



Dalit And Female Voices In Bama's And Sivakami's Select Novels

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Abstract

Literature has always mirrored society and its various issues, using stories, novels, plays, and poems to highlight societal problems. These literary forms influence readers, prompting them to reflect on these issues. Literature plays a significant role in raising awareness and addressing societal problems. Dalit literature, in particular, has shed light on the trauma and suffering experienced by Dalits in their daily lives. Dalit women writers have notably articulated the struggles and hardships faced by Dalit women, striving for their emancipation by emphasizing the importance of education. Among these writers, Bama and Sivakami have distinguished themselves, creating a significant impact in the literary world. This article explores the challenging journeys of their female characters, who navigate their troubled lives with determination, courage, and resilience, ultimately overcoming numerous obstacles. The ways in which these brave Dalit women confront and address their challenges are remarkable. Their ability to find a place in a male-dominated society is commendable, as each character asserts her individuality and voices her dissent in a patriarchal world.

Keywords – Dalit Literature, Realisation, Emancipation, Male-dominated, Patriarchy.

Introduction

Women are the companions of men, Gifted with equal mental capacity.

--Mahatma Gandhi.

Mahatma Gandhi, recognized as the Father of Our Nation, acknowledged the value and importance of women, advocating for their empowerment. Despite his efforts, women in India have historically been viewed as secondary and inferior to men. While many developed countries have moved past such disparities, India continues to struggle with them. The situation is even more dire for Dalit women, who face multiple layers of oppression due to their caste, class, and gender.

Both Bama Faustina and P.Sivakami, novelists from the Dalit community, have vividly portrayed their painful experiences in their literary works. Their narratives resonate deeply with readers, urging them to reflect on the oppressive caste system that strips individuals of their respect and dignity. The caste system in India is deeply entrenched and has persisted for centuries, victimizing many from the lower castes and denying them their rightful dignity.

Full Paper (Research Article)

Dalit women, in particular, endure dual discrimination from both the upper castes and their own men, who suppress and exploit them. These critical issues are poignantly highlighted in the novels of Bama and Sivakami. This study examines Bama's "Karukku" and "Sangati," as well as Sivakami's "The Taming of Women" and "Cross-Section," which effectively reflect the struggles and resilience of Dalit women in the face of systemic oppression.

Bama, the Dalit feminist writer, established herself as a prolific author with her autobiography "Karukku," which won the Crossword Book Award in 2000. Her path to recognition was challenging; born in 1958 into a family of Dalit agricultural labourers who were converted Christians in Pudhupatti, Madras, Bama had a humble beginning. Her father, Susairaj, served in the Army, while her mother, Sebasthiamma, was a housewife.

Initially, Bama did not set out to become a writer; she intended to become a nun to sincerely serve her community. However, facing discrimination based on her community, she left the convent after seven years. Her encounter with Father Mark Stephen from her village inspired her to narrate her unpleasant experiences, resulting in her book "Karukku," published in 1992. Her subsequent novels, "Sangati" and "Vanmam," further established her literary prowess and gained her recognition.

Bama's novels focus on caste and gender discrimination, solidifying her role as a champion of Dalit feminism. "Karukku," her first novel, traces her journey and search for identity as a woman and Dalit

Christian. Despite numerous setbacks in the convent, she used the challenges she faced as stepping stones to success. "Karukku" documents her life, revealing her spiritual upheaval and turmoil. As Balakrishnan observes, "Because her faith failed her, Bama leaves the order only to revisit her trauma with words that are forged in the smithy of her soul, which sear the conscience of the empathetic reader" ..

In Tamil, "Karukku" refers to palmyra leaves, which are double-edged and sharp, symbolizing the trauma and discomfort experienced by the narrator. Although the term itself does not appear in the novel, it metaphorically represents the suffering endured by Bama. Her narrative traverses from her village to the convent, revealing the gap between Christian teachings and their actual practice.

Bama begins the novel by describing the scenic beauty and lush greenery of her village, highlighting the caste-based division of residences. The novel is rich with incidents that expose the caste hierarchy and its functioning within the village. One such incident occurs when Bama, as a child, is falsely accused of stealing a coconut while playing with her friends, leading to her public humiliation in front of her classmates. She also recounts an eye-opening moment in third grade when she saw an elderly man carrying snacks with a string to hand over to an upper-caste Naicker. Initially laughing at the incident, she later understands its gravity after her brother Raj Gautaman explains its significance.

Bama recognizes the transformative power of education following her brother's advice and diligently pursues her studies. Despite her hard work, she constantly faces the stigma of her caste. Her experiences in school and college are marked by unpleasant events that challenge her identity and existence. When her siblings expressed their desire to go home for their First Communion, the Principal and the Warden made derogatory remarks: "What celebration can be there in your caste, for a First Communion?". These words revealed the biased and condescending attitudes towards her community.

The belief that education and a respectable job would free her from discrimination proves false when Bama encounters prejudice from the convent authorities. At the convent, she observes a lack of compassion for the poor and meek, who are exploited and treated like slaves. Krishnaswamy remarks, "Both Bama's disillusionment with the professional beliefs of the Catholic Church and her subsequent reinterpretation of the Christian scripture emphasizing the revolutionary aspects of Christianity, the values of equality, justice, and love, are throughout informed by a robust engagement and a practical understanding of a religious practice in everyday life".

The novel "Karukku" reveals numerous hidden aspects of the Church, particularly its discriminatory practices and attitudes. Disillusioned and dissatisfied with its functioning, Bama leaves the convent and returns to her village, joining the women of her community despite feeling a deep sense of insecurity. In her subsequent novel "Sangati," Bama narrates the lives of these women, shedding light on the daily impact of caste and gender discrimination.

"Sangati" spans the experiences of three generations of women: Bama's grandmother, Bama herself, and future generations. Like "Karukku," this novel celebrates Bama's identity as a Dalit woman and a feminist. Bama vividly portrays powerful female characters, ranging from the meek and submissive to those who assert their individuality and resist long-standing oppression. She expresses her anger and rage against caste-based tyranny and patriarchal mindsets through these characters, who are drawn from real-life experiences and voices.

One of the central figures in "Sangati" is Bama's grandmother, Vellaiyama Kizhavi. After Bama's grandfather moves to Sri Lanka and never returns, Vellaiyama is left to fend for herself and her two daughters. She struggles immensely, working hard to provide for her family and ensure their survival. Bama's narrative brings forth the resilience and strength of such women, who endure and resist systemic oppression in their everyday lives. She says:

We have to labour in the fields as hard as men do and then on top of that; to bear and raise our children as for the men, their work ends when they've finished in the fields. You are born into this world, it is best you were born a man. (6)

The words spoken by Bama's grandmother reveal the gender-based disparities within the Dalit community and their profound impact on the lives of women, who face numerous challenges and problems. Bama vividly highlights the wage gap between men and women performing similar work:

The women, in any case, whatever work they did were paid less than men. Even when they did the same work, they were paid less. Even in the matter of tying up firewood bundles, the boys always got five or six rupees more. And if the girls tied up the bundles but the boys actually sold them, they got the better price (18)

Another grave concern highlighted by Bama is the sexual harassment Dalit women face while working. She vividly recalls her grandmother's warnings not to venture out alone to collect firewood, emphasizing the dangers these women are exposed to. Bama introduces many memorable women characters in her work, each illustrating different responses to their oppressive circumstances.

On one hand, there are meek characters like Mariamma, Thaayi, and Rose. On the other hand, there are rebellious figures like Rakkamma and Sammuga Kizhavi, who dare to raise their voices against injustice. Mariamma, for instance, is molested by Kumarasami Ayya and falsely accused of having a relationship with her cousin Manikyam. Despite her efforts to convince the Panchayat elders, she is fined more heavily than Manikyam and is eventually forced to marry him against her will, leading to a life of unending misery and abuse from her worthless husband.

Similarly, Thaayi and Rose suffer at the hands of their abusive husbands, enduring relentless beatings. These women, docile by nature, lack the courage to leave their abusive relationships and assert their independence. In contrast, Rakkamma uses her sharp tongue and vulgar language as a weapon against her violent husband.

Through Rakkamma's character, Bama illustrates how some women use obscene language as a defense mechanism. Rakkamma justifies her actions by explaining that her foul language and behavior are her only means of escaping her husband's brutality. Though her language might be shocking, it underscores her desperate situation and the limited options available to her.

Bama suggests that the oppression and exploitation these men face at their workplaces might drive them to vent their anger on their helpless wives. As these men unleash their fury at home, women like Rakkamma resort to using vulgar language to defend themselves. Bama highlights how these women, without embarrassment, use abusive and uncouth language as a form of resistance.

Moreover, Bama praises the hard-working nature and multifaceted skills of the women in her community. She writes, "How many jobs they are able to do simultaneously, spinning about like tops. Even machines can't do as much" (78), celebrating their resilience and ability to manage multiple tasks skillfully.

The plight of marginalized women in Bama's narratives is not unique to Perumalpatti but reflects the lives of millions of women across India, particularly in rural areas, who lack access to education and employment. Bama unveils the harsh realities of their existence while also presenting a hopeful vision for the future, suggesting that change is possible. She highlights some advantages Dalit women have over upper-caste women, noting their greater freedom and financial independence due to their physical and mental strength, diligence, and industriousness. Unlike upper-caste women, Dalit women are less dependent on their husbands because they work and earn money. Furthermore, Dalit widows have the freedom to remarry, a liberty not afforded to women of higher castes. The absence of dowry practices among Dalits and the option for women to dissolve unhappy marriages are additional benefits Bama mentions, offering some relief in their otherwise monotonous existence.

Simon de Beauvoir's famous words, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (295), reflect on the socially constructed secondary status of women. Bama also emphasizes the gender disparity evident from childhood. Girls are burdened with household responsibilities while boys are free to play. Girls must wait to eat until after the men and boys have finished, and baby boys receive immediate attention when they cry, unlike baby girls. This neglect and pain start early, embedding a sense of inferiority from a tender age. Bama recalls the partiality of her grandmother, who favoured her grandsons over her granddaughters. Girls were restricted to playing with shells and stones, while boys played games like kabaddi and marbles. Education was prioritized for boys, while girls were confined to household chores.

Bama recounts confronting her grandmother about this unfair treatment, saying, "It is you folks who are always putting us down; from the time we are babies you treat boys in one way and girls in quite another. It is you folks who put butter in one eye and quick lime in the other" (29). Bama stresses the importance of education, urging her community to strive for their own betterment rather than waiting for external help. She advocates education as the key to solving their problems, raising their economic and financial status,

and improving their lives. Through her writings, Bama becomes the voice of Dalit women, articulating their concerns and issues that hinder their growth and development.

P. Sivakami is another prominent Dalit feminist writer like Bama, who gained acclaim with her first novel, *Pazhayana Kazhidalum*, translated into English as *The Grip of Change*. Her notable works include *Kurukku Vettu*, *Kadai Mandhar*, and *Nalum Thodarum*. Beyond being a novelist, Sivakami is a former IAS officer and has made her mark in the political arena. She is active on social media, often sharing her views on society and politics. Her novels primarily focus on Dalit lives and represent Dalit feminism.

In *The Taming of Women*, Sivakami presents a mosaic of characters from a typical South Indian village dominated by patriarchy. The protagonist, Anandhayi, is the center of the novel, which revolves around her and her six children. Her husband, Periyannan, is depicted as a dominating, short-tempered, and unfaithful contractor who neglects his wife. The novel opens with a scene that introduces the main characters and their inherent natures. Anandhayi, though meek and submissive, voices her dissent, particularly against her husband's actions. Periyannan brings home a mistress named Lakshmi just as Anandhayi is about to deliver her fifth child. Despite Anandhayi's objections, Periyannan disregards her and manhandles her, showing no concern for her advanced pregnancy.

Periyannan's domineering and unfaithful nature, along with his violent behavior, extends to his daughters, Kala and Dhanam, and even his mother, often referred to as "the old crone" in the novel. Through these characters, Sivakami highlights the plight of Dalit women dominated by male family members—fathers, brothers, and husbands. Anandhayi embodies the typical wife, enduring an unfaithful husband while caring for the household and children, suffering silently. Periyannan neither respects nor cares for her, yet Anandhayi persists, bearing his atrocities and contemplating suicide, only to be deterred by thoughts of her children. She shoulders the entire household's responsibilities and the burden of repeated pregnancies, feeling powerless and helpless.

Anandhayi's children do not respect her, having witnessed their father's mistreatment and dominance. Kala and Dhanam, her daughters, grow up disconnected from Anandhayi, failing to understand or appreciate her sacrifices. They become resentful and lack regard for their mother. Conversely, her sons, Mani and Anbu, are treated differently as boys, rarely scolded by their father and growing up irresponsible and disrespectful towards their mother. They mirror their father's short temper and dominate their sisters, restricting their movements. Despite experiencing their father's wrath, Kala and Dhanam do not empathize with their mother, highlighting the deep-rooted gender biases within the family. Sivakami's portrayal of these characters underscores the systemic oppression and gender-based discrimination faced by Dalit women, emphasizing the resilience required to navigate such a harsh reality.

Being powerful and authoritative, Periyannan commands more respect from his children, causing his daughters to fail in sympathizing with their own mother. Lakshmi, Periyannan's mistress, is described as

beautiful and charming. Initially, Periyannan treats her well, but his ego is wounded when she tries to run away, leading him to beat her mercilessly. Ultimately, Lakshmi commits suicide to escape Periyannan's control and torture. Seeking comfort and security, she meets a tragic end, becoming a victim of adverse circumstances. Both Lakshmi and Anandhayi are crushed under the powerful force of patriarchy, unable to free themselves from its grip. Although Anandhayi initially resents Lakshmi, she gradually develops a soft spot for her and feels sorrow at her tragic end. The two women sometimes find solace in each other, as both are victims of Periyannan's cruelty. Neither the wife nor the mistress receives any respect or dignity from him.

Through these characters, Sivakami emphasizes the need for education and upliftment. In the circumstances depicted, a Dalit woman has no one to turn to, leading to frustration and bitterness. Alice Walker, in her novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, aptly notes, "And we cast out alone, to heal and recreate ourselves" (213). This reflects the isolation and resilience required for women to heal and rebuild their lives in oppressive conditions.

Sivakami skillfully utilizes Anandhayi as a medium to depict the sufferings of a Dalit woman, highlighting how her movements are confined within the confines of her home. Having lost her parents and lacking education or means to support herself, Anandhayi is trapped in a cycle of misery with no avenue for escape. Despite her awareness of her limited options, she does not hesitate to voice her discontent against her unfaithful husband, even though she consistently loses these battles. Similar to characters in Bama's works, Sivakami's characters are sincere, hardworking, and resilient despite facing domination and subordination by men.

Anandhayi tirelessly carries out her responsibilities within the confines of her home, which becomes a battleground where she expresses her disapproval and dissent, even in the face of repeated failure. The novel revolves around her rather than her husband Periyannan, showcasing how a typical Dalit woman's life is overshadowed by her husband's dominance, leaving her entirely at his mercy. Her story is emblematic of countless other women who endure similar circumstances, resigned to their meaningless existence.

Sivakami thus illuminates the societal structure where men dictate the rules and hold supreme power. In line with Simon de Beauvoir's observations, Anandhayi embodies the "incidental" and "inessential" compared to the dominant male figure in her life. Her character serves as a poignant reflection of the marginalized position of Dalit women in society, where their voices and agency are often suppressed and overlooked.

The saga of Anandhayi unfolds within the confines of her marital life, where she cares for her six children whom she deeply cherishes, despite her bleak circumstances. Sivakami deftly portrays a range of characters in her novel: some, like Anandhayi, are meek and submissive, while others, like Lakshmi, strive to break free from their adverse circumstances. Characters like Poongavanam and Dhanam attempt to defy the restrictions placed upon them; Poongavanam chooses to be a single mother and live independently.

In the narratives of Bama and Sivakami, there is a clear indication and anticipation of significant transformation and change, as discussed by Helen Cixous in *The Laugh of the Medusa*. Writing, according to Cixous, can act as a catalyst for subversive thoughts and the transformation of social and cultural structures. Bama and Sivakami are akin to cartographers, redrawing the map of literature by exploring previously uncharted territories of experience that had been shrouded in darkness and silence. Through their works, they illuminate the struggles and resilience of marginalized voices, paving the way for a more inclusive and diverse literary landscape.

In Sivakami's novel *Cross-Section*, a character named Saro defies tradition, grappling with the psychological turmoil stemming from her attraction to Kumar despite being married to Ravi. Their relationship is fraught with bitterness and suspicion, despite Saro's financial independence allowing her more freedom. Like Anandhayi, Saro deeply loves her children and endures her relationship with Ravi for their sake. However, her affair with Kumar offers no escape from her unhappiness, leaving her trapped in a strained marriage.

Ravi's physical assault on Saro underscores the male ego and the violence women endure in their homes. While Saro's behavior may not be justified, neither are Ravi's actions. The novel delves into the complexities and deceit within married life, particularly in Indian society. Saro, Kumar, and Ravi all conceal their relationships, highlighting societal expectations and the secrecy surrounding extramarital affairs.

Primarily focusing on Saro, the novel explores the evolving mindset of women, influenced by financial independence and self-awareness. Saro represents a modern woman prioritizing her own needs and challenging traditional norms. While Anandhayi remains a dutiful wife to Periyannan, Saro seeks refuge in another man's arms, symbolizing a shift in women's attitudes and behaviors. Unlike earlier characters, Saro is economically independent and assertive, reflecting a departure from traditional gender roles.

Saro's character, bold and non-traditional, is a departure from Sivakami's earlier portrayals. Her restless nature and insecurities are illuminated through her dreams, contrasting with the steadfastness of previous characters. The inclusion of metaphysical subtext throughout the novel distinguishes it from Sivakami's previous works, showcasing her experimentation with style and character development.

Conclusion

Bama and Sivakami have crafted powerful characters who courageously express their dissent and discontent against male dominance and oppression. The narratives they weave shed light on the emerging awareness among Dalit women, paving the way for their liberation. It is imperative for society to recognize and honour the true potential of women, treating them with the respect and dignity they deserve. Through their literary endeavours, Bama and Sivakami contribute to this ongoing transformation, advocating for gender equality and empowerment.

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