work, there is an evident transformation in a woman in the Paraya community who faced rejection, social discrimination, financial crisis, and emotional turmoil, but with never-ending hope and acute firmness, she stood against the system that questioned her honor and integrity as a Dalit woman.

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