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SERVITUDE TO SURVIVAL AND SELF ESTEEM: THE ANTI-HEGIMONIC REVIVAL OF EXCEPTIONALLY BOLD DALIT WOMEN CHARACTERS

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Abstract

Dalit Literature forms an effective critique of the deep rooted views on caste, class and gender. The importance of dalit writings lies in the fact that reality is better understood when expressed out of experience rather than the uninvolved observations and assumptions. In female dalit writing scenario, expression of socio – cultural and economic oppression subsides and the platform opens for the presentation of protest and struggle for self honour and entity. Nowadays dalit women find their own space in almost all the social realms and mark their signature. While the educated and popular dalit women activists drag the world attention to their issues, the common women who are illiterate and still in a poor condition strongly react to the condemned attitude of the society and give a new dimension to dalit feminism. This paper aims at analysing the brave women characters – famous for their multidimensional agency as well as the capacity to protest against the oppressive elements within the limitations imposed on them - in Bama's short stories "Ponnuthayi" and "Chilli Powder" appear in the collection Harum - Scarum Saar & other short stories (2006). These stories present women characters who challenge the hegemonic hold of the caste and gender roles on them. The paper proceeds to analyse the various feministic strategies of their protest which is of course the stepping stone for their successful existence in the society.

Key-Words

Gender, Caste, Hegemony, Agency, Self Actualization

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Caste system and its human discrimination may be the longest surviving hierarchical system in the world itself and unfortunately is still in existence. Denial of the human status results in considering the dalits to be 'polluting' hence the untouchables. Their poverty coupled with illiteracy aggravates this deprivation of basic human rights over centuries. Inspired by a number of dalit revolutionists like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Jyothilal Phule etc. as well as the movements such as Black Panther Movement dalits started to revolt against the socio-economic oppressive elements. According to the dalit critic Ruth Manorama, "the word dalit became a symbol of assertive pride and resistance to the linked oppressions of caste and class" (256).

The Dalit Movements could achieve incredible development in their socio economic status. Intentionally or not the dalit activists and writers failed in acknowledging the gender issues of their community. The main stream feminism flourished in the late twentieth century also could not bring forth the sufferings of dalit women particularly. There happened what the famous critic Sharmila Rege terms as "the classical exclusion" which includes "savarnisation of womanhood" and the "masculinisation of dalithood" (Nov 1998 91). No one is interested in addressing the problems of the 'dalit among the dalits' or the 'downtrodden among the downtroddens'.

Dalit women form the largest number of work force, who is paid the lowest. Their working conditions are exploitative and dehumanising in nature considering the dalit

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women to be inferior to any living substance. Sexual molestation at work place is one of the major problems of dalit women. They objectify the dalit woman to be the piece of flesh to satisfy their sexual needs and are of the notion that these women have no sense of honour or shame. Along with such mental and physical pressure, the dalit woman has to undergo the bitterness of internal patriarchy. This three-tire oppression on the basis of class, caste and gender makes the lives of dalit women the worst. In Ruth Manorama's words, "the lives of dalit women have been characterised by "Culture of silence" as they have lacked a political, economic and social "space for utterance" for centuries" (259). The late twentieth century movements, education and the awareness of social injustice make them understood their capabilities and the right for human status. This results in the blossoming of a number of dalit feminists and social activists.

Bama, the upcoming Tamil dalit writer and activist is one among them whose literary contribution attains world wide acceptance and is famous for her novels *Karukku*, *Sangathi* and *Vanmam*. The fierce and open writing style of Bama explicates the poor condition of dalit women and also encompasses their resistive measures in different situations. Anecdotal in nature, her works contain the realistic flavour and hence are the best encouraging books for the dalit woman in finding her own entity and identity. It is impossible to find an exception among Bama's works in presenting at least one superwoman characters who fight back to the inhuman activities.

Unlike the stereotyped submissive dalit women characters, Bama's characters which are drawn from her surroundings itself are strong and wilful in their nature. Not only in fiction but also in her short stories, she depicts female characters with self-respect and capacity to design their lives. "Chilli Powder" and "Ponnuthayi" are two of the short stories by Bama appear in her short story collection *Harum Scarum Saar & Other Short stories*. While "Chilli Powder" deals with the protest against casteism as well as the power of group work, "Ponnuthayi" points to the sexist hierarchical power structure replicated within the community and female willpower to overcome it. The characters Pachayamma and Ponnuthayi from "Chilli Powder" and "Ponnuthayi" respectively show the traits of unique identity and strong willpower. The effective reactions of the strong female characters and its impact on society gain Bama's works contemporary relevance.

In "Chilli Powder", Bama presents the rift and grudge between women belong to two different classes. Though the women share many gender biases in common, they always try to find further divisions to degrade the other. Here Gangamma- the rich upper class woman- is trying to cause maximum difficulties for the dalit women group involving Pachayamma, Berayi and Kalathi. With their altered social perceptions, these women are not ready to surrender before the caste based atrocities. Being unafraid to react, they make weapons from their weakness itself. The dalit women are considered to be illiterate and

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uncultured and hence there is no code of conduct for them. These imposed indignities are turn into the weapons to protest against the social and patriarchal hierarchical orders to which the so-called cultured ones have to surrender.

Women are the bread winners in most of the dalit families where the men are either alchaholics or abusive in nature. Pachayamma of "Chilli Powder" has to find her own ways to sustain her family. The conflict between Gangamma and Pachayamma starts when the former catches Pachayamma red handed cutting grass and eating mangoes from the orchard. Though she escapes that time, Pachayamma gets trapped later for the same. Instead of neglecting this silly issue, Gangamma inflames this to be a big crime and throws chilli powder into Pachayamma's eyes. Pachayamma, unlike the submissive and silent dalit woman stereotype, gets infuriated and reacts fiercely by showering verbal abuses and she even goes to the extent of calling Gangamma a 'whore-widow'. Gangamma also uses abusive language and attacking the weakness of Pachayamma's community. The face to face verbal confrontation shows the dalit woman's strive towards self dignity and it can be done by only a superwoman in dalit scenario. Pachayamma curses her until she gets satisfied for the insult and physical torture she had.

Infuriated Pachayamma spreads gossips about Gangamma with her friends as a reaction to her tyrannical nature. Here the ground level defensive strategies of the victims against the perpetrators are presented with a pinch of humour. By giving the nickname 'molagappodi' for Gangamma, Pachayamma gets a psychological satisfaction of resistance. Gangamma takes revenge on Pachayamma by trapping her with a group of companions while plucking cotton pods from her farm. Even though Gangamma knows the pathetic condition of the dalit women which forced them to do it, she makes it a criminal offence. With her economic and political influence, she makes the policemen take the poor women to the police station in a tractor. On the way, Pachayamma asks the permission to pee but she is not allowed. On reaching the station, she lifts her cloths and pees right there. All her friends do the same as a protest to the system that does not allow them to find something to fill their stomach. They are ready to work but the hegemonic system is reluctant to give any work or wages for them. The only way to keep them alive is to find something from the surroundings for which they got arrested now. At the peak of such sufferings, the women get impatient and start to react in their own ways. They argue that they do not even have the status of an animal and hence there is no need of behaving in the expected ways of the 'cultured society'.

Fed up with the activities of the women, the policeman asks a fine of Rs 10 from each of them for which they answer sarcastically thus: "What a joke! We can't even buy some broken rice to make kanji at home and he demands ten rupees! Ten rupees! Whom are you trying to fool? We don't have a single coin to buy even a small packet of snuff, you know that!" (38). The only solution for the helpless policemen is to leave the women as

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soon as possible. Though Gangamma has the influence, she could not stand up to the dalit women who work and react as a group. On the way back, the dalit women themselves identify the power of their unity in destroying the hierarchical power. The attainment and maintenance of personal autonomy and challenging the systems show the superwoman in Pachayamma.

Women have already started to show their courage indistinctively against all the opposing factors such as upper caste monopoly, political interferences moreover the government itself. The emancipation starts from the low level in their own community and Bama is a vibrant recorder of such superwomen and their activities to give maximum encouragement to the dalit women community as well as to show the world how versatile and capable the 'indignified' dalit woman is.

"Ponnuthayi", a short story by Bama, explores the dark side of internal patriarchy and a determined woman's reaction. Bama dismantles the deep rooted notions of the concept 'woman' through the title character Ponnuthayi. Her ability to reverse the dynamics that entrench gender inequality results in attaining the superwoman self. Here Ponnuthayi's life becomes eventful when she becomes the wife of an alcoholic and abusive man - Mookandi. She is not ready to be the silent victim of her husband's atrocious nature and thus decides to break the shackles of the marriage institution which confines her. Ponnuthayi - the married young woman and the mother of four children - walks away from her family and responsibilities, earns herself and above all lives alone serving hot news to the local scandal-mongers in her community.

Leaving the abusive husband is not a big deal among dalit women but leaving four children with the husband evokes great shock in the society. Despite gender everyone wonders how a mother can leave her children for no reason. Strong Ponnuthayi answers thus: "Are the children only mine? It was to ward off his violence that I gave birth to them, one by one. After two, I wanted to stop, but he objected and brought me back. Now let him look after them" (96). The intense feminist reply keeps everyone's mouth closed. The superwoman in her questions the age old ideologies which throw all the burdens on the woman's shoulders in an estrangement.

Ponnuthayi is not a woman who abandoned her family on one fine morning. She did compromise, adjust and had a lot of sufferings. There emerges a sense of protest as the limit crosses and she executes it as such. Grabbing her daily wages and the sale of her milk cow which filled her children's belly are some of the tortures done by the 'responsible' husband. Though she tries hard to sustain the family life, she never wants to continue the life under patriarchal superiority. Ponnuthayi is bold enough to tackle the hindrances that limit her. She never wants to blindly follow the people around her and thus rejects working in the fields of the upper class people with the status of a slave and low wage. Despite her ignorance she goes to market which her companions never do, buys things and sells from

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house to house. For the dalit women community, going to market or doing business is beyond their rights. Such things are only meant for upper class community or at least dalit men. This independence is intolerable for both the men and women of her community. The instance of Ponnuthayi's use of tooth brush creates wonder and jealous among the dalit women for whom it is the symbol of sophisticated life style. Being a rebel in the community, Ponnuthayi evokes wide range of criticism from her own people. The dalit women's envy for her coincide their secret urge for becoming 'Ponnuthayies.

Before getting estranged from each other, once after a violent quarrel, people see Ponnuthayi runs towards the fields with her heavy bleeding head and thought she must be in search of some wells to end up her life. Ponnuthayi runs to the police station and complains against her husband for domestic violence with proof. The policemen catch Mookandi and make him undergo the required punishments and physical tortures. This incident brings a mixed response from the community. Kuruvamma, one of her neighbours says: "How long could she bear everything? Didn't she take all the beating he gave her? This kind of fellows should be handed over to the police. Only then will the other fellows stop being abusive" (98). While Kuruvamma says thus, Kuppuswami accuses Mookandi as: "Is he a man? What a fool! She took him to the police station and made him beaten up and he still lets her live! Useless fellow! I would have strangled her in the police station itself" (98). These two responses are the perfect examples of the intense patriarchal attitude of the man and the suppressed urge for emancipation of the woman in dalit community. The parents of Ponnuthayi are not an exception. They both force her to apologise Mookandi for the unforgivable mistake she committed.

Toward s the end of the story, Ponnuthayi reconstructs the gender roles by selling her *thali* and starting a shop contains goods to be sold in the market. Though her insistence on leaving the abusive spouse earns her the censure of most of her community, she remains firm in her decision. The act of leaving children with him does not show her irresponsibility or lack of love but it is a reminder for the men community of their responsibilities which they purposefully neglect. Ponnuthayi is of course an exception but her entity is the secret dream of the entire oppressed dalit women.

The presentation of the changed perceptions in dalit feministic writings is a stepping stone for great revolutionary acts. Even though subject to multiple oppressions comparing to the upper class women, dalit woman has the agency and capacity to fight back. She is free from the notions of 'good woman' restrictions. Her capacity is beyond the expectation level. She does the job of a midwife, local healer, field labourer and above all the provider of the family. She is a super woman who is capable enough to have an autonomous self, potential to reconstruct the gender roles, development of advanced insight and foresight, independent lifestyle. All these characteristics may not provide her a 'positive' image in the society as she reverses the conventions and contradicts the

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expectations like Elaine Showalter's 'New Woman'. Being exceptionally bold, these women characters of Bama become the synonyms of empowerment in the society that has been structured to devalue her very essence as a woman. The world starts to know about such illiterate feminists whose selves are not fictional through such feministic writers. The monolithic projection of dalit woman's oppression takes away for the reality of their zest for life and positive approach. The dalit feministic writings with exceptionally bold women characters contribute a lot in the moving up of dalit women in the social scale and coming in direct competition with all the realms of the society.

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