

# Survival to Self – Confidence: Valiant Dalit Women Character in Bama’s Short Story *Chilli Powder*

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## Abstract

*Dalit literature is established itself as a separate class of writing in several of the Indian languages. Aspects of Dalit literature have become more effective concentrating on caste, class, and gender. The prominence of Dalit writings is to explore the suffering of Dalits with experience. Especially the woman Dalit writers concentrated on the sociocultural and economic aspects of Dalit women. The present paper aims to explore the valiant Dalit women character. Chilli Powder is the short story written by the celebrated contemporary Dalit woman writer Bama. Her short story collection Kisumbukkaran written in Tamil language and it was translated into the English language as HarumScarum Saar & Other Stories by N. Ravi Shankar. The story explores the Dalit women’s self-confidence. Though they belong to an outcast they try to overcome the oppression. They execute various traits to protest themselves.*

**Keywords:** Dalit, Oppression, Gender, Survival, Self-confidence.

Bama is the first Tamil Dalit woman writer born in Puthupatti village in Viruthunager district in Southern Tamil Nadu. Her novels *Karukku*, *Sangati*, *Vanmam* and a jewel-like collection of short stories *Kisumbukkaran* are originally written in the Tamil language. Her first novel is an autobiographical novel translated into English and many different languages. This novel received the Crossword Award twice for the English translation. The second novel *Sangati* focuses on the plight of women and girls of her community. The third novel *Vanmam* deals with “intra-dalit strife”<sup>1</sup>. The first two novels are translated from Tamil to the English language by the famous Lakshmi Holmstrom and the third novel is translated into the English language by Malini Seshadri. The short stories collection ‘Kisumbukkaran’ is translated into English as *Harum-Scarum Saar and Other Stories*. The collection arises many Dalit issues.

“Bama’s writings embody Dalit feminism and celebrate the inner strength and celebrate the inner strength of the subaltern woman in the throes of caste domination and social discrimination.”<sup>2</sup>

*Chilli Powder* is a short story about the grudge and dispute between two women who belong to two different castes. Though women share many gender discriminations

in general, women always try to find further discriminations to degrade other women based on the caste system.

Gangamma, a privileged caste woman who owns a palatial bungalow, orchards and nearly sixty acres of fertile land. Everyone in the colony is scared of Gangamma. Pachayamma, belongs to an outcast and a bold woman protagonist in the story. The conflict between Gangamma and Pachayamma begins when Pachayamma enters Gangamma’s mango orchard to cut the grass. After cutting the grass Pachayamma feels hungry, plucks two mangoes and begins to eat them. Meanwhile, Gangamma appears. On seeing Gangamma, Pachayamma hides the mangoes. Unafraid of the landlady she seeks Gangamma’s help to lift the bundle of grass on to her head. Gangamma becomes furious on her request and Pachayamma runs away skilfully taking the bundle of grass from Gangamma’s sight.

“That woman got so furious she was swaying like an elephant calf gone mad! Don’t know from where I got the courage, I held my breath, heaved the bundle onto my head and half walking, half running, rushed back here.” (HSS. P.31)

Being a Dalit woman, she is not scared of Gangamma, instead, she seeks help from the owner of the

landwhere she trespasses and cuts the grass. she narrates how skilfully she cut the grass and escaped from the Gangamma's sight. Gangamma's weakness is Pachayamma's strength because Gangamma is huge. She can't run like Pachayamma.

In another context, Pachayamma shows her courage to Gangamma is that after few days pachayamma enters Gangamma's field with three other women from her street to cut the grass. When they were engaged in cutting the grass Gangamma enters the field calmly. She abuses Pachayamma and provokes this as a crime and throws chilli powder into the eyes of Pachayamma. Gangamma amusingly says

"You thieving wretch, is it because you have no other place to go to that you come here and slit my throat?" (HSS P.32)

She wants to teach Pachayamma a lesson that not to enter into the fields of her own and others too even for small things. She wants to discourage the courage of Pachayamma on the concept of 'nip it in the bud'. Pachayamma is a lesson to all the outcast people especially women. They don't want to lose an inch of their possessions.

Instead of irresistible and silent like other Dalit women, Pachayamma reacts aggressively by showering verbal abuse on Gangamma.

"Chi ! can you be called a woman?  
Throwing chilli powder in my eyes  
Cutting grass that grows on its own? Is there such a harvest of fruits and vegetables here that we will come and steal them?" (HSS. P.32)

This shows Pachayamma's fearlessness towards the privileged caste woman Gangamma. Both Gangamma and Pachayamma continue abusing each other. Pachayamma teases Gangamma with a nickname as *molagappodi*. Then onwards Pachayamma and other women started mocking Gangamma irritatingly as *molagappodi*.

"The woman would get so furious at just a mention of the word, but pachayamma and other women enjoyed themselves by repeatedly saying *molagappodi* in her presence."  
(HSS. P.33)

When the colony people express an unfavorable opinion for Pachayamma's behavior towards Gangamma. Then she questions,

"where else do we go for grass to feed the

cattle we survive on? As if she owns some special kind of fields that no one else in the world has!" (HSS P.33)

Meanwhile, in another incident, Pachayamma and a group of street women go in search of work in the forest where they could not find any work so they return home with disappointment. She feels about their meal for that day. Pachayamma says,

"No work, no wages! Don't know what I'm going to cook the meal with today. What kind of life is this! You get kanji only if you work! Otherwise, you just drink some water and go to sleep." (HSS P.34-35)

While returning home Pachayamma plucks the full-grown pods from the cotton plants. The other women also start plucking the pods. Without any hesitation, they start plucking the cotton pods from the Gangamma's farm. Gangamma takes revenge on Pachayamma by deceiving her with a group of women while plucking cotton pods from her plantation. With her economic power Gangamma appears with two policemen who had come to her street on some work. Despite police presence, Pachayamma dares to talk on Gangamma's reprisal attitude. The other women plead Pachayamma to keep quiet to avoid the risk. They say,

"Ei... keep quiet, akka. For once, don't spoil everything by talking too much!  
Compromise, think of how to get home now. See, finally we got caught today!" (HSS P.36)

After an investigation, the women are forced to go to the police station by Gangamma's tractor. On their way to the police station, the women started blaming each other for their situation. Pachayamma intervenes and makes them keep quiet. She says

"Why are you quarrelling with each other now? Are they going to cut our heads off at the station? Take it easy, women!" (HSS P.36)

Even though Gangamma knows the pathetic condition of the Dalit women which they plucked pods from her plantation she makes it a criminal offense. With her economic and political influence, she makes the policemen take the poor women to the police station in a tractor.

"And so all the women were loaded onto Gangamma's tractor and taken to the police station." (HSS P.36)

On the way, Pachayamma asks permission to pee but she is not allowed. On reaching the station, she lifts her clothes and pees right there in the police station without any hesitation.

"When they reached the station the policemen ordered them to get down. As soon as she did, Pachayamma quickly lifted her clothes and peed right there, standing up." (HSS P.38)

Fed up with the activities of the women, the policeman asks a fine of Rs. 10 from each of them for which they answer sarcastically thus,

"What a joke! We can't even buy some broken rice to make kanji at home and he demands ten rupees! Ten rupees! Whom are you trying to fool? We don't have a single coin to buy even a small packet of snuff, you know that!"

(HSS P.38)

The women give him an option that they will pay money in the next day after coming from work in the evening if the inspector allows them to work. This shows their confidence in leading an independent life. The inspector looked at the women and warns them not to repeat the stealing and asks them to leave the station. On the way back, the Dalit women themselves identify the power of their unity in destroying power.

"I am letting you go this time! But if you repeat it once more, I'll put all of you in the lock-up...Now, get out!" (HSS P.39)

The women are back to their houses and everyone in the colony wondered how they are released so quickly from the station. Pachayamma answers everyone who criticized their visit to the police station. She attains that especially human beings who are weak can survive only by expression. She says,

"What do you know? These days, if we don't speak up, they will come and fart right into our mouths..." (HSS P.40)

The attainment and maintenance of challenging the systems show the superwoman in Pachayamma. The caste system in our country is the source of subjugation and suppression on Dalits. But nowadays the Dalits started to protest the oppression. According to Dalit critic Ruth Manorama, "the word Dalit became a symbol of assertive pride and resistance to the linked oppression of caste and class."<sup>3</sup>Bama concentrates on the caste system and the problems of Dalit women. The caste system is a silent and hidden action of caste and opposes its politics by recommending for rewriting the history of Dalits for nourishing relations amongst people.

### References

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