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Reclaiming humanity: Dalit identity and resistance in Bama's literary vision

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Abstract

Although the practice of untouchability was constitutionally abolished and deemed illegal in India in 1950, Dalits continue to endure pervasive social and economic exclusion and discrimination. Dalit literature serves as a powerful medium, reflecting the authentic contours of feelings, thoughts, actions, and societal assumptions—both conscious and unconscious. In post-independence India, Dalit literature has emerged as one of the most significant literary movements, innovatively addressing the evolving identity crises that often elude precise articulation in conventional terms. This study examines the transitional ideas and perspectives articulated by Bama, focusing on her efforts to establish Dalit identity as fundamentally human identity. The analysis highlights the challenges and solutions presented in her works.

The author emphasizes the necessity of creative intervention to amplify the capacity for transformation. Such interventions catalyze a paradigm shift from silent passivity to active resistance among Dalits, fostering their progression towards enhanced social status, privilege, and recognition.

Keywords: Societal assumptions, transitional perspectives, resistance, liberation, Dalit identity

Introduction

Dalit literature transcends the boundaries of a mere literary trend, functioning as a robust social campaign that challenges injustice and aspires toward liberation. Its origins can be traced back to the 11th century, with Madara Chennaiah's writings exposing the oppressive conditions faced by Dalits. Over time, Dalit literary movements have deconstructed and critiqued dominant master narratives, fostering an alternative discourse. The organized Dalit movement began in 1958, inspired by the pioneering thinkers Bhimrao Ambedkar and Jyothiba Phule, whose works laid the foundation for critical engagement with caste-based oppression. Dalit writings extend beyond the Indian context, encompassing the struggles of marginalized communities worldwide, including minorities, backward classes, and other subjugated groups. The literature also addresses issues such as environmental exploitation, racial discrimination, gender marginalization, transgender rights, and the neglect of the elderly. As Thomas aptly states, "Dalit, rather than being a caste, can be regarded as a symbol of Change or Revolution" (Thomas 18).

Materials and Methods

Dr. Ambedkar's efforts to liberate Dalits in the early twentieth century stand as a seminal contribution to the genre. The Dalit Panthers, a vanguard group of activists and writers, furthered this cause through their incisive portrayals of Dalit lives. These narratives, often informed by personal experience, offered an authentic and unflinching account of the systemic injustices endured by the community. Bama's writings exemplify this genre, depicting the realities of slavery, oppression, and the overt and covert manifestations of caste discrimination. These works diverged from conventional literary forms, framing the quest for freedom, dignity, self-respect, and equality as central to democratic ideals. The collective struggle of untouchables to transition from a stigmatized identity to a self-defined Dalit identity marked a significant cultural and social transformation. The term "Dalit Literature" was first introduced during a Dalit conference in Bombay in 1958, and it gained widespread recognition in 1972 with the formation of the Dalit Panthers, an organization of young Marathi writers and activists.

This movement established a literary framework within which Dalit writings could be evaluated, prioritizing collective experiences and resistance over traditional literary aesthetics. Bama's work exemplifies this approach, characterized by its raw anger and defiant voice, which resist the torment of Dalit life.

As described by Navsarjan.org, Dalits have been subjected to cultural subjugation, political marginalization, and systemic oppression dictated by the principles of untouchability and notions of purity and pollution. These restrictions govern every facet of daily life, determining where Dalits may reside, whom they may associate with, and what roles they may occupy ("Who are Dalits?").

Bama's works navigate the entrenched caste hierarchies and the brutal realities of untouchability, vividly illustrating the plight of the downtrodden and their exploitation. She redefines Dalit identity not as a caste but as a marker of recognition, resilience, and shared experiences. Her literature integrates sociological perspectives, blending themes of resistance, upheaval, and scientific rationality, ultimately culminating in revolutionary discourse.

Discussion: The Quandary of Dalits Amidst Patriarchal and Caste Hierarchies

One of Bama's most significant contributions to Dalit literature is her use of Dalit-specific vocabulary. By employing the oral dialects of Dalit communities, Bama creates a distinctive voice in her writing. Her sentence structures mirror the speech patterns of Dalit women, lending authenticity and individuality to her narratives. Her works, such as *Karukku*, *Sangati*, and *Vanmam*, exemplify her confessional and conversational style, which deepens the reader's connection to her characters and themes.

Bama's texts vividly depict the lives of Dalit women—their resilience, humor, adaptability, and creativity. These women are portrayed as tireless individuals who shoulder dual responsibilities: managing domestic work and earning livelihoods. They often face these challenges alone, especially when male family members are unjustly detained by the police. Bama also valorizes the sense of solidarity and communal harmony within Dalit colonies, even amidst systemic exploitation and violence perpetuated by patriarchal structures.

Born in Puthupatti village, Virudunagar District, Tamil Nadu, Bama emerged as a prominent Dalit writer and activist, advancing Dalit discourse across India. Her seminal works, *Karukku* and *Sangati*, are autobiographical, revealing the pervasive discrimination faced by the Dalit community. *Karukku* critiques the systemic oppression of Dalits, particularly in religious and educational institutions, while *Sangati* exposes the entrenched casteism within the Church. *Vanmam*, her third novel, delves into the theme of internal conflicts among Dalit communities.

In *Karukku*, Bama recounts the oppression of Dalits by the Naickers, the landowning upper caste. She highlights the disparity in treatment between Dalit and upper-caste students in schools, where Dalit children were demeaned and subjected to menial tasks. Bama herself experienced such marginalization, recalling a false accusation of theft simply because of her Dalit identity.

Bama also narrates the discriminatory practices endured by Dalits in her village. For instance, in one account, an upper-caste woman mocked Gnanappu, a Dalit woman, by saying, "You are only fit to collect sniggers and slippers like

Chakkili Boys" (*Karukku*, p. 8) while she waited in line for water. Such incidents reveal the deeply ingrained prejudice faced by Dalits in daily life.

Through her grandmother's experiences, Bama illustrates the dehumanizing treatment meted out to Dalits. Her grandmothers, who worked as servants for Naicker families, were subjugated even by children of the upper caste, who ordered them around. Drinking water was poured from a height to avoid physical contact, and leftover food was tipped from a distance into Dalit vessels to prevent "pollution." Bama recounts:

"Both my grandmothers worked as servants for Naicker families... Even tiny children, born the other day, would call her by her name and order her about... The Naicker women would pour out the water from a height of four feet, while Patti and others received and drank it with cupped hands... She would behave as if she had been handed the nectar of the gods" (*Karukku*, p. 16).

These accounts vividly convey the systemic subjugation of Dalits and the normalized servitude enforced by caste hierarchies. Bama's outrage against these injustices is evident in her works, yet her family's response reflects the entrenched resignation of many Dalits:

"These people (Naicker) are Maharajas who feed us our rice. Without them, how will we survive? Haven't they been upper caste from generation to generation, and haven't we been lower caste? Can we change this?" (*Karukku*, p. 17).

Bama's narratives demand a critical examination of caste-based oppression and the enduring systemic inequalities faced by Dalit communities. Her works serve as a clarion call to challenge the entrenched societal norms that perpetuate such injustices.

Dalits as Victims of Systemic Oppression and Exploitation

As Bama highlights, Dalits endure relentless physical and psychological abuse. Efforts to assert their rights are frequently met with severe opposition from upper-caste communities, resulting in heinous atrocities such as torture, sexual violence, and massacres. Alarming, such incidents are often ignored by law enforcement agencies. Police authorities sometimes refuse to register First Information Reports (FIRs), and in certain instances, Dalits are falsely implicated in fabricated cases. These practices serve to deflect attention from the injustices perpetrated by the upper castes, often under political influence or corrupt practices, further compounding the marginalization of Dalits.

Bama narrates several instances that expose these systemic injustices. In *Karukku*, she recounts the ordeal of Mariamma, a Dalit woman subjected to harassment by an upper-caste landowner, Kumarasami Ayya. While gathering firewood one day, Mariamma stopped to drink water at a pump-set. Kumarasami Ayya accosted her, attempting to assault her. Although she managed to escape and confided in her friends, she was warned:

"Mariamma, it is best you shut up about this. If you even try to tell people what actually happened, you will find that it is you who will get the blame; it is you who will be called a whore... That landowner is an evil man fat with money. He is upper caste as well" (*Sangati*, p. 22).

Mariamma heeded the advice and remained silent, yet Kumarasami Ayya fabricated a story and lodged a complaint with the *Nattaamai* (village elder). He accused Mariamma and another Dalit, Manikkam, of indecent behavior. A

village meeting was convened, where the accused were brought forward but denied the opportunity to defend themselves initially. The assembly presumed the truthfulness of Kumarasami Ayya's accusations, reflecting the entrenched caste bias in such proceedings. When finally allowed to speak, Mariamma narrated the actual events and refuted the false accusations. However, the senior *Nattaamai* dismissed her claims, saying:

"In that case, did the mudalali lie to us in everything he said? You two had better be respectful, admit the truth, and beg pardon. Otherwise, we have no other way but to punish you severely" (*Sangati*, p. 23).

Despite her protestations, Mariamma was coerced into apologizing and, along with Manikkam, fined Rs. 200 and Rs. 100, respectively. The *Nattaamai's* concluding remarks underscored the pervasive gender and caste prejudices:

"It is you female chicks who ought to be humble and modest. A man may do a hundred things and still get away with it. You girls should consider what you are left with, in your bellies" (*Sangati*, p. 24).

This incident exemplifies the oppressive social structures that render Dalits voiceless. Dalits, often landless laborers, depend on upper-caste landlords for survival, which compels them to endure systemic exploitation. Resistance is silenced, as any attempt to seek justice risks further victimization. Bama further illustrates the stark social and spatial segregation within her village. The caste hierarchy dictated access to public spaces and services, with Dalit areas marginalized and devoid of essential institutions. She observes:

"We only went to their side if we had work to do there. But they never, ever, came to our parts. The post office, the Panchayat board, the milk depot, the big shops, the Church, the schools—all there stood in their streets. So, why would they need to come to our area? Besides, there was a big school in the Naicker street which was meant only for the upper-caste children" (*Karukku*, p. 7).

Through these narratives, Bama exposes the pervasive caste-based discrimination entrenched in social, economic, and institutional structures. Her works challenge readers to confront these injustices and reflect on the resilience of Dalits in the face of systemic oppression.

The Enduring Influence of the Caste System

The pervasive influence of the caste system in India is evident in its deep entrenchment within societal and cultural practices. Historically, the oppressed caste groups, often referred to as "untouchables," lacked the agency to challenge the practices of untouchability or demand their basic human rights. This reluctance stemmed from fears of being deemed anti-religious or blasphemous and a potential internalization of caste hegemony as a divinely sanctioned social order. The notion of "unity in diversity," often celebrated in the Indian context, appears paradoxical and illusory when juxtaposed with the rigid hierarchical stratification inherent in Indian society. This social segregation, based on notions of purity and impurity, reflects a deeply ingrained socio-cultural poison, primarily associated with Hinduism. However, its effects have transcended religious boundaries, influencing other faiths as well. Many from oppressed caste groups sought liberation through conversion to religions like Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam, perceiving these faiths as avenues for social equality and freedom from caste-based discrimination.

The caste system's divisive impact extended even to the Indian independence movement. The *Chaturvarnya* system restricted the right to bear arms to the *Kshatriya* caste, which constituted a small fraction of the population. This limitation weakened collective resistance against colonial imperialism. However, many Dalits who converted to other religions actively participated in the fight against imperialist forces, contributing significantly to India's struggle for independence. Ironically, post-independence, the resurgence of caste and religious discrimination highlights ongoing systemic oppression.

In contemporary India, caste discrimination has evolved to intertwine with religious intolerance. The ruling elites, often aligned with upper-caste Hindu ideologies, have targeted marginalized religious groups, particularly Muslims. This systemic targeting aims to weaken opposition through divisive strategies, with many unaware that such strategies ultimately undermine the broader social fabric. The increase in atrocities, often justified or overlooked by state apparatuses such as the police and judiciary, reflects a troubling regression in India's socio-political ethos.

A stark example of this regression is the incident involving Assamese photographer Bijoy Bonia, who was filmed assaulting a protester lying unconscious and bleeding from a chest wound. The complicity of law enforcement, as seen in the video, underscores the alarming protection afforded to perpetrators of violence against marginalized groups. Such incidents are not isolated; they represent a growing pattern of systemic violence and discrimination, illustrating how religion now often serves as a proxy for caste in perpetuating societal divisions.

Intersection of Caste and Religion in Modern Discrimination

Dalits, traditionally affiliated with Hinduism, have long faced relentless oppression. While many sought refuge in other religions to escape caste-based subjugation, the intersection of caste and religion has continued to fuel discrimination. Despite allegations of forced religious conversions propagated by modern commentators, historical evidence suggests that these conversions were voluntary acts of resistance against systemic inequality.

Bama's personal narrative exemplifies the complexity of caste and religious identity. Born into a Dalit Christian family, she grappled with the double standards of a society that discriminates on multiple axes. Her decision to become a nun led her to travel across India with Christian missions, but she soon encountered caste-based humiliation within the Church. Disillusioned, she left the convent, relinquishing her religious vocation and confronting profound existential questions about her identity and place in society. Through her writings and activism, Bama emerged as a symbol of resilience and empowerment for oppressed communities. She demonstrated that courage and determination can challenge entrenched systems of oppression, inspiring others to assert their dignity and rights. Her life and work underscore the urgent need for a more inclusive and equitable society, free from the shackles of caste and religious discrimination.

Conclusion

The discrimination based on caste, color, and religion is unequivocally prohibited in India, as enshrined in its constitution, reflecting the nation's commitment to equality

and justice. However, the current political landscape appears to be disrupting the peaceful conditions that have long been upheld. Scholars have been scrutinizing contemporary politics with a heightened sense of awareness and vigilance, keenly observing the steps taken by political leaders. A new agenda has emerged, aiming to marginalize minorities, particularly the economically and socially disadvantaged Muslim communities, from mainstream society. This agenda is receiving support from influential groups, who, ironically, remain unaware that they themselves may soon fall victim to the forces of fascism.

Ambedkar, in his critique of caste discrimination, asserts, "The Hindu will not believe in the quarters of the untouchables and will not allow the untouchables to live inside Hindu quarters. This is the fundamental practice and feature of untouchability as it is practiced by the Hindus. It is not a case of social separation... Putting the impure people inside a barbed wire into a sort of a cage. Every Hindu village has a ghetto. The caste Hindus live in the village, and the untouchables in the ghetto" (Busi, 1997:17). This stark reflection underscores the systemic segregation that has persisted for centuries.

It is incumbent upon every Indian citizen to disregard the agendas of select groups seeking to undermine the country's social fabric, as these efforts risk reintroducing the caste system in its most divisive form. Today, caste identity is being manipulated to consolidate power, with those indifferent to caste-based distinctions strategically marginalized. Caste, once again, has become a tool for political power. In this context, the political ideas and frameworks proposed by Bama are urgently needed to raise awareness among the general populace and challenge the current status quo.

As a researcher, I have identified that the lack of education remains one of the primary causes of the continued segregation of certain groups within society, although there are exceptions. For Dalits, the caste system has historically denied them fundamental human rights—religious, social, political, educational, and economic. The voices raised through literature and speeches, known collectively as Dalit Literature, serve as a powerful platform advocating for human rights, affirming Dalit identity, and protesting against all forms of oppression.

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