



MARGINALITY AND FEMINIST ASSERTION: SIMILARITY IN ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE* AND BAMA'S *KARUKKU*

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Abstract

Women have been victimized in many ways in almost all times and places. They have been considered as weaker physically, and mentally as well, as compared to men. Women all over the world, like the colonized subjects, have been treated as 'other', 'marginalized' and 'colonized' by various forms of patriarchal oppression as they share with colonized races the similar experiences of the politics of oppression and suppression. They are called 'subalterns' on the basis of this repressed position. In the whole world, there are different issues of women regarding oppression and marginalization in different cultures. But the black women in America and the dalit women in India are the two special groups who are reeling under the double marginality of race or caste and gender. Therefore, it's imperative to isolate the problems and issues regarding black and dalit women for their emancipation and empowerment. The black feminist writer Alice Walker, and dalit feminist writer Bama have demonstrated the problems and issues related to black women and dalit women respectively, and also demonstrated through their novels how the material realities of both groups of women can lead the women to raise their strong voices against the intersectional oppression of race/caste and gender.

Keywords: Race, Caste, Gender, Marginality, Oppression, Resistance, Assertion

Women have been victims of oppression of many types at all times and in all climes. They have been considered as weaker physically as well as mentally, as compared to men. Women all over the world, like the colonized subjects, have been treated as 'other', 'marginalized' and 'colonized' by various forms of patriarchal oppression as they share with colonized races the experiences of the politics of oppression and suppression. Simone de Beauvoir, a renowned feminist writer, rightly observes that the world of women "is everywhere enclosed, limited, dominated by the male universe; high as she may raise herself, far as she may venture, there will always be a ceiling over her head, walls that will block her way"(325). Based on this assumption of

repressed position, they are called 'subalterns'. In the whole world, there are different issues of women in different cultures. But the Black women in America and the Dalit women in India are the two special voices for liberation who are reeling under the double marginality of race or caste and gender. So it's imperative to isolate the problems and sufferings of the doubly-subjugated Black and Dalit women in America and India for their emancipation and empowerment.

The Black feminist writer Alice Walker and Dalit feminist writer Bama demonstrate through their novels how the material realities of both groups of women can lead the women to raise their

strong voices against the intersectional oppression of race/caste and gender. All the different groups of women in the world have their particular ways of fighting against oppression. In case of Black feminism or womanism, and Dalit feminism, the emphasis is on survival and wholeness, the full self-development of the marginalized subaltern women, and solidarity and resistance against racist/casteist and patriarchal oppression. This paper entitled "Marginality and Feminist Assertion: Similarity in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Bama's *Karukku*" purposes to analyze the double oppression of African American women in America and Dalit women in Indian society by the privileged people of these societies and patriarchal male hegemony, and how they voice against the ill-treatment meted upon them.

Black women in America and Dalit women in India are more oppressed than the privileged women in both societies. In postcolonial terms, if the women are "double-colonized" by patriarchy and imperialism, the Black and Dalit women are "triple-colonized" by double patriarchy of the privileged men outside and underprivileged men at home, and by the women of privileged class and imperial power in general. They have been treated as 'other' of the 'others'. In America, the Black women are marginalized on account of being black by the white society and for being women by the patriarchal ideology outside and at home, and in India, the Dalit women are equally marginalized for being dalit by the upper caste people and for being women by the patriarchal attitude of men outside and even in their own homes by their own men. The Black feminist writer Alice Walker and the Dalit feminist writer Bama are the prominent figures who have portrayed not only the oppression of the subaltern women of their societies, but also presented their coping strategies of resistance, their spirit of survival and wholeness, and their awareness and solidarity to dismantle all kinds of domination and oppression.

This paper is proposed to analyze the marginality and feminist assertion of Black and Dalit women that gets contextualized in Walker's *The Color Purple* and Bama's *Karukku*. Black feminism rose to prominence in the 1960s, as the civil rights movement excluded women from leadership

positions, and the mainstream feminist movement largely focused on the issues predominately related to middle-class white women. It stresses upon the fact that racism, sexism and classism are very much linked and intersectional. Black feminist writers have raised the voices of black women vehemently through their notions and writings. Alice Walker, the champion of Black women, has come out with her own Black feminist theory of "womanism" that not only focuses on the marginalization of black women in the racist and sexist American society, but also on the survival and wholeness, quest for identity and self-discovery of subaltern Black women, and their innate strength and power of resistance against oppression.

In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker presents the insightful and riveting portrait of black life, in particular, the experiences of Black women in a racial and patriarchal American society. The novel is epistolary in nature and there are a number of letters covering the story of two sisters Celie and Nettie through their letters to each other and to God. The novel explores the gender bias and sexual and racial oppression of suppressed and silenced black women. Celie, the protagonist of the novel, is depicted as an uneducated, poor black woman who is frequently raped by her step-father Alphonso and becomes pregnant. The unscrupulous man sells her children and Celie becomes sterile not only sexually but also emotionally. Then she is married to Mr. Albert, who already has four children by his previous marriage. After her marriage, Celie saves her sister Nettie from the advances of her step-father by inviting Nettie to Albert's house, and then sends her to Africa with reverend Samuel and his wife Corrine, the Black missionaries. Celie becomes a surrogate mother for Albert's children. Celie endures sexual, physical and emotional abuses at the hands of her step-father first, then by her husband, Albert. Then Celie finds a friendly relationship in Shug Avery with whom Albert had an affair. Shug awakens Celie's inner soul and strength. Shug acts as a catalyst who brings about transformation of Celie's attitude towards life. Celie finds herself awakened and self-confident in the company of Shug and thus establishes a female bonding between them. Being confident and awakened, Celie takes up the business

of pant making in Memphis with the help of Shug and rejects the male hegemony of Albert and others who treat her as 'other' socially, sexually and culturally.

Walker through the character of Celie represents the enduring power and the spirit of self-sacrifice among Black women. The ability to endure under worst circumstances is Celie's key to survival. She manages to withstand all abuses because of her strong faith in God and with female bonding. She comes out as a liberated, confident woman who has not only found her voice but also her identity as an individual. Celie's new relationship with the world is manifested by the way that she has started pondering over life and this shows her matured and developed outlook towards life. She says:

I start to wonder why us need love, why us suffer, why us black. Why us men and women...I think us here to wonder, myself. To wonder. To art. And in wonderings about the big things and asking about the big things, you learn about the little things, almost by accident. (270)

The Color Purple thus, articulates the complexities of the struggles of black women in America. Walker is committed to explore the oppression of black women, racial and sexual discrimination against black women, and also the loyalties and triumphs of suppressed black females in a racial and patriarchal American society. Walker tells that the black women suffer from discrimination by the white community and from a second repression from black males who impose the double standards of white society on women. In her work, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, Walker suggests the universality of the oppression of women:

The African male order, just like its American counterpart, denies the validity of female expression, girl children are not permitted to participate in the education provided by the missionaries, and they are considered the property of first their fathers and then their husbands. (62)

Thus, Alice Walker has presented the peculiar dilemma of the African American women as trapped victims of both race and gender. Albert, Celie's husband, embodies the black male chauvinism and the patriarchal assumptions and tendencies. Walker tells that the portrait of Albert is suggestive of the black feminist denigration of male sexism and phallogentrism, inherent in sexual and racial politics that justifies domination of females, misogynist thinking and negative anti-woman mythology. Through Celie's life, Walker explores not only the debilitating effects of racism and sexism on black subaltern women, but also the black women's self-assertion, and determination to overcome these barriers, and emerge unscathed ultimately, and also with a spirit of survival of all, male as well as female. This idea is also supported by the other women characters like Shug, Sofia, Nettie in the novel. Through these characters, Alice Walker has epitomized the realities of the lives of black women and registered a vehement protest against the enfeebling sexism of the patriarchal society.

Like the black women, the Dalit women in India appear to be shouting in the wilderness--raising voice for their social, political, economical, and cultural rights. Dalit women, like their American counterparts, are also marginalized on account of caste, gender and class. In a sense, they are 'Dalits among the Dalits' as they are doubly marginalized by the casteist ideology of the upper castes and the patriarchal ideologies of males both upper castes and Dalits. Dalit feminist writers began to raise voice for equal rights of Dalit women. Dalit feminism started in around 1990s emerging from patriarchal hegemony of Dalit literature, and casteist hegemony of mainstream Indian literature. Literature by Dalit women, like black feminist writers, is an attempt to articulate the unheard and unspoken voices of the oppressed subaltern Dalit women. Bama, a Tamil Dalit, is one of the leading Dalit feminist writers in India who has strongly raised the suppressed voice of Dalit women through her writings:

Dalit feminist discourse incorporates writings of women, who have voiced their protest against the oppressive power structures operative in the Indian caste, class and patriarchal system. In an attempt to subvert

the phallogocentric domination in society, as well as in literature, women writers such as Bama, have penned down their painful experience of being a female subaltern. (Dhawan 9)

The Dalit feminist study of Bama's novels exemplifies what it means to be Dalit woman in a caste-ridden and gender biased Indian society. Her novels focus on caste and gender oppression of Dalit women equally in Christianity and Hinduism. Like Black feminist writer Alice Walker, Bama's works are also famed for celebrating the inner strength of the subaltern Dalit women.

In her autobiographical novel *Karukku*, Bama exposes the double oppression of Dalit women in the casteist and sexist Indian society. The Dalit feminist study of the novel also reveals a Dalit woman's quest for self-identity and self-assertion, and a spirit of survival and wholeness. The novel is an autobiographical sketch of the author's childhood experiences as a female, a Dalit and a Christian. It shows how the author is oppressed by caste, gender and religion. Bama describes the facts in the life of Dalit women through her own experiences. *Karukku* reflects the author's life and the life of whole Dalit community as well. It discusses the oppression borne by Dalits at the hands of state police, Panchayat council, the upper castes and the church. Bama highlights how Dalit women are oppressed further by Dalit men at home. A significant aspect of this work relates to the oppression of Dalit Christians at the hands of the church. The institutionalized religion discriminated against Dalits in direct opposition of its teachings. Bama depicts how Dalit Christians are not allowed to sing in the church choir. They are forced to sit separately away from the upper caste Christians. They are not allowed to bury their dead in the cemetery within the village, behind the church, but are made to use a different graveyard beyond the outskirts. Bama belongs to the Parayar, a Christian Dalit community. The Parayars are Christian converts in the hope of avoiding caste differences. Christianity does not recognize caste divisions but church in India is casteist in its dealings.

As an exponent of Dalit feminism, Bama has found in *Karukku* the right space to articulate the

pains and sufferings of Dalit women. *Karukku* means palmyra leaves like double-edged sword and Bama finds many similarities between her life full of struggle and the saw-edged *karukku*. In short, the novel narrates the double oppression of Dalit women through the analogy of double-edged *karukku*. Bama shows how a Dalit woman is Dalit amongst the Dalits. In Bama's case, her position is further endangered by her existence as a Dalit Christian. She describes her experience:

When I went home for holidays, if there was a Naicker woman sitting next to me in the bus, she'd immediately ask me which place I was going, to what street. As soon as I said that the Cheri, she did get up and move off to another seat. Or she did tell me to move elsewhere....This happened to me several times. (20)

In *Karukku*, Bama depicts the wrongs done in the name of caste and the meaningless violence that it instigates. It is not Bama's story alone but the story of a collective trauma of her community. It is a painful story that is open-ended, not like a complete successful story like a conventional autobiography. It is essentially cathartic in nature. Bama says, "This book was written as a means of healing my inward wounds. I had no other motive." (ix) In this novel, one sees Bama's quest to understand and present how her multiple identities as Dalit, woman and Christian have affected her oppression. Bama tells about when she was in high school, her elder brother helped her to understand the oppression meted to them and told her that education was the only way out of their miserable existence:

Because we are born into the Parayajati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that. But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities. So study with care, learn all you can. If you are always ahead in your lessons, people will come to you of their own accord and attach themselves to you. Work hard and learn. (17-18)

Thus, by strengthening themselves by education and awareness and taking intuitions from the teachings of Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, Dalits

decided to assert their identities and tried to make a space for their silenced and suppressed society.

Bama, as a character in the autobiography, asserts herself as a Dalit Christian woman against the triple subjugation of Dalit women and their whole society. She wishes the survival not only of herself but of the whole society. Against the oppression and subjugation of her community, Bama's anger is quite visible in these words:

Are Dalits not human beings? Do they not have common sense? Do they not have such attributes as a sense of honour and self-respect! Are they without any wisdom, beauty and dignity? What do we lack? They treat us in whatever way they choose, as if we are slaves who don't possess human dignity. (27)

All her experiences are related to caste hegemony, patriarchy and gender discrimination which gives a message to Dalits to fight for their rights. Bama also successfully portrays the cultural, social and familial life of Dalits in this novel. The novel exposes the doubly wounded feelings of Dalit women. When it comes to sexual exploitation, even the Dalit male is no exception as the oppressed becomes the oppressor. Bama tells about the patriarchal attitude of Dalit men towards poor Dalit girls and women:

In the face of such poverty, the girl children cannot see the sense in schooling, and stay at home, collecting firewood, looking after the house, caring for the babies, and doing household chores. (68)

Through her own story and other Dalits including women, Bama presents not only the oppressed and subjugated images of her people but also celebrates the strength and perseverance of Dalits, especially Dalit women. Like Black women, Dalit women show a sense of bonding, and also a spirit of survival and wholeness for the upliftment of their suppressed community. The focal point of the novel is the development of the protagonist's mind and character from her childhood through diverse experiences, and the recognition of her identity and role in the world. It highlights Bama as a Dalit woman

who moves towards self-discovery and self-assertion. She has given her voice to the subaltern marginalized women of the society.

Thus, the subaltern female characters in the novels of Alice Walker and Bama emerge victorious breaking domestic, social, political, religious and sexual shackles which so far have oppressed them in every way. They have transformed themselves from silenced, suppressed, voiceless and marginalized females into confident, assertive and expressive modern women who compete with men in all spheres. Both the novels explore the journey of oppressed women from suppression to expression, from erasure to assertion and voiceless to voiced. This is the victory envisioned by Black feminism/Womanism and Dalit feminism. Both American Black women and Indian Dalit women are two distinctive groups that occupy a similar bottom position in their respective communities. Both the literature, Black feminist and Dalit feminist literature seek to promoting the ideas of social equality, justice, resistance to suffering and self-assertion. Both societies and literatures are very much alike in their sufferings, their assertion, their hopes and desires, and their coping strategies.

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