



NARRATION OF THE SELF: A STUDY OF BAMA'S *KARAKKU* AND *SANGATI* IN A SUBALTERNIST PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Literature is the articulation of emotions. The language used in different genres communicates the writers' own experiences, their thoughts and feelings. When literary works are analysed one can perceive that the literary outputs and culture are interrelated. The beliefs, values, lifestyles, habits all can manipulate ones culture. This paper tries to explore the relationship between language and culture in a subalternist perspective, taking into consideration Dalit literature, especially Tamil Dalit Literature. The humiliating experiences the Dalits face from the domineering class, the brutalities they have to endure under the clutches of Caste Hindus, all forced these subalterns to form their own literary movement. The lack of education, and the so called 'uncivilized' ways made their literary language also a reason for disdain. Yet the silent fury of Dalits which was deep rooted in their culture, brought down by the age old suppression is articulated in their writings. Tamil Dalit Writer Bama through her writings gives a mirror image of the lamentable and desperate state of Dalits. Analysing two works of this author *Karakku* which is autobiographical and *Sangati* which can be claimed as the autobiography of a community, one can identify how culture and language of an alienated society are interrelated.

Key Words: Language, Culture, Alienation, Subaltern, Dalits.

Introduction

We live in a world of differences, a world where the language we use, the culture we inculcate all are diverse. Interestingly ones language and culture have a crucial part in defining ones identity. Language when simply defined is a group of words which are articulated to communicate, but it is a sign of our social identity. It helps to share thoughts, emotions and opinions. Culture on the other hand grooms the language we use. Ones culture is greatly influenced by ones social background, likes, dislikes, habits, believes etc. It is built upon the ways of living and is transmitted from one generation to another. It is often cited that Culture is that complicated totality, in which are included knowledge,

confidence, art, moralities, laws, customs and all other efficiencies which a man is forever striving to achieve as member of a community. The shared aspects of culture are language, religion, celebrations, food, clothing, all which are part of one's heritage. Among these aspects the most intrinsic factor is language. Language is the best means by which one can convey and preserve ones tradition and shared values.

As a result of historical events, human migration and variety of different features there is cultural and linguistic diversity among the people of a nation. So to preserve the culture, to preserve the language is also essential in a multi linguistic society. It's quite an interesting area of study that while on

one side people try to preserve ones language and culture, on the other side there is a disappointing picture of the suppression of the language of the subalterns by the hegemonic group. In order to marginalize the minority, the majority used a policy of suppressing the language. As a result of colonization and migration a large number of the world's language has been lost. Contrary to this there is a group of people who were brought to the mainstream during the colonial period; Dalits or the so called outcastes. The age old custom of caste system denied them entrance to the limelight and it was during the colonial period education become available to them.

Discussion

The literature of a community is a replica of their culture. The languages they use in the literary outputs show their literary as well as artistic heritage. Dalit literature which is actually an outpour of the trials and tribulations of the outcastes, which is a testimony of the sufferings of the 'other', is distinct because of the so called colloquial and uncivilized language they use. The Dalit language goes against the established codes of a standard language they use. It goes against the established codes of a standard language which is considered pure and divine.

The language used by a person is determined by the socio-cultural environment in which he was brought up and the educational upbringing. Dalits who are victims of the evil practice of caste system in India were deliberately denied higher education, and it made their language different from the textual language used by the upper castes. In ancient times education was imparted in Sanskrit and the Dalits were forbidden from learning and speaking Sanskrit. If somebody from their caste dared to be bold enough to learn and speak it they were castigated. They could only use Prakrit. As education was denied to them, it also restrained them to think about the true essence of their life and to raise their voice for their rights. This has strengthened the political domination of the upper castes. The Dalits did not get any recognition and their talents were ignored deliberately. Even in this modern era when a Dalit showed to be

resourceful it is attributed to the policy of reservation.

In order to portray this plethora of discernment, the subalterns found their literary output as the mirror image of their life. They do not have to use ornate language, to convey their anguish and pain; they could reflect it in the most unembellished words. If Dalit literature in its incipient level was just a means to outpour their sorrows later it has become a positive assertion of Dalit values. Arjun Dangle, the editor of *Poisoned Bread* which is a collection of Dalit discourses writes, "Dalit literature is not simply literature. It is associated with a movement to bring about change. It represents the hopes and ambitions of a new society, new people" (266). "By Dalit Literature, I mean writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness. The form of Dalit literature is inherent in its Dalitness, and its purpose is obvious, to inform Dalit society of its slavery and narrates its pain and suffering to Upper Caste Hindus" (Limbal 19).

Dalit poets have created their own poetics contrary to the traditional Brahminical poets. A lexicon rich in community dialects, slang and rarely known usages and sayings made bizarre feeling to the so called elite group. Dalit writers of fiction and autobiography have redrawn the entire scenario of Indian literature and discovered and explored many so far unlit areas of experience. They rewrote everything in the marginalized character's perspective, forcing the rest of the society to look critically at their own traditions and practices. "The lack of art and artifice in Dalit literature compensated for by the lived reality and candid expression directed at the polite conscience of high society, high literature and high theory (Abedi 140)". Dalit literature is based on anubhava and not anumana. Dalit writing which reflects the outrage of the down trodden, who is fed up with the humiliation and debasements from the society may appear to be full of negative energy. But on the other hand it is a positive symbol of revolt and protest of a bold uprising. It shows the birth of a new being who was reduced to animal servility by the so called upper class who handles the power

strata. In other words it is breaking the silence which was enforced for centuries.

Dalit autobiography is the most important tool of Dalit literature. They are narratives of the self. It transforms an experience of pain into a narrative of resistance. These narratives do not isolate the individual from his environment, family, community and society at large. Moreover the oppression, struggle, assertion and quest for identity of the narrator seem associated with the society. They are expression of the reality of human life in a perspicuous language.

The history of Dalit Literary Movement is centuries old but the Little Magazine Movement around 1960's and the motivation gained from the Black Panther's Movement of America gave an impetus to Dalit writers. The movement started in Maharashtra and it slowly spread to other states like AndhraPradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. While analyzing the various type of Dalit protests occurred throughout India, the dissent of the Dalit women must also be taken into consideration. The Dalit women in India suffer from dual disadvantage, of being a Dalit and of being a woman. The sexual violence they had to encounter under the Zamindari system is distressing. One particular quality that makes Dalit women stand apart is that, amongst all the sufferings and humiliations they face, they stand united as a community. In most cases they are the sole bread winners. They do not look upon their husbands as providers and protectors. The perseverance they show among all the odd factors is worth mentioning. The indignation they face from the Caste Hindus and the domestic violence they suffer from their husbands in this patriarchal world are well reflected in the writings of Dalit women. The writings of Dalit writers like Rajat Rani Meenu, Kaveri, Sushila Takhur, Raj Bharari, Tara Parmar; Meghana Pathe, Bama and Sivakami were tales of survival and rebellion.

Dalit voice in literature could not find its distinct place in Tamil Literary domain until late 1980's, but its growth was meticulously fast. The Dalit identity was subsumed by these writers with a class identity. They used different genres as their mouthpiece to show the hegemony of Caste Hindus upon Caste Subalterns.

Critics condemn these literatures of lament, but they too have a central place within the creative core. Tamil Dalit literature is characterized by the call for self identity and assertion. It tramples all conventions with its intensely personal expression, is concerned with the life of the subaltern, and deals out a stark brutality. This literature should be viewed not as a literature of vengeance or literatures of hatred, but a literature of freedom and greatness. (Abedi 13)

The profound interconnectedness between the caste identity and the self of the speaking subject arises largely because of the oppressed position of the subject. Tamil Dalit writer Bama's writings portray the feeling of otherness by the caste subalterns and how Dalit writing can be perceived as a strategy of resistance against social oppression. Analysing two works of this author *Karakku* which is autobiographical and *Sangati* which can be claimed as the autobiography of a community, does one can identify how the language in Dalit literature has become a tool for protest against the suppression and discrimination they face from Caste Hindus.

Subaltern literature is not just a reflection of reality but it is also a medium of resistance and threshold of liberation. Bama's subaltern narrative primarily rests upon her use of language and style simulating that of the life style of Dalits. Lakshmi Holmstorm, the translator of Bama's works *Karakku* and *Sangati* in her introduction in *Karakku* says about the language she used, "Bama is doing something completely new in using the demotic and the colloquial routinely as her medium of narration and even argument, not simply for reported speech. She uses a Dalit style of language which overturns the decorum and aesthetics of received upper class, upper-caste Tamil. She breaks the rules of written grammar and spelling throughout, elides words and joins them differently, demanding a new and different pattern of living" (xix). Bama uses the vernacular and breaks the rules of grammar and spelling in order to show the rebellious nature of her characters. The work chants, folk songs, songs sung at rites do portray the turmoil of the Dalits

especially Tamil Dalit women. If *Karakku* is told in Bamas' own voice, *Sangati* is in the voices of many Tamil Dalit women. She is bold enough to use words like slut, bastard, common whore, she donkeys, savage and many other local usages which gives the reader a shocking picture, but that is what Dalit language is like.

Interestingly most of the characters are addressed or are talked about by using their nick names not the real ones, like 'Mannacchi, Maikkanni, Kizhavi, Kazhiya, Naadodoi, Kaatu Raasu which is typical of Dalit culture. This may be absent in the upper caste society but it surely depicts the community life of Dalits. The use of folk songs, which are plain but full of passionate emotions, is another unique feature. Even though the women sing of their sufferings and pain the lyrical and rhythmic quality makes it distinctive. "When I heard the older women sing, I could feel myself overcome by sleep. Their songs were so bewitching. Thinking about it, from birth to death, there are special songs and dances" (*Sangati* 78).

Women too sang. As they planted seedlings or weeded the fields, or harvested the grain, they worked to the rhythm of their songs. They sang to their babies as they rocked them in their cradles. They sang to the young girls when they came of age. They sang dirges to their dead. (*Karakku* 63)

These songs are actually soothing agent to them. When they are happy or when they are sad they sing, in the midst of great mental turmoil they sing to alleviate the pain. Bama also uses her narrative to question the caste bias. She satirizes the so called Caste Hindus through her humorous but sarcastic remarks. Even though they work hard they do not even get proper wages. After a day's work, they come with a little ragi and with that they prepare meals to feed the entire family. They are not even able to buy some rice.

And it's because we drink this dark stuff that our children are born coat black in colour just like crows. Look at those upper-caste children, they are all pink and white. Some of them are so fair; they look as if they might bleed if you so much as touched

them. And do you know why? It's because they eat milk and rice. (*Sangati* 114)

The mere illustration of children's games communicates the caste-class, gender oppression, the family relations and the socio-economic status of the community. The game of Naicku and Pannaiyal, the game of shopkeeper and customer show how even in a child's mind the caste system is deep rooted. The humiliations they face from the church authorities are also portrayed. "There were a few games that we played frequently... the police arriving and beating him up (*Karakku* 56-57). The picture of the disharmony in the marital life, the humiliation they face from the political and religious authorities, the nature of the patriarchal society all are drawn beautifully through these games.

Though the subaltern texts in general are angry in tone, the sense of humour of its characters cannot go unnoticed. Even if the women toil hard dawn to late night they celebrate their lives. They always sing songs and laugh while weeding, transplanting rice, cutting the crops at harvest time, or doing anything else. They always tease each other through their songs.

Handsome man, dark as crow
More handsome than a blackened pot
I have given you my promise
You who can read inglissu. (*Sangati* 77)

This is a song teasing a woman whose prospective bridegroom is darker than her. Another song is about a man who walked off in anger after making a huge fuss over a mere trifle.

As we cleaned our teeth
In the spring by the river
Is it because I spluttered over you
You haven't talked to me for eight days.
(77)

When they sing lullabies Bama says that the songs are so bewitching even a grown up would fall asleep. The women sing oppaaris and weep loudly during burial ceremonies. From birth to death there are special songs and dances. These Dalit women are so candid in expressing their emotions. That is why they cry and laugh so empathetically. Bama through her narratives proves the assertive nature of the subaltern language which the so called elite groups branded as submissive. It is different from

the aesthetic mainstream literature but more energetic, reactive and independent. Dalit life has a distinct language, culture and identity.

Bamas's writing celebrates Dalit women's subversive strategies to overcome their oppression. While some act as shrews and overwhelm their alcoholic, violent husbands with their verbal tirade and thereby escape physical violence, some others wrestle with the men while a few of them choose to walk out on their abusive husbands. All Dalit writing is to be perceived as political writing, as a strategy of resistance of social oppression. Bama through her writing hopes to influence Dalit women readers to shape their lives positively. (Das 72)

Bama's narrative is the narrative of the self, which is actually viewed from the subaltern perspective giving emphasis to the life of Tamil Dalit women. They often raise their voices as a shield to protect them, the obscene words and sharp tongue only help them to escape from the triple subjugation they face, the subjugation they face because of their caste, class and gender. The lack of peace and real happiness in their lives are the rationale behind the repulsive language they use. Through her works Bama wants to prove that the language she used in her narratives visualizes the culture and identity of the subalterns, the Dalits.

Conclusion

Dalit literature has contributed fresh experiences, a new sensitivity and vocabulary, a different protagonist, an alternate vision and a new chemistry of suffering and revolt. Many critics argue that this literature lacks artistic fineness. Dalit literature appears to be univocal as the language they use is dialectical, and hence considered to be vulgar and obscene. The life portrayed in most of the Dalit writings, as in the case of *Karakku* and *Sangati* can be articulated as collective not individual. They felt a pressing need to create awareness that the oppression and suppression of Dalits are to be denounced and corrected. To bring forth this change they did not take into consideration any canonical rules, as a point of fact they are not at all included in any of these rules by

the ruling class. Their efforts come to bear fruit as Dalit literature has bring about change. The society that categorized certain community as caste subalterns, now try to deconstruct the traditional mindset which makes them perceive Dalits as equals rather than pitiful victims. This change in attitude has awakened a new confidence among Dalits too. Thus it shares its aims with those of other marginalised and subaltern groups worldwide. " It is a Tamil and Indian reflection of the global literature of the oppressed where politics must be an active one that fights for human rights, social justice and equality " (Gauthaman 98). In today's socio political scenario, the only way for the subaltern to strengthen themselves is to become educationally upright and attain self-esteem.

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