

Negotiating Caste and Gender: A study of Karukku and the grip of Change

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Abstract:

The Indian caste system in the 20th century had rigid hierarchy that caused social inequality, intense marginalization and violence against lower castes, especially towards Dalits (formerly “untouchables”). This paper examines the intersectionality in caste and gender in the literary work, *Karukku* by Bama and *The Grip of Change* by P.Sivakami. It speaks about how Dalit women experienced discrimination not only by caste but also because of gender and patriarchy. The aim of this paper is to show how the two authors Bama and P.Sivakami with their incredible literary works *Karukku* and *The Grip of Change* represented resistance, identity and a way to explain difficult livelihood of Dalit women. *Karukku* an autobiographical work from lived experiences of Bama, it illustrates marginalization and gender prejudice which are so depicted realistically, while P.Sivakami a prominent writer and the former member of Indian administrative service who strongly identifies herself as Dalit feminist, writes a fictional novel *The Grip of Change*. The authors are critical of the Dalit movement and Dalit patriarchy. This text demonstrates double marginalization, caste based violence and internal patriarchy. These

narratives are not mere reflections into the past but lived experiences and present sociological base. This study argues that, both works demonstrate the double marginalization faced by Dalit women but they differ in presenting resistance.

Key words: Dalit, feminist, patriarchy, intersectionality, marginalization

Introduction:

In the Vedic period Indian society was divided into different communities namely the Brahmins(priests), Kshatriyas(warriors), Vaishyas(merchants) and Shudras, (servants) placing out each community for certain task ensuring coordination and harmony. But soon that turned into hierarchy which resulted in oppression of lower castes. The community much affected by this was the Dalits (untouchables).

This paper throws lights on the authors who were brave enough to speak out injustice and prejudice towards the Dalit women. The Dalit literature articulates the struggle faced by Dalit women by upper caste and within their own community due to gender and patriarchy. The two writers who worked on this theme exposed double discrimination and marginalization on Dalit women. A significant contribution to Dalit writing in India, Bama weaves many narratives together to explore the social inequities compounded above all by poverty suffered by Dalit women.

P.Sivakami critiques both the Dalit movement and Dalit patriarchy, and yet does not become traitor because of her participation in the search for solution. Her novel became an expression of Dalit youth-eager and working for change.

They articulate Tamil Dalit feminism by exposing double discrimination on Dalit women from upper castes and within their own community. *Karukku* by Bama is an autobiographical work rooted in personal experience and emotional introversion, *The Grip of Change* an English translation of *Pazhaiyana kazhithalun*, the first full length novel by P.Sivakami, an important Tamil writer, presents a fictional narrative that exposes systemic inequalities and power struggles. The translation also features *Asiriyar kurippu*, the sequel in which P.Sivkami revisits her first work with the character Thanganam, she showed challenging lives of Dalit women who navigate through marked by discrimination, poverty and patriarchy with determination, courage and resilience. Both texts reveal that Dalit women are not merely passive victims but active agents who resist and redefine their



identities within oppressive framework.

ABOUT THE NOVELS AND AUTHORS

Dalit literature in India emerging strongly from late 19th century anti- caste movement by famous figures like:

Jyotirao Phule: He was an Indian Social activist, and an anti-caste social reformer. His works were around ‘Untouchability’, caste system and showed efforts in educating women and uplifting oppressed caste communities. One of his prominent works ‘Gulamgiri’ (slavery) published in 1873 critiques the Indian caste system, Upper caste dominance and social injustice.

Baby kamble: Baby Kondiba Kamble also known as Babytai Kamble was an Indian Dalit activist, feminist and writer. She belongs to the Mahar community, the largest dalit community in Maharashtra. She was influenced by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar a prominent national leader. Her autobiography *Jina Amucha*, meaning ‘Our Life’ in Marathi is regarded as the first autobiography by a Dalit woman in Marathi. This work of hers provides a detail account of the lives of Mahars in Maharashtra with extreme poverty, caste discrimination, social customs and superstitions.

Gogu Shyamala: An important writer, philosopher and editor from Peddemul village. Her works, including *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only A Small Basket, But...* which is important in Telangana Dalit literature. This was part of her work on a project named Dalit Woman Biography. This story tells about a young girl growing up in poverty and social discrimination, her daily struggles of survival and deep-rooted caste inequality.

Bama Faustina Soosairaj: A Tamil Dalit feminist, teacher and novelist. Her autobiographical work *Karukku* 1992 chronicles the joys and sorrows experienced by Dalit Christian women in Tamil Nadu. She subsequently wrote two more novels, *Sangati* and *Vanmam*. Bama through the act of writing, prominently contributes not only transgressing caste boundaries, she also demolishes the conventional exclusions of language and genre.

P.Sivakami: A former Indian Administrative Services officer, activist and Dalit feminist writer predominately writing in Tamil. Apart from being one of the most prominent Dalit novelists in India, having written six novels and more than sixty short stories. She has also



constantly voiced her opinions on contemporary social and political issues.

In India, Dalit literature became famous whereas Dalit women literature is still not recognized. Dalit literature explains Dalit women status in India and in the same community. Dalit community women are oppressed and subjugated in doubly, first by patriarchy in their caste and then systemic violence and discrimination by upper caste class of Indian society. In *Karukku*, Bama exaggerates on two aspects caste and gender discrimination, until her 3rd standard schooling she was not aware of untouchability.

The scene where a man offers her food by holding a packet at the distance (to avoid polluting it) young Bama realizes caste based humiliation for the first time.

“Are we not human too?” (Karukku p.no.25-27)

Children from Dalit community face discrimination everywhere. Bama has a bitter experience of when she was accused of stealing a coconut and everyone turned a deaf ear to her protest, even the priest, whom she appeals for help is not above caste prejudices and tells her that,

” After all, you’re from Cheri you must have done it” (Bama Karukku 19)

Bama’s brother advised her to study hard to. He says:

“Because we are born into the Paray jati, we are never given any honor or dignity or respect. We 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.” (Bama 18)

Despite all, she finds education as the sole means to overcome caste discrimination and the way to progress. She completed B.ed degree but same kind of discrimination continued.

The lines stated above tells us about experiences of Bama, how at an innocent age she had gone through humiliating situations how everyone including the priest did not believe her as she belonged to a lower caste. She believed education could change their situation, but soon realized it could not alone completely erase the deep-rooted discrimination.

The two types of oppression faced by Dalit women are by upper caste systems, and men in their own society, these oppressions are not only coterminous but mutually reinforcing. The reason upper caste is able to maintain their supremacy is through the exploitation of Dalit women. Dalit women are subjected to upper caste abuse and to domestic violence of patriarchal institution within their community itself. Dalit women handled domestic work in the household as well as agricultural labour in upper caste fields and come back home to start second shift of



labour while the men relax, this serves as an evidence of a societal structure that wrings the greatest labour out of individuals at its intersection of caste and gender slavery. Men of the household take the decision behalf of them, upper caste men in the society command and control them, the church talks about them defining their spiritual worth using ideals of purity influenced by brahmanical beliefs. In this context Bama act of writing is a bold act of her usage of the right to speak. *Karukku* serves as the voice for the voiceless.

P.Shivakami through the character of Thangaman showcased the toughest situation of Dalit women in society: she writes:

The rare beauty and honesty of the narrative arises from its body-centricity. Thangam's body bears testimony to the difficulties faced by Dalit women. (The Grip of Change pg.no:194)

Thangam's body treated as easily available body for sexual exploitation by upper caste people (Paranjothi udayar) she is exploited as a widow, as no male protection exacerbating her vulnerability, brothers of her late husband tried to take advantage as well. Thangam faces marginalization from social structure (caste) and gender.

But at last Kathamuthu raised his voice against sexual exploitation, gave her shelter and then he tried to take Thangam's body to satisfy his male desire. She said,

'You're like a brother to me...a brother' she groaned (The Grip of Change pg.no93) .

It is not always upper caste exploiting the lower caste. A lower caste might exploit his own community people. In the novel we see men like Kathamuthu taking advantage of vulnerable women. The novel presents overall texture of corruption that exists at all level.

These words highlight the harsh realities faced by Dalit women who take up all humiliation and endure exploitation while the oppressors maintain their social status and power. In the novel, Thangam a childless widow faces many challenges by the upper caste and in her caste. Kathamuthu has an affair with Nagamani an upper caste widow then married her to save social status where as Pranjothi an upper caste man just used Thangam as his mistress. The author uses this contrast to showcase the patriarchal mindset among people.

'Ungrateful whore! Even if she was hurt, she was hurt by the hand adorned with gold! A parachi could have never dreamt of being touched by a man like me! My touch was a boon granted for penance performed in her earlier births! And then the dirty bitch betrays me! How can I face the world with my name thus polluted?' (The grip of change pg.no - 31)



The above passage reveals the mindset of the upper caste people and how they criticized the Dalit women even though they are at fault, they consider themselves to be superior and failed to recognize their wrongdoings.

A few days later, Thangam's land dispute case was taken to court. (The grip of change pg.no-87)

Thangam's courage doesn't end there; she also pushes Kathamuthu to pursue court hearings. P.Shivakami with this novel explores the vulnerability of Dalit women and their battles against oppression. Through the character of Thangam's shown the women strength and resist the violence upon her. It's a bold step for Thangam to file case against Paranjothi Udayar. Paranjothi never expected such a decisive action.

Critical analysis:

Karukku and The grip of change serve as a study on intersectionality of caste and gender. Their writings show that oppression can't be understood solely through one lens for a long time, Indian literature ignored the Dalits or represented them inaccurately. Bama and P.Sivakami through their writings questioned traditional literature and shared to the world the difficult lives of Dalit women.

These texts not just hold literary importance but are also powerful means as social critiques that encourage readers to think about justice and equality.

Conclusion:

Karukku and The grip of change are prominent works in Dalit women literature, earlier Dalit literature focused only on men literature. Bama and P.Sivakami showcased the discrimination faced by Dalit women not only by caste but also even on gender, their works portray the real struggle faced by Dalit women because of caste and gender intersectionality and marginalization outside and inside their own community. Both novels show struggles, pain, justice and courage to overcome the difficulties from their pathetic situations.

Bama in her novel shared personal life, childhood, studies, growth and discrimination in a society as a Dalit while Sivakami determined social struggles of the Dalit women and fights against oppression. Here Bama and P.Sivakami narrative approaches are different. Bama with her own life experience showed struggle, hierarchy, inner strength, self-awareness and identity.



P.Sivakami's work is about political and social approaches in society, conflict in gender and caste on Dalit women oppression and discrimination. Bama's approach is more personal and reflective while Sivakami approach is more direct and focused on social action even then both the writers explored resistance and changes in possible ways

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