



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 8. Issue.2. 2021 (April-June)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

BAMA'S JUST ONE WORD: A DALIT FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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Article information

Received:29/4/2021
Accepted: 03/6/2021
Published online:11/06/2021
doi: [10.33329/ijelr.8.2.178](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.8.2.178)

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts a study on how Tamil dalit writer Bama delineates subjugation and exploitation of Dalit women and the way how they protest to all these kinds of injustice with special references to select short stories from her anthology of short stories "*Just One Word*", translated into English by Malini Sheshadri in 2018. Being a dalit feminist writer Bama introduces her readers to the lived experiences of dalit women with an ironical overtone interrogating the layers of marginalization and the female space they have been provided by the caste oriented patriarchal society. A dalit feminist perspective has been undertaken to study Bama's select short stories from her *Just One Word*.

Key words: dalit, feminism, exploitation, caste, patriarchy

Introduction

A Dalit woman is always at the margins of caste and gender; and hence they are doubly marginalized in Indian social scenario. But Dalit women's marginality was never supposed to be an issue of utmost concern either for the mainstream feminists or for the Dalit movements against caste based discriminations; and as a consequence of it dalit women initiated a movement of their own through which they tried to raise a voice of protest against all kinds of discriminations as well as exploitations. Dalit feminists could realize that the burden of caste and gender could be annihilated only by following what B. R. Ambedkar said "Study, organize and struggle". (p. 351) Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's speeches and thoughts had a great impact on these women. He encouraged dalit women to educate themselves so that they can fight against all humiliations as well as dominations by raising their voice of protest. Before the advent of Babasaheb in this scenario, Jyotirao Phule and his wife Savitribai Phule made a great contribution to educate women and lower caste people for the purpose of eradicating class as well as gender discriminations in the society. Indeed, Dalit women's voice has always been suppressed not only by the dalit men, but also by the mainstream feminists; yet they have been fighting against all kinds of barriers by taking to heart Ambedkar's threefold mantra to study, struggle and organize for the establishment of their own unique identity. As a consequence of it, Dalit women initiated a kind of revolution not only by contributing to the field of literature but also by engaging themselves in movements for their liberation. Dalit women started writing and they consider writing as a weapon, not only to establish their voices of protest, but also to record their own history, since official history denies their roles as well as viewpoints. The arising awareness of being positioned at the margins of their own families as well as in the socio-economic-political scenario instigates the dalit woman community to demand for a gender-just theory of their

own and in the formation of this theory we must acknowledge the foundational contributions of Sharmila Rege, Gopal Guru, Susie Tharu, Kanchana Mahadevan, V. Geetha, Meena Gopal, Mary E. John etc.

The 1990s is an epoch-making decade for feminist politics in India because during that period dalit women began to raise objections regarding their representation by the mainstream Indian feminism. The National Federation of Dalit Women formed in the 1990s in the state of Maharashtra and on 11th August 1995 at the national level at New Delhi. They argued that the questions of class and gender have been always the only priority of feminist discourse of India. The negligence of caste issue in the history and theory of feminism upsets dalit women, and hence dalit women community forwarded its steps towards formulating their own history as well as a theory by contributing their own writings. Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon, noted dalit feminists, contributed a remarkable book entitled *We Also Made History* which was originally written in Marathi and published in 2006, later on translated into English by Wandana Sonalkar in 2008. The book records the participation of dalit women in political and historical movements, and their experiences as dalit women while yearning for freedom. Indeed, Dalit women's writings focus on writing about their experiences of being a dalit woman in Indian society. Hence their writings are categorized as Dalit women's literature. In my research article, an emphasis will be given on examining the lived experiences of Dalit women. It will critically examine and analyze the kind of lives dalit women live in a caste based society. Indeed their lives are always with a 'difference' to that of the upper-caste women because they are at the margins of caste, class and gender. Besides being subjugated as a woman, a dalit woman has to suffer from the curse of caste that they inherit by birth. The caste that limits their means of livelihood by assigned occupations in a casteist society and it compels them to live a life of poverty. Thus dalit women are doubly marginalized in a society where gender and caste hierarchies are prominent. The concept of 'difference' is very much seminal in the formation of dalit feminist approach. This 'difference' is to be recognized as a 'difference' from Indian feminist philosophy arising from the caste perspective – a *Dalit difference*. Gopal Guru writes "Dalit women justify the case for talking differently on the basis of external factors (non-Dalit forces homogenizing the issue of Dalit women) and internal factors (the patriarchal domination within the dalits) (p.150). The phenomenon of 'talking differently' by dalit women helps in foregrounding the identity of dalit women. Another concept, 'intersectionality' has been adopted by dalit feminist theorists for interpreting the 'dalit difference'. The term was coined by legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw and the concept of intersectionality is actually based on Black women's 'difference' from race-privileged women. The first world feminist discourse failed to address the issues of Black women and in the same way Indian feminism ignores the issue of dalit women. Although the concept of intersectionality originated in Black feminist history and theory, it bears certain kinds of universal applicability. Intersection denotes a junctional point where two or more elements meet and in our Indian context, caste, gender and class would seem to constitute the crucial intersection of Dalit feminism. Intersectionality operates as a tool to observe and address the patriarchal injustices experienced by women from the margins of so called brahminical society.

Renowned Tamil Dalit feminist writer and teacher Bama, also known as Bama Faustina Soosairaj was born in a Roman Catholic family from Puthupatty in the then Madras state. Her literary oeuvre comprises of her autobiographical novel *Karukku* (1992), three more novels *Sangati* (1994), *Vanman* (2002) and *Manuci* (2017) along with two collections of short-stories: *Kusumbukkaran* (1996) and *Oru Tattvum Erumaiyum* (2003). Her immense literary contribution enriches the field of Dalit literature by giving voice not only to the marginalized Dalits but also to the doubly marginalized dalit women. Her critical delineation of caste stratification in Indian society and at the same time the way she uncovers the ugly face of patriarchy in a male dominated society is specific to her writings. Her *Just One Word* is a collection of fifteen short stories, translated by Malini Seshadri into English language and first published in 2018. Most of Bama's short stories are written in third person and all these stories chronicle the lives of those people with whom she has lived her life. In most of her stories she has portrayed female protagonists who fight against discrimination raising a voice of protest to build up their own identity in the society.

Discussion

In an interview with Jaydeep Sarangi, Bama was asked about the need of a separate term 'Dalit Feminism' and in response she said:

Feminism in India emphasizes the empowerment of women in general in terms of equality in all its dimensions. It is true that all women all over the world suffer because they are women. In India the problems faced by Dalit women are entirely different from that of non-Dalit women. In the Indian context, women suffer a lot in the family because it is man-centred; in the society because it is patriarchal and male-chauvinistic, and religion justifies and legitimizes both these unjust institutions and mind-sets favoring men alone. In addition to these, Dalit women face other problems because our society is not only a male –dominated society, but it is an upper-caste male-dominated society. Due to untouchability and caste based violence and atrocities Dalit women are tortured and humiliated even by upper-caste women. So, the term ‘feminism’ in India is not enough to encompass the liberative perspectives, aspirations, values, convictions and dreams of Dalit women. How can any ideology of emancipation and empowerment that does not include the annihilation of caste in its agenda and is not committed to the task of restoring the self-esteem and self respect of Dalit women who do not have equal social status like other non-Dalit women, make any sense to us? Therefore I feel we need separate term ‘Dalit feminism’.

(*Conversations with Writers*)

Besides in her essay “Dalit Women: Problem and Prospects” Bama writes that our society is an upper caste male-dominated society and a Dalit woman’s problems is unique because she is a dalit among dalits. Moreover she writes that patriarchy is a power relationship in an Indian society by which women’s labor, sexuality and fertility are controlled and it results in the subordination of women. (Bama, p. 329)

According to Dalit feminists, mainstream feminist movement is hierarchal, brahminic, and dominated by upper castes and so they questioned the foundation of mainstream feminism in India arguing that the question of class and gender have always been the only priority of Indian feminist discourse. The question of caste and gender was marginalized in the approach of mainstream feminism. Dalit women are oppressed through internal and external patriarchy. In other words, while internal patriarchy stands for the oppression of dalit women by dalit men, external patriarchy denotes to the oppressions of dalit women caused by non-dalit men and non-dalit women. The day to day violence and discrimination of dalit women on the basis of caste is part of the external patriarchy. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in his analysis of caste considers patriarchy as the twin sister of brahminism. The nature of Indian patriarchy is ‘brahminical’ and keeping it in view Dr. Ambedkar coined the term ‘Brahminical patriarchy’ or ‘graded inequality’. The concept of ‘Brahminical Patriarchy’ does not refer to the patriarchal practices followed by Brahmin men. Instead it represents the multiform nature of patriarchy against women in India. By definition, when a person, irrespective of her caste or gender, who believes, practises, preaches or encourages any kind of discrimination based on the hierarchical structure would be considered as a follower of brahminism. According to Dr. Ambedkar, it is not necessarily Brahmins who practise brahminism, the way it doesn’t require a man to practice misogyny.

In *Wherever You Look*, Bama points her weapon like pen to that particular society where educated and civilized people supply fuels to caste stratifications in India. In the story we can have an idea how beautifully Bama has shown the way a dalit women is humiliated by a non-dalit women; thus practising so called brahminical patriarchy. Whereas in classrooms, teachers teach their students the slogans of equality by annihilating caste stratifications in society, but in reality they practise caste discrimination in their day to day events of life. It is quite evident in case of Kamalavalli who was humiliating her colleague Kanniyamma for using her plate in her absence. It was because Kanniyamma belonged to a lower caste; in spite of all her education Kanniyamma was unable to receive her portion of respect only because she did not belong to a high caste. Kamalavalli even did not invite Kanniyamma to her daughter’s marriage either because it is thought that Kanniyamma’s presence in the wedding would be inauspicious. When Kamalavalli came to know that Kanniyamma used her plate for lunch in her absence, she became furious and started shouting:

“... These SC donkeys are getting bolder these days. Otherwise, would that wretch have dared to use my plate? Just because she has got a smattering of an education, does she think she can eat off my plate? After all, however high a sparrow tries to fly, it can never become an eagle. That woman needs to be reminded of that.” (*Wherever You Go*, p.114)

But this same Kamalavalli was teaching in a class after sometime on the topic of Subramania Bharati's poem urging social revolution. She taught to the students that there is no such thing as caste and it is a sin to talk of high castes and low castes. Indeed Bama delineates the irony throughout this situation. That is why she writes:

Who knows what Kamalavalli felt as she taught these words to her students? May be in her stubborn mind she turned her indignation on the long dead Subramania Bharathi! (*Wherever You Go*, p.116)

Bama herself is a committed teacher and the events that she has delineated throughout these characters in the story are indeed from the experiences of her own life. We can notice that the grip of caste in our society surpasses the value of education in some contexts as portrayed in her *Wherever You Look*. Babasaheb Ambedkar urged dalits to educate, agitate and organize themselves so that they can fight for their rights as well as identity. Surly education provided Kanniyamma a means of her livelihood and a status of honor in the society outwardly, but the caste stratification in our society is so deeply rooted in our society that the upper caste people are unable to accept them as their equals and so they are unable to treat dalits fairly. It is felt that sometimes education fails to provide self-esteem to dalits. But if we notice the character of Kanniyamma we can understand how stable she was in her use of words and behavior towards Kamalavalli who was so harsh to speak against Kanniyamma at a trivial thing like using her plate for lunch only. The way Kamalavalli behaved with Kanniyamma actually exposed her ego, arrogance and irrationality for being an upper-caste, but in reality it degrades Kamalavalli's own self-respect for being an uncivilized educated woman. A teacher is regarded as a reformer of the society, but in the same society we often come across some teachers who actually support in prevailing discrimination in the society and indeed they are like barriers in the development of a healthy society. The experience Kanniyamma had is the same experience of all dalit women at their workplace; in spite of being highly educated they have to face caste discrimination at some point of time in their life. A woman can experience how discrimination affects people because she always faces gender discrimination in a society, and it is obviously very depressing when a woman discriminates another woman for being a dalit woman.

In another story *Loss*, Bama tries to encapsulate a single dalit woman's experience while searching for a place on rent since she has been transferred to another school of different location. While searching for the same she had to undergo many obstacles and hardships of reality for being a dalit as well as a single woman:

"I was a school teacher in a small village in Ramanathapuram district and I was transferred to a school in another small village on the outskirts of Madras. I still remember those anxious days of searching... searching endlessly for a place to take on rent. No one would take me as a tenant because of my caste. Add to that the fact that I was a single woman working and living by myself... and all doors were closed to me." (*Loss*, p.60)

Gradually she owned a land and there she built a house of her own; and indeed it was a kind of great satisfaction on her part because the house stands as a testimony of her freedom and control over her destiny. The house encourages her to be who she is and to be free within her own space.

In a typical patriarchal society, women are considered as objects to be dominated or exploited who can never possess an identity with dignity, except being someone's daughter or wife or a human like machine to produce children. Gender discrimination is in practice in Indian social system and hence it is most often noticed that girl children are neglected whereas boys are nourished with utmost care because it is believed that only a boy can take all the responsibilities of a society as well as family. There are numerous incidents in India about female infanticide and it is the consequence of only the kind of patriarchal thinking among the people in India. Emphasizing on this kind of issues Bama has written her story *Wailing*. In the story the narrator Mallika's heart feels heavy after reading some news on growing instances of female infanticide. Meanwhile she experienced an incident that happened in a bus and she was one of the witnesses in that particular bus. Mallika saw that a young girl, may be sixteen or seventeen, gave birth to a girl child in the bus and therefore the bus had to move towards a hospital so that the baby and mother both can be admitted. But there inside the bus, Mallika noticed the attitude of the woman accompanied with the young girl was not that favorable when she asked the woman why they could not manage a taxi instead of going through a hard time on the bus. In response she said to Mallika;

“Oh, just shut up. Don’t stir up our resentment further. At least if it had been a boy, we could have arranged a taxi...we could have arranged everything else needed. For her to deliver this girl this is enough. If she’d had the wretched child at home, we could have avoided all the expenses of nurse and ayah and this and that....” (*Wailing*, p. 141-142)

In her story *Durga*, Bama has interwoven a portrait of a woman who has been a victim of domestic violence. Durga is a small girl whose front teeth are broken and when her teacher asks her the reason behind her broken teeth she says;

“..., when I was a small child... my Appa and my Amma had a fight, you see. And my Appa started hitting my Amma and he wouldn’t stop... he went on hitting and hitting her... so I went and clung to my father’s legs and I was crying and begging him to stop hitting Amma. Appa picked me up and threw me across the room... and my face hit the floor hard. That is how my front teeth fell out.” (*Durga*, p.126)

This incident in the story exemplifies how women are treated by their husbands within their family if something unfavorable happens. Besides this, one thing can be noticed that girl children are not given much importance in their families. Durga’s mother represents all those silenced women who are bearing with all these violence caused by their husbands against them. But Durga expresses her determination to be a police officer in future so that she will stop her Appa from beating her Amma.

Again, her another story *Corpse* is set up in a newly formed colony of ten families where people of different castes and religions live together harmoniously. Although it seems that they live in harmony, but the fact is that caste discrimination was still in practice in that area. In the story the families of Chokalingam and Sankaralingam belong to dalit community, while Pachaimma’s family belongs to a high caste. Time has changed now, dalits or low caste people are no more poor and uneducated. Pachaimma did not invite them to their son’s engagement because she felt that their presence on that occasion will be inauspicious. And this decision of Pachaimma created dissatisfaction among all the neighbours in the colony. In the story, Bama did not stay away from adding an irony in it. Pachaimma invited Gomathi, a teacher from another town to her son’s engagement assuming her to be of a high caste and also hoped to get some rupees from her as gift in the engagement. But somehow after the engagement was over, she came to know from one of her friends that Gomathi was belonged to a low caste and it shocked Pachaimma terribly that “her face turned ashen, like a corpse” (p. 55). The things from which she tried to get rid of, actually all are running after her.

Conclusion

Indeed we can see that dalit women’s lives are different from upper caste women, just because they are born as untouchables. The life they live is at the intersections of caste and gender; Bama has made an attempt to delineate this intersectional experiences with the help of female dalit characters in her select short stories. In all select stories of *Just One Word*, it is clearly noticeable that Bama’s central characters are female and most of them are delineated as protestors against discriminations rather than mere oppressed beings. A dalit woman must overcome these discriminations in a society in order to uplift the society with socio-political and economic reform. For that she has to raise her voice of protest urging for an identity that defines her dignity as well as self-esteem. Bama’s writings yearn for such dignity.

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