

**Breaking the Silence: Emergence of Rational and Rebellious Dalit Women
in *Karukku, Sangati and Harum Scarum Saar and other stories***

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the representation of rationality, resistance, and emerging agency among Dalit women in the writings of Bama, focusing on *Karukku*, *Sangati*, and *Harum Scarum Saar and Other Stories*. Situated within the intersecting frameworks of Dalit studies and feminist discourse, the study challenges the stereotypical portrayal of Dalits as passive sufferers and highlights the everyday acts of defiance through which Dalit women negotiate oppressive caste and patriarchal structures.

The analysis reveals that Dalit women experience a dual marginalization—subjection to caste discrimination from dominant social groups and patriarchal control within their own communities. By depicting characters such as Paachiamma, Mariamma, Rakamma, and Vellaiamma Kizhavi, Bama illustrates how small acts of courage and dissent function as significant forms of social and psychological resistance. The autobiographical narrative voice in *Karukku* further exposes institutional discrimination within educational and religious spaces, thereby critiquing the hypocrisy of structures that claim to uphold equality and compassion.

The paper argues that Bama's works reframe Dalit women as conscious, articulate, and politically aware subjects whose resilience and courage challenge entrenched systems of inequality and open possibilities for social transformation.

Keywords: Dalit feminism, protest literature, resistance; subaltern voices, social justice.

In the acknowledgement section of *Sangati*, Bama points out:

My mind is crowded with many anecdotes; stories not only about the sorrows and tears of Dalit women, but also about their lively and rebellious culture, their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter them; but to swim vigorously against the tide; about the self confidence and self-respect that enables them to leap over the threatening adversities by laughing at and ridiculing them; about the passion to live life with vitality, truth and enjoyment. (ix)

If we analyse the noteworthy works of Bama, we will realize that it would be wrong to presume that Dalits are passive and subordinate individuals who silently endure all the pain and torture that are inflicted upon them. History has shown us that injustice and pain can only be endured to a certain level. When individuals are reduced to such derogatory position that they do not even have their basic fundamental rights, protest becomes inevitable. In *Harum Scarum Saar and other stories*, Bama introduces us to rebellious women who, instead of accepting misery and suffering as their fate, have asserted their individual views and expressed their reluctance to abide by oppressive norms which serve to increase their plight. Sometimes protest comes in the form of an organized rebellion against an individual who is presented to us as a symbol of power, influence and authority. In “Chilli Powder”, we find the courage and tenacity of Paachiamma, an ordinary dalit worker who refuses to bow down before the wealthy and powerful Gangamma. Gangamma, by virtue of her wealth and influence, is able to arouse fear in the hearts of dalit workers except Paachiamma. When Gangamma throws chilli powder into the eyes of Paachiamma for cutting grass from her field, all dalit workers are motivated by the latter to fight back against such inhuman atrocity.

In *Sangati*, we find how a young girl like Maikaani who works in a match factory becomes ready to join other children of her age to protest against upper caste children when they call Bernath's granddaughter 'a paraiya'. Perhaps it is the realisation that they all belong to the marginalized sections of Indian society that unites the dalits to protest against injustice and baseless social norms.

Unfortunately, dalit men are reluctant to provide a separate platform to the women of their community to express their views. At home, they can vent out their anger and frustration on their helpless wives and children because they have no other way to protest against the humiliation to which they are subjected in their workplaces. Thus, they feel that if dalit women are made aware of their rights and they resolve to protest against oppressive patriarchal norms, it would be impossible for them to maintain their supremacy in society. *Sangati* shows us how women are never allowed to express their views and opinion in meetings organized by village councils. They must be present as mute spectators who are ready to accept all the decisions taken by the male members. Even if dalit women try to express their views, their suggestions are dismissed as irrelevant. Whenever they stand up as witnesses in favour of an innocent individual who has been accused of a crime, they are abused in harsh terms. Both Anandamma and Susaiamma in *Sangati* are silenced by the male members of village council when they try to support Mariamma who is publicly humiliated due to a false charge brought against her by Kumarsami Aiyya. In fact, the way in which the leaders of the village council order the women to be excluded from important meetings reveal the reality that dalit men are perhaps afraid of the issues and facts which may be raised by the so-called ignorant women. Bama has candidly underlined the fear of dalit men to face the questions of their female counterparts.

Sometimes in dalit society, protest comes in the form of the courage of a lady who refuses to conform to social norms which have been laid down as models of acceptable conduct. In Hindu society, it is mandatory for a married woman to wear a mangalsutra for the long life and well-being of her husband. Marriage, as a social institution, is based upon mutual trust and understanding and both the husband and wife must have certain responsibilities toward the family and also each other. However, it has always been observed that even if a husband refuses to execute his duties, a wife must always remain loyal to him and perform her duties. Even our sacred epics like *The Ramayana* has highlighted the message of selflessness and commitment that a lady is expected to follow. In *Sangati*, Bama shows us a courageous woman like Vellaiyamma Kizhavi who goes to the extent of selling her mangalsutra when she is deserted by her husband Govindan. Unlike Sita who silently accepts the decision of her husband to abandon her in order to set an example in front of the subjects, Vellaiyamma's decision seems to be as significant as Nora's protest in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. When Nora takes the decision to leave Torvald's house, she points out to her husband that before being a wife and a mother, she is an individual whose first duty is to herself- "That I don't believe anymore. I believe that first and foremost I am an individual, just as much as you are- or at least I'm going to be."¹

While most of the upper caste women silently endure domestic violence and put up a mask of contentment and perfect bliss, dalit women like Peechiamma can go to the extent of appealing to the village council for a separation from her husband who never contributes towards the welfare of the family and squanders his income in drinks. For the well-being of her children, Peechiamma marries for the second time. Taking into consideration the fact that

¹ Ibsen, Henrik. *A Doll's House*. Trans. James Walter Mcfarland (New York: OUP, 1978) 84

dalit women are pushed to the margins of existence, such bold and courageous steps must be appreciated. Ponnuthayi also rejects the ideals associated with the institution of marriage. She resolves to come out of an unhappy marriage and pursue her own dreams. Despite their respectable position in society, upper caste women cannot show the courage of raising their voices against the oppression of their husbands. But dalit women who do not even have a chance to receive education in school turn out to be independent and assertive. Several noteworthy feminists including Simone de Beauvoir have highlighted the fact that progress can be made by women when they have the courage to take steps towards happy and secure future, often by seeking separation from their oppressive husbands.

In *Sangati*, protest also comes in the form of refusal to accept false accusations levied on dalit women. Not only are dalit women constrained to bear domestic violence but they are also the victims of lust of upper caste men in workplace. Even if an upper caste man commits a heinous offence, he can easily escape from punishment by virtue of his wealth and position in society. A dalit woman who shows the strength of fighting for justice is reduced to an object of public humiliation and sometimes she is also compelled to pay compensation. *Sangati* shows us how influential upper caste men like Kumarsami Aiyya can attempt to molest Mariamma and then circulate a fictitious story to malign her character. Contrary to our expectations that Mariamma will accept the false charge of misconduct brought against her, we find the brave girl fighting for justice. Mariamma's friends in *Sangati* makes her aware of the grim reality- "If you even try to tell people what actually happened, you'll find that it is you who will get the blame; it is you who will be called a whore." (20)

In the village council meeting, fingers are pointed at the innocent Mariamma and people express doubt as to whether it is possible for an upper caste man to even touch a dalit woman.

Mariamamma's trial reminds us of the struggle of Bhanwari Devi, a poor dalit porter from Rajasthan, who was gang-raped for protesting against the marriage of the nine-year old daughter of an influential member of the Gurjar community. When Bhanwari Devi was produced in court, the judge went to the extent of asking as to whether it was possible for upper caste men to even touch dalit women. While Mariamma is asked to pay a fine of one hundred rupees, Bhanwari Devi's family was ostracized, her son Mukesh was beaten up in college and she was threatened to withdraw her case in return for a small amount of money. Despite all attempts on the part of the criminals, Bhanwari Devi continued to fight for justice for almost twelve years till the story attracted the attention of people across the globe.

Often dalit women take recourse to verbal violence to escape the unbearable torture of their husbands. In *Sangati*, we find the quarrel between Rakamma and her husband Paakiraj. Rakamma constantly hurls abuses at her husband just to ensure that he leaves her alone and does not subject her to further humiliation. To common people, Rakamma's conduct may seem unacceptable and even indecent but the narrator realizes that if the lady had not behaved in such a manner, she would have been subjected to more intense form of torture- "But later, I realized that it was only after she screamed and shouted and behaved like that he let her go. I realized that she acted in that way because it was her only means of escape." (62)

Rakamma's speech which is charged with violence reminds us of Ammasi in Bama's short story "Annachi" who refused to offer his seat to his father's landlord. Though Ammasi is subjected to criticism, he sticks to his decision to address the landlord as elder brother. Paakiraj, Rakamma's husband, is completely taken aback to hear his wife abusing him in such derogatory terms. This also reminds us of another character, Puthiyamuthu. When his employer asks Puthiyamuthu as to what they should do after the latter has finished a series of

household chores, the furious dalit servant replies that the landlord must summon his wife so that he can spend some enjoyable moments with her. It is significant that *Harum Scarum Saar and other stories* was initially called *Kisumbukkaran* which can be translated as ‘rebellious prankster’. The kinds of protest which we find in the different stories included in this collection cannot be regarded as significant rebellion that would change the condition of the downtrodden sections of society. Rather the protests are simple in nature. Sometimes an ordinary dalit refuses to give special respect to an influential landlord. In other cases, poor dalits refuse to accept the sympathy of their cruel employers. Though none of the stories highlight a kind of protest which can be called revolutionary, they demonstrate the fact that being exposed to years of injustice have filled the dalits with anger and they have resolved to fight for their basic rights with confidence.

The most appreciable form of protest comes from the narrator in *Karukku* who decides to follow the instructions of her elder brother and empower herself through education. Being subjected to unjust discrimination in educational institution as well as workplace, she realizes that she can contribute towards the well-being of her community only after she becomes educated and independent. The narrator rightly observes- “Yet because I had the education, because I had the ability, I dared to speak up for myself; I didn’t care a toss about caste. Whatever the situation, I held my head high.” (20)

In *Karukku*, the narrator boldly protests against everything which seemed unjust to her. She expresses strong anger against the atrocities to which dalits are subjected. Her voice represents the voice of the educated and rational dalit who has the courage to fight for her rights. Whether it is discrimination in school, college, hostel and even in the Church, every

prominent evil comes under her scathing attack. She points out in a logical manner the plight of the dalits:

How is it that people consider us too gross even to sit next to us when travelling? They look at us with the same look they cast on someone suffering from a repulsive disease. Wherever we go, we suffer blows. And pain. Is there never to be any relief? It doesn't seem to matter whether people are educated or not. They'll go about filled with caste hatred. (24)

In *Karukku*, when the narrator appeals to her college authority to grant leave so that she can go home to attend the first communion of her brother and sister, the Principal and warden sister express their reluctance and even question the relevance of observing such ritual in the dalit community. The narrator displays outstanding courage by sticking to her decision:

The more they spoke, the more I felt a wild rage impelling me to go, come what may. So I stood my ground obstinately. I managed to get my way at last by insisting that there cannot be different rules for different castes, only the same rules for everyone. (19)

The narrator joins the convent with the sole desire to help struggling students of her community. The corruption and hypocrisy which she observes within the convent fills her with rage. Instead of remaining silent, she candidly underlines her feelings:

But I understood, after I entered the order, that the convent I entered didn't even care to glance at poor children, and only wished to serve the children of the wealthy. In that convent they really do treat the people who suffer from poverty in one way, and those who have money in their pockets in a totally different way. (66)

Her views about nuns and priests can be considered to be highly critical as she observes how the so-called servants of God delivered lofty sermons about benevolence and humanity but in reality, supported those who were wealthy and powerful. In *Karukku*, the narrator points out:

There was no love to be found in the convent, among these people who declared all the time that God is loving. There was no love for the poor and the humble. They claimed that God's love is limitless, subject to no conditions. Yet inside the convent there were innumerable conditions about how you should be and who you were in order to deserve their love. When outsiders arrived, flaunting their wealth and education, they were treated with one sort of love; if they did not have these things, they were treated in quite a different way, and I am not sure that there was any love at all in this case. They shout themselves hoarse that God is just, they sing to this effect in their hymns. But it is injustice that dances like a demon in the convents, and within all the institutions that are run by these people. They say with melting hearts, *Our God*, is a forgiving God. But if you look within, they seem to go about always saying, who is it, when and what is it, Hit him, Punish him. Their very words are barbed, like arrows. Nobody who gets in the way of their own conscience is let off easily. (93)

Dalits who are tortured and humiliated everywhere try to find solace by converting to Christianity which upholds the message of universal love and brotherhood. Jesus had always attached great importance to virtues like piety and it would be natural to assume that Christian priests and nuns would welcome people of all castes with open arms and shower their affection on them. However, after joining convent, the narrator is able to realize that the message of love and humanity preached by Christian priests and nuns have no significance in

reality. Instead of lapsing into silence, Bama raises her voice of protest against the hypocrisy of Christian priests:

I learnt that God has always shown the greatest compassion for the oppressed. And Jesus, too associated himself mainly with the poor. Yet nobody had stressed this nor pointed it out. All those people who taught us, had taught us only that God is loving, kind, gentle, one who forgives sinners, patient, humble, obedient. Nobody had insisted that God is just, righteous, is angered by injustices, opposes falsehood, never countenances inequality. There is a great deal of difference between this Jesus and the Jesus who is made known through daily pieties. The oppressed are not taught him; but rather, are taught in an empty and meaningless way about humility, obedience, patience and greatness. (90)

For ages, people have silently endured the hypocrisy of authorities associated with the Church. Under a veil of benevolence, they have always been interested in advancing their personal interests. They have enjoyed patronage of the wealthy and influential classes. On one hand, they took great interest in making the masses aware of the values of justice, kindness and humanity. On the other hand, they maintained close association with affluent families. This wide gulf between what they preach and what they practice in reality comes under the attack of the narrator in *Karukku*:

.....There seems to be one God within the Church and another outside. I was extremely bewildered by all these different versions of God. But they seemed to have no problem either with creating these different versions or with juggling smartly between all of them. You have to admit, it takes a kind of skill. (93)

Priests can be considered to be our spiritual guides, serving as link or intermediaries between the Omnipotent Almighty and the masses. Ironically, the narrator in *Karukku* shows us another side of this popular belief. Instead of providing solace and comfort, religion only serves as an instrument to misguide people:

In the name of God, they actually rob from the poor who struggle for their very livelihood. They teach them to shut their eyes when they pray with the deliberate intention that they should not open their eyes and see. They teach them to shackle their arms together and to prostrate themselves in prayer at full length on the ground so that they should never stand tall. What kind of piety can this be? They make themselves into Gods so that they can exploit others. So where has God gone? The so-called Gods walking here are the priests and nuns and their relations; no other. (94)

After joining a boarding school as a teacher, the narrator is filled with hope that she will be able to bring about significant changes in the lives of dalit students. She becomes a part of a school for destitute children but she realizes that it is impossible to change the mindset of her fellow teachers and students. The narrator observes that Christian priests and nuns deliberately differentiate between dalit and upper caste students. Special privileges were given to children from wealthy families:

Each class was full of children from wealthy families. They sat in rows, sleek and well-fed. All they had to do was to be light- skinned and arrive in cars.....the rich children would say, We don't want to sit next to these ones, they are dark skinned, they are poor, they are ugly, they don't wear nice clothes.... (47)

An educational institution must thrive on the principle of impartiality and equal opportunities must be provided to students for all-round personality development. But dalit students are

never given any scope to develop their potential and teachers deliberately follow a policy of discrimination to undermine the confidence of dalit students. These students are made to feel there can be no possibility for improvement and they are destined to endure the pangs of poverty. One of the most prominent issues which provokes the anger of the narrator in *Karukku* is the partiality of self-centred teachers who ruin the confidence of dalit students:

Besides the usual lessons, they could have educated the dalit children in many matters, and made them aware of their situation in the world about them. But instead everything they said to the children, everything in the manner in which they directed them suggested, that this was the way it was meant to be for the dalits; that there was no possibility of change. And mainly because of this, those children seemed to accept everything as their fate. As I saw all this, I became very troubled in my mind. I was angry: I thought to myself, what sort of nuns are these, they claim that they are helping the poor and the needy. Yet this is how they are at times I confronted them and argued with them. (89)

Like the prominent characters in Bama's works, the only way for dalits is to assert their individuality by registering their protest against oppressive norms. As Bama rightly suggests in *Karukku*:

We who are asleep must open our eyes and look about us. We must not accept the injustice of our enslavement by telling ourselves that it is our fate; as if we have no true feeling. We must dare to stand up for change. We must crush all these institutions that use caste to bully us into submission, and demonstrate that among human beings there are none who are high or low. Those who have found their happiness by

exploiting us are not going to let us go easily. It is. We who have to place them where they belong and bring about a changed and just society where all are equal. (25)

To regain their confidence and make constant efforts to move forward despite all obstacles is the message given by Bama to every member of her community. In *Karukku*, she points out:

Just as people throw sticks and stones to wound a wingless bird, many people have wounded me with their words and deeds. Yet I know I'm moving forward slowly, step by step. (104)

The uniqueness of Bama lies is the fact that she has succeeded in focussing upon the resilience of dalit women who, despite being deprived of quality education have refused to be regulated by baseless patriarchal and social norms. They are not scared to accept the fact that their bold steps might have adverse impact on their lives. Rather, they bravely assert their views with confidence to set appreciable examples and prove that they are not destined to a silence which bewildered us in Coetzee's *Foe*.

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