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IDENTITY CRISIS IN BAMA'S SANGATI AND KARUKKU

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Abstract

Women novelists have played a vital role in enhancing the quality and quantity of the Indian literature. Dalit literature gives expression to the voices of dalits and tries to construct dalit's identities differently from the already existing elitist notion of a dalit identity. Bama's Sangati foregrounds multi-layered oppression of Dalit women. Karukku becomes an attempt to break the existing tradition and to identify ways of defining one's own identity. Dalit is deeply concerned with identity formation and its assertion to regain the self-confidence, self-work of the marginalized section in our society.

Keywords: Identity, Crisis, Dalit women, Discrimination

Women novelists have played a vital role in enhancing the quality and quantity of the Indian literature. The prolific women novelists are Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Manju Kapur and Bama. These writers study the problems of women in a patriarchal structure where men are the dominant sex and the cultural construction and social mechanism preserve gender inequality. As literature is an ardent vehicle for reflecting the society. Dalit literature gives expression to the voices of dalits and tries to construct dalit's identities differently from the already existing elitist notion of a dalit identity. In her famous novels *Karukku* and *Sangati* Bama's writing mostly comes under Dalit literature. Dalit literature gives expression to the voices of dalits and tries to construct dalit's identities differently from the already existing elitist notion of a dalit identity. The self-respect and identity are the manifest forms of the identity of the Dalit Women. Bama's *Karukku* was published in Tamil in 1992 and *Sangati* in 1994. *Karukku* is a voice of an individual.

In *Karukku* and *Sangati*, Bama foregrounds multi-layered oppression of Dalit women. She focuses against on the 'work that is routinely done by Dalit Women both at home and outside. She explores how violence against Dalit women is decriminalized and systematized by state, family, church and upper caste communities. Her fiction documents how Dalit women struggled and get exploited at home and outside, are subjected to violent treatment by upper caste landlords, the panchayat, the police as well as by Dalit man within their homes. In her representation of Dalit women, Bama

presents Dalit women primarily as workers who join the work force right from girlhood and toil through. *Karukku* becomes an attempt to break the existing tradition and to identify ways of defining one's own identity. In this process of developing deep into the past Bama identifies herself with the Dalit community which almost becomes as expansion of her own self.

Bama's *Sangati* is a record on the predicament of Dalit Women as the victims of domestic violence and two fold discrimination- as women and as Dalits in all the domains. The narrator, Pathima, says that discrimination starts right from the birth of the children. Boys are treated specially and are given more care and attention than the girls. When the boy baby cries, instantly he is picked up to be fed. He is breastfed for a longer duration than the girl babies. When they grow up also they are given more respect and given first preference. Pathima's 'Patti' says, "If you are born to this world, it is best you were born a man. Born as woman what good do we get?" (SE 6-7). Girl children are trained from their childhood to obey the menfolk, and they are conditioned that they are ignorant and are inferior to their men. The little girl Maikkanni's life reveals that the ordeal for the women starts even during their childhood: "The day Maikkanni learnt to walk, she started to work as well" (70). In addition to looking after the siblings, the girl children have to work in their capacity as daily wagers. Pathima's Patti affirms: "Once you are born a woman, can you go and confront a group of four and five men? should you even do it? ... What do we know about justice? From your ancestors times it has

been agreed that what the men say is right" (28-29).

Bama's *Karukku* focuses on two aspects namely caste and religion that caused great pain in Bama's life. *Karukku* was a reaction to the personal crisis in the author's life and the second thing is that the author gives expression to her experiences in life as a woman, Christian and Dalit. It is true that Bama wrote *Karukku* just after leaving the convent. Naturally it addresses the burning issues of identity that Bama faced during that period of crisis. Answering a question in an interview published in Mathrubhoomi Bama observes:

Karukku is my first published book. It was to a great extent autobiographical. It has to face severe opposition when it was published. Actually it was not intended for publication. I wrote about the atrocities that I faced in my life. I was a teacher. I resigned my job and joined the convent to become a Nun. I came out after seven years as I could not adjust with the life there. Those were the days in which I suffered a lot in my life. I lost my job and had no other way to live. I don't know what to do...I even though that I was unfit to live in this society. My individuality has undergone total transformation during the 'formation' period. It was very difficult to come back to normalcy. I though my thoughts needed an outlet. That is how I started writing. (Translation mine, 15)

It is clear from the above observation that the chief source of creative tension in Bama's *Karukku* is the identity crisis that she experienced during a decisive situation in her life. Emanating from the crisis that originate from the discriminatory treatment that she faced because of her paraya background, *Karukku* traces the development of Bama from an ordinary village girl to a 'Dalit' woman committed to fight for the cause of the Dalit community. The book describes Bama's life from childhood to adulthood. The first person narrative expresses the daunting experience of caste discrimination from the stand point of Dalit women. When Bama was studying in the third standard, she has seen the discriminations in her locality. She saw an elderly man carries a package without touching it.

".....He came along, holding out the packet by its string, without touching it. I stood there thinking to myself, if he holds it like that, won't the package come undone, and the

vadai fall out? The elder went straight up to the Naicker, bowed low and extended the packet towards him, cupping the hand that held the string with his otherhand. Naicker opened the parcel and began to eat the vadais". (13)

Later, Bama understood that she and her communities were prohibited by Hinduism and were cursed to remain as poor, cloth washer, cobbler, the one who cleans dead animals, conveys death news, grave digging and drumbeat announcer.

Bama remembers her experience as a farm worker. Even though Bama went to school, she worked as a labourer for daily wages to meet her expenses. There is also double vessels system. Dalits were asked to stand away from the vessels of the Naickers when they give leftovers.

....I knew I should not touch their goods or chattels: I should never come close to where they were, I should always stand away to one side. These were their rules. I often felt pained and ashamed....(46)

The personal voice of Bama, in *Karukku*, becomes the "collective voice" of the community, through the usage of the first person narrative "I". The narrator of the story is unidentified and unnamed till the end (although the readers understand that it is Bama herself). Because there is no specific person designated to the word "I" the narrative becomes personal as well universal at the same time. It becomes a direct narration of the Dalit. Thus by narrating the story in the first-person, Bama finds her own voice, which she eventually transmits to her community- the voice of an individual thus becomes the voice of an entire community that has been silenced for centuries.

The highest purpose of Dalit writing is not beauty of craft, but authenticity of experience. Most significant attribute is that the Dalit literature displays Dalit consciousness. Dalit is deeply concerned with identity formation and its assertion to regain the self-confidence, self-work of the marginalized section in our society. To elaborate the real life of Dalit community through their literature and positive steps towards equality, the paper analyses the journey of oppressed or untouchables in India who are deprived of identity and equality through Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati*.

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