



Bama and Baby Kamble: Polemical Matrix from the Periphery

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Abstract: This paper writes about two dalit autobiographies in English translation. It discusses how the two women writers have used their writing as a weapon to protest against their marginalization as dalits and women, within their own society and in the mainstream culture.

Keywords: *dalit, oppression, autobiography, caste*

*“Happiness is a garden walled with glass: there's no way in or out. In Paradise, there are no stories, because there are no journeys. It's loss and regret and misery and yearning that drive the story forward, along its twisted road.” — Margaret Atwood, **The Blind Assassin***

Dalit is not a new name. Dalit is and never was a caste name. Dalits are the lowest rung in the social hierarchy based on ritual purity and occupation, and in India are placed outside the Varna system. The word ‘dalit’ originated from the discrimination, inequality and injustice predominant all over the Indian society. Dalits have been existing in the history of India since time immemorial but as a voiced organised movement it is a rather new phenomenon in the life, literature and history of India. Shambuka, Eklavya, Kabir, Raidas, Agasthya are some of the well-known dalit writers.

Mahatma Jyotiba Govind Phule and Dr. B.R.Ambedkar¹ bridged the gap between dispersed dalit communities. They both felt education was the key to unlock the door to change their course of life. It is said that Marathi Dalit literature is the forerunner of all modern Dalit Literatures in India. Before, Dalit literary/cultural expressions were never taken into



consideration due to the hegemonic nature of the field of literary production. The change marks a shift of the literary focus from the splendours of elite society to a section of society which were hidden behind the shadows of gloom, poverty and darkness. Though the history of Dalit literature can be traced back to centuries, the recent ancestry of Dalit literature has been traced however to D. Javalkar's *Desaca Dusman* (1926), an essay attacking Chipulankar and Tilak². W.N. Wankhede has argued the boundaries of 'Dalit' and admits, "The word 'Dalit' does not refer only to Buddhists and Backward classes people, but also to all those who toil and are exploited and oppressed." (Wankhede:317) Even Lakshmi Holmstrom in her Introduction (xviii) to Bama's *Karukku* said "Dalit writing—as the writers themselves have chosen to call it...it is significant that the preferred term is Dalit, implying militancy, an alliance with other repressed groups" It is evident that Dalit literature is the voice of the outcastes and underprivileged in the society. Dalit literature, is recently being translated in English, so that its impact may be felt at the all India level and beyond its geo-political boundaries. This could also be an opportunity to examine Dalit expression and literatures in a renewed way and from different perspectives. 'Change' is what underlines these narratives, the change towards self-assertion. This paper examines two novels: Bama's *Karukku* and Baby Kamble's *The Prison We Broke*.

Bama (Faustina Mary Fathima Rani) was born in 1958 in Puthupatti village in Viruthungar district in Southern Tamil Nadu. In spite of her consistent efforts to set herself free from the bondage of caste, she remained unsuccessful. To Bama, Dalit literature was not merely literature on Dalits, but a critique of the Hindu social order, with a special focus on Dalit women. Her voice, surely through her novels '*Karukku*' and '*Sangati*' reached the regional readers, but when in 2001, Lakshmi Holmstrom's English translation of *Karukku* won the Crossword Award in India, Bama became a distinct voice in Dalit literature. Bama has published five major works: an autobiography *Karuku* (1992), two novels *Sangathi* (1994) and *Vanman* (2002), and two collections of short stories *Kisumbukkaran* (1996) and *Oru Thathavum Erumaiyum*. *Kisumbukkaran* (1996) which was translated into English as *Harum Scarum Soar and Other Stories* in 2006 by N. Ravi Shanker. Her novels opened a new chapter of life before her. She found that the excessive pressure of social conventions often leads to



hazardous consequences and such exploitation by the privileged class made her mandatory to raise her voice of protest. Her silence began to melt away and she became more conscious about her space and identity in the existing social order.

According to Bama, woman's autobiographies should not exhibit lamentations, animosity, antagonism or humiliation of the self. Characters and their ideas in her writings do not solicit for pity and solace but reckon with inner powers to continue with respect. Bama's account of the events from her writings does not request the reader for pity or compassion but actually confirms her will to persist and make evident, her self-respect and her resentment. The narrative mode of modern autobiography as a literary genre, firmly linked to the notion of the individual, evolved to some extent by propelling the moment of self-recognition towards the narrative present. Though Bama uses the form of autobiography, it appears as an extension of short stories or narratives. They together form interwoven narratives of self-assertion and remonstrance, for the dalit community at large.

Autobiography, focuses on the life of a singular individual within its specific historical context, retracing the “genetic personality de-ve-lop-ment founded in the awareness of a complex in-ter-play bet-ween I-and-my-world” (Weintraub 1982: 13). In this sense, it may be seen to represent the “full convergence of all the factors constituting this modern view of the self” (XV). Its central figure is that of a Romantic self-constitution, grounded in memory and thus the boundaries between fact and fiction are inevitably straddled. Editorial note of Mini is worth stating in this context: “Breaking the silence that has lasted for more generations than we can count comes Bama’s *Karukku*, a text which is a life story that could lay foundation for a course on Dalit memoirs. Part autobiography, part analysis, part manifesto, Bama’s is a bold account of what life is like outside the mainstream of Indian thought and function”(K-xxv) *Karukku* means ‘palmyra’ leaves, which, with their serrated edges on both sides, are like double edged swords. After reading one finds great affinity between Bama and the saw edged *Karukku*. It also encompasses the community around her, and their troubles and tribulations, their struggle for existence, etc. This autobiographical novel also brings out the discrimination on the basis of sex and gender. When a girl child is born, there will be curses but when a male child is born



there are applauses. In general, this is the social attitude in all the communities. With its several dimensions of social ‘relatedness’, then, autobiographical writing is never an autonomous act of self-reflection, as sociological theorists of (auto-) biography have long argued (Steedman 1987). From a sociological angle, it may be considered as a form of social action making sense of personal experience in terms of general relevance (Ricœur 1991: 71). Autobiographical patterns of relevance are culture specific, diverse and subject to historical change, as the history of autobiography with its multitude of forms and writing practices demonstrate. Bama in the preface to *Karruku* writes: “The driving forces that shaped this book are many, cutting me like Karukku and making me bleed; unjust social structures that plunged me into ignorance and left me trapped and suffocating; my own desperate urge to break, throw away and destroy these bonds, and when the chains were shattered into fragments, the blood that was split then, all these taken together.”(K- xiii) Dilthey, who considered autobiography as the supreme form of the “understanding of life” felt such understanding involves selection. The autobiographical self takes from life those elements that, in retrospect, appear relevant. The past is endowed with meaning in the light of the present. Understanding, according to Dilthey, also involves fitting the individual parts into a whole, ascribing interconnection and causality ([1910] 2002: 221–22). Autobiography thus constructs an individual life course as a coherent, meaningful whole. Even if autobiography’s aspect of re-living experience, of rendering incidents as they were experienced at the time, is taken into account, the superior ‘interpreting’ position of the narrative present remains paramount, turning past events into a meaningful plot, making sense (Sinn) of contingency.

‘*Karukku*’ proved to be an intervention to articulate the voice of a woman whose heart had an unbearable and inexpressive pain. It is the first autobiography of its kind to appear in Tamil. It narrates not just the life of the author alone, but also the depiction of the various aspects of life and ‘there is also at the same time a powerful sense of engagement with history, of change, of changing notions of identity and belonging’(K-xix). Bama here reflects on her memories of childhood, education, and writes about her dalit perspective on Christianity, development and expectation from and within societies. *Karukku*, was not originally intended to be published. She wrote it to rediscover herself. Bama here, “captures moments that contain a paradox: she



seeks an identity, but also seeks a change which means an end to that identity.”(K-xix) The journey from anonymity to presence, though very hard, is a rewarding one for the marginalised self.

In Bama’s own words, “It was a very personal endeavour that helped me resolve certain tensions in my life. When I left the convent, I didn’t know how life would be! I had no hopes or dreams or any expectations even! My only aim was to get a job in order to survive... .” (Litterit, 2007). When her book *Karukku* was published, Bama herself recalls with hesitation: that “there was a lot of misunderstanding among the villagers about the book. They thought that I was revealing the secret aspects of their life to the public... Later with the help of the youth in my community, I tried to convince them that I was not degrading them. So, they understood my sincerity and commitment and they now extend their support to me.” (Litterit, 2007)

Set in the first-person narrative, the text moves from the past to the present in exploring varying sets of different events, which have taken place in her life. She begins by describing her village, five streets that made up the part where her community lived and its forests, rocks and fields with mythological stories. Apart from giving a scathing critique of the hegemonic ways of the upper caste communities *Karukku* also exposes the hypocrisy, inadequacy and unacceptability of institutionalized Christianity. A nagging perplexity which pervades the work is the unfathomable divide between truth and fiction within institutionalized religion - the deep rift between belief and practice. Bama shows how the church and the convent are hand-in-glove with the society at large to keep the Dalit at the lowest ebb. It is not only the Hindu system but the Christian organizations too meted out inhuman treatment to the untouchables. Discrimination and exploitation of children on the ground of caste continues at all levels. They are publicly humiliated. Bama’s narratives employ irony tinged with humour. Small episodes here and there give us insight about the ill treatment meted out in school, on the basis of caste. One day Bama playing with other children, had climbed a coconut tree and at her mere touch the ripe coconut had fallen down. She narrates, next morning in the assembly, how the headmaster had called out her name, “You have shown us your true nature as a Paraya.” (K-19) She writes that until her third standard in school she had never heard of untouchability.



Yet, one day when she was returning from school, she finds an elder from her street holding out a small packet of snacks tied on a string. The elder was presenting the packet to a Naicker of the village by holding the strings without touching the packet. This incident raised many questions in her young mind: “What did it mean when they called us ‘Paraiya’? Had the name become that obscene? (K-16). Bama narrates the oppression she and her fellow dalits faced as a student and a teacher. She narrates that her family would go to Naicker’s home quite early at dawn and do the sweeping of cowshed, collect the dung and dirt, and in return was given leftover rice and curry. When Bama said to Paatti that they should not accept leftovers, then Paatti had replied: “These people are the mahajans who feed us our rice. Without them how will we survive?” (K-17)

It was her younger brother Annam who made a very deep impression on Bama. He had explained to her, the reason of marginalisation and oppression of Dalits. For him too, education was the only way to combat all these indignities. Her elder brother Annan who was studying in the University gave her a solemn advice, “...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.” (K-18)

As the dictum goes, ‘fields are always greener on the other side’, Bama felt that Christianity shall make their way smooth and give them equal status in society: “It was this train of thought that lead me to the foolish desire that I could become nun and enter a convent, and in that way work hard for other children who struggled as I had done.” (K-77). At the age of twenty-six, she took the vows to become a nun. But in the seminary and later in the convent, she apprehended the bitter truth that the situations within or outside are same. She narrates how the Dalits are not allowed to join the Church choir. There are separate schools in the same campus, one for the rich, the elitist upper caste Christians and non-Christians and the other for poor and Dalit Christians. She portrays beautifully the prejudices and distinctions faced at all levels by Dalits. Bama while acknowledging the governmental affirmative programmes, points out the tendencies among the school administration to isolate and humble the studious Dalits, “All the same, every now and then our class teacher would ask all the Harijans to stand up either at the

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assembly, or during the lessons . . . we felt really bad then . . . hanging our heads in shame, as if we had done something wrong. Yes, it was humiliating” (K-21). Bama in rage had said that she did not want special classes but realized she could “not get rid of the caste business easily wherever she went” (K-22). She had lost her temper and challenging them “head on stood her ground and managed to get her way at last. (ibid). Soon she had started taking pride in resisting.

Bama gives us many glimpses of the different activities of the convent, church and people associated with them. And it was in such a mood that she decided to become a nun to help those who got humiliation at the hands of nuns. But the oppressive atmosphere of the convent robbed her of her spirit. “Wherever you look, however much you study, whatever you take up, caste discrimination stalks us in every nook and corner and drives us into frenzy” (K- 26).Bama realized that the worst part of this discrimination is that the oppressed internalized their self-worth (K-27).

Bama also narrates the internal conflict between the lower caste communities. In one of her chapters of the book there is an account of the bloody conflict between the two low castes. When she was eleven years old, there were perpetual confrontations between ‘Paraya’ and ‘Chaaliyar’ communities. Police were on the side of ‘Chaaliyar’ as they were a more powerful community of Dalits. Due to the clash, some of Paraya’s male community were arrested and beaten. Women, according to Bama, had indomitable spirit to bounce back, to live and to earn their sustenance. But this was not favoured by Police and they used obscene language, shoved their guns against their bodies and sometimes forced them to leave their area of work. The police instead of maintaining law and order played a partisan role to safeguard, and strengthen the cause of those who can fill their bellies and swell their pockets. Bama takes cognizance of the material conditions in the social setting. Her plea was for the economic betterment of the downtrodden, and education though rendered ineffective at times, was one of the most self-actualizing remedies open to them. When she became a nun, she had hoped that she will have a chance to put her aspirations of equality, and social justice into effect. She discovered, however, that the perspectives of the convent and the Church were different from hers. She writes about the shallowness of the nuns: “Before they became nuns, these women take a vow that they will live in poverty. But that is just a sham. The convent does know the meaning of



poverty... I began to think, soon after I entered the convent, Chi, is all there is to the life of renunciation. Is there an understanding of poverty here? (K-77-78) Bama refers to her community as bonded labourers, “People of our community work for them (Naicker), each Paraya family is attached to a Naicker family, as panniyaal, bonded labourers.” (K-48) In her episodic narration she points out that in this society, if one is born a Dalit, then he has to live a life of humiliation and perversion until death. Bama in her narrative discourse recounts that during her holidays she too worked in the fields, like pulling groundnut crop, cleaning and sorting the pods or collecting stray onions left in the field. Bama says: “It was always the girl children who had to look after all the chores at home. The older women would come home in the evenings after the day’s work, and then see to the household jobs.” (K-52)

She narrates episodes after episode to point out how the caste-based stereotypes were created and imposed to insult the untouchable. When seven years later, Bama walked out of the convent, new sets of problems awaited her. Leaving her religious order to return to her village, made her realise her special bonding and affinity with her community. Though her wings were clipped, she finds a self-resolve to move forward slowly, step by step. “I have courage; I have a certain pride. I do have a belief that I can live; a desire that I should live” (K-122) she concludes “it is possible to live a meaningful life, a life that is useful to a few others. I comfort myself with the thought that rather than live with a fraudulent smile, it is better to lead a life weeping real tears” (K-122). This autobiographical piece of writing as a speech act is a bare, bald but bold account of a Dalit woman’s struggle against the hegemonic structures. She with pride says, “Each day brings new wounds, but also new understanding, new lessons that experience teaches, sufficient mental strength to rise up even from the edge of defeat.” (K-138) *Karrukku* highlights the arc of the narrator’s transcendent awareness both through the nurturing of her belief as a Christian, and her gradual consciousness of herself as a Dalit. In the Afterword, Bama says that there are thousand difficulties which beset a Dalit woman living on her own: “If it is difficult even to find a means of living, there is also another great difficulty, the difficulty I found in moving about in the outside world, alone. If a woman so much as stands alone and by herself somewhere, all sorts of man gather showing their teeth. However angry you get however repelled by their expressions and their grimaces, even to the point of retching, what can you do on your own?” (K-119) Voicing her own perspective of revolting against the



stated norms of society, However, Bama's work cannot be reduced to an engagement with victimhood. Her works are unique for their literary/aesthetic imagination and narrative style.

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, a Dalit autobiography focuses on the two major problems faced by her Mahar community. Firstly, the repression and exploitation of the Dalit by the upper classes, secondly, the discrimination towards women in a Patriarchal society and their position in their families and communities. *The Prisons We Broke* is an English translation of Marathi novel *Jina Amucha* by Prof. Maya Pandit. The word "Jina Amucha" literary means 'our existence'. This autobiographical novel contains the incidents before her conversion to Buddhism. Baby Kamble begins her narrative with the description of her grandmother's house where she was born and about the life in her village, called Veergaon with focus on her own community people, the Mahars. She has narrated in detail not only her surroundings but her association with it.

As for their domestic utensils, there would be a big clay pot with a small mouth (keli) kept at the entrance for drinking water. The mouth would be covered with a broken coconut shell ('decorated' with three holes at the bottom). It also serves as a cup for drinking the 'mineral' water brought from the open stream. And the way to drink the water is almost acrobatic! 'One had to pour water into the coconut shell, and blocking the holes with one's fingers hastily empty the shell into one's mouth (P-07)....

The hut would have a clay *chulha* (our oven) near which lay a couple of clay pots, a wooden *pali* and a (our nonstick) *tawa*. The *tawa* must have got a hole in its heart due to overuse and no hope of retirement. A *katwat* for rolling the dough and a long piece of tin (not a can) for keeping the *bhakri* while baking it. A grinding stone in one corner, few dust emitting rags used as 'cushion', a small platform, *bhanwas*, with a few clay pots on it. Kamble ridicules, they matched the overall decor of the house" (P-08).'

Through this autobiography, Kamble recapitulates their mental and physical trauma, their marriages, problems as housemaid, brutalization, dehumanization, despair and agony in an artistic manner and argues that dalit feminist problems are understood only by dalit women, as dalits' problems are understood only by dalits and not by non-dalits. The inhuman practice of untouchability, though a punishable crime, pervades the life of the Dalits. Baby so



panoramicly describes the situation of her community in the text:

Come to think of it, what kind of life did these people really lead? What was there worth living for? Generation after generation wasted away in the senseless worship of stones, in utter misery. Generation after generation perished. But it is a basic human need to hope for change. The tiny sapling of hope was reared in their hearts too. It grew tall, drawing strength from the iron in their souls (P-11)

She narrates, “Such was the condition of our people. We were just like animals, but without tails. We could be called human only because we had two legs instead of four. Otherwise, there was no difference between us and the animals’(P-49) She justifies her anger towards higher class and Hindu philosophy:

Hindu Philosophy had discarded us as dirt and thrown us into their garbage pits, on the outskirts of the village. We lived in the filthiest conditions possible. Yet, Hindu rites and rituals were dearest to our hearts... We desperately tried to preserve whatever bit of culture we managed to lay our hands on...And no one tried to understand us. Our minds somehow kept on hoping against hope that we too would be able to enjoy wealth like the Patil’s wife and practice the same rituals as them. (P-18).

Kamble describes many events similar to upper class people’s festivals and rituals. In another incident, she re-counts that Mahars were so ignorant that they did not know whether a child suffering from high fever is unconscious or dead. She herself was declared to be dead when she was two and half years old. She was unconscious due to fever and her family pronounced her dead. When she was about to be buried, one of her elderly relative noticed her breathing and she was declared alive. She writes how her community people continued to lead their lives in ignorance and abject poverty. They had been treated so badly for a continuous thousand years or more that they were reduced to the level of animals. She narrates in detail the bitter experiences of survival with grotesque reality:

During an epidemic, the house would be flooded with huge mounds of meat. The Mahars considered animal epidemics like diphtheria or dysentery a boon ... We cut off the infected parts full of puss, and convinced ourselves that it was now safe to eat the meat... After a woman kept the basket on her head; her children would give the stick to her. The woman would balance the basket on her head with one hand, and with the other, she would continuously ward off flies and birds, all the while loudly chanting ‘ghar, ghar, ghar’ The women started homewards, walking through the village, warding the birds off with their shouts. Their heads would be drenched with blood, puss and other putrid secretions oozing out of the meat. Rivulets of sweat mixed with the blood and puss would run down their faces and onto their bodies, already coated with grime and muck... (P-86)



She further narrates about the patriarchal hegemony within and outside Mahar community. The violence inflicted on dalit women by high caste men and women on one side, and by dalit men, their husband and other relatives like father, brother, father-in-law, brother-in-law, on the other hand, finds detailed description in her novel. She recounts, ‘Once we went to Mumbai to attend a meeting, we travelled in a general compartment that was very crowded and some young men happened to stare at me. My husband immediately suspected me and hit me so hard that my nose started bleeding profusely...The same evening we returned and he was so angry that he kept hitting me.’(P-155) Emotions, violence, bewilderment, fear, gender discrimination, rage, caste humiliation, triple exploitation and poverty take prominent place in her narratives. Kamble, by the end of her Autobiography, asserts that “Baba’s words show me the way; I decided to begin my struggle through my writing. I followed Baba’s advice verbatim, to the best of my ability” (P- 135). Her promise attests her commitments. She summons the Dalits into action towards the annihilation of the ‘prisons’ through education, accretion, adhering to the principles of Ambedkarite movement, economic independence etc. and, if needed, through ‘war’. She praises Dr. Ambedkar as a messiah, who was the most educated dalit and therefore could lead them to the truth. She says, “He was our Bhim who rescued us from a terrible fate.” Bama and Baby Kamble both by the end of their autobiographical novels hope, ‘There will come a day when all men and women will live as one and they are pearls pushed to the depth of the sea, they are diamonds buried at the bottom of the earth. Enough...stop...consider them - a human being.’

As Guy Poitevin (2002), in the context of such dalit narratives, points out, “Women’s testimonies make us discover a female world of hidden feelings of dissent and moves of subdued revolt under the yoke of endured humiliations as memories drift back and past days and years are recreated. Specific ways and motives of a shared feminine sensitivity and cultural creativity are highlighted, as nowhere else.” Sharmila Rege also clarifies the genre as it washed out the ‘I’, an outcome of bourgeois individualism and displaced it with the collective community of the dalits. (323). The voices of these women dalit writers have yet a long way to go, but their writings have indeed served as a powerful instrument of catharsis for the dalits.



Notes

1. The ‘Riddles Controversy’ was a hugely generated collective support from the Dalit masses of India for the publication of an essay written by Ambedkar entitled “Riddles of Rama and Krishna” criticizing the two Hindu Gods. The Government of Maharashtra funded for it, Shiv Sena supremo Bal Thackeray opposed it diehard. The Congress government had to be retained the chapter and the controversy died slowly.
2. The words of D. Javalkar’s Desaca Dusman, in an essay attacked Chipulankar and Tilak for discrimination. It is referred in Preface of *Unheard Voices of Dalit Literature* (ed), Satendra Kumar, Yking Books: Jaipur: 2012.

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