



Emergence of the Autonomous Self from the Institutional Matrices: A Study of Bama and Lee Maracle's Life Narratives

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ABSTRACT: The entry of women into the many spheres of public domain has become a reality only in the recent past. Yet, they are still an accorded minority, when the majority of women across the world are oppressed, marginalized and powerless. Among many ways of countering the dominant protocols of power, life writing has become an effective tool. Life writing enables every woman to narrate her story in her own language and from her own perspective. For this purpose, the paper tries to examine the life narratives authored by a Dalit woman and a First Nations Canadian woman. Though both narratives vary spatially and culturally, there are many points of intersection in the manner and method they had been marginalized. This paper attempts to study the underlining similarities and differences.

KEY WORDS: Autonomous Self, Collective oppression, Life Writing, Marginalization, and Women.

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Since times immemorial, women were excluded from almost all disciplines. However, though this was changing gradually, they are still a visible minority. Women are relegated to the periphery of the society. Women have started to realize their collective oppression with the consciousness-raising movements during second-wave feminism, and started to raise their voice against the dominant other. Writing becomes an effective medium to counter the marginalization. As in the words of Susie Tharu, "women's texts, (we) argue, challenge the new authorities in a variety of ways, but also often help consolidate the protocols of power." (40)

The marginalized literature is a new way of presenting their suffering and hardship to the world. Through their literature, they critique the dominant group and the ideologies that have been suppressing their lives. The present study focuses on how the oppressed women realize their oppressed position in the society and how they counter their oppression in various forms. The paper reviews the debut works of Bama, Tamil Dalit writer, and Lee Maracle a First Nations woman in Canada. Though they are culturally diverse, they both encounter similarities of oppression, which are highlighted in the paper. Also, it examines how they counter their oppression in multiple forms and assert their identities.

Lee Maracle is a native inhabitant of Canada. The Canadian society is racially divided and the marker of marginalization is the colour of their skin, hair and eyes and thus considers Whites as superior. Thus the identity marker of colour becomes visible in Western culture and the native inhabitants are all oppressed. However, with the advent of colonialism, the half-breed communities started to emerge. In cases of half-breed children, one cannot decide a person's identity with the colour of their skin. The chosen author Lee Maracle is light in colour and thus people are often confused with her identity. Once the aboriginals were called Indians, but later it was replaced with the term First Nations which denotes all the Aborigines in Canada.

The chosen writer Lee Maracle often focuses on indigenous rights, the oppression and marginalization of First Nations in her writings. Her *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel* is a life-narrative which focuses on how Maracle's 'self' emerges as a First Nations Canadian woman. She also highlights the issues of Indigenous Canadian women. She is currently working as a mentor for indigenous students in the University of Toronto. Bama, a Tamil Dalit writer, resides in Tamil Nadu, South India. As she belongs to a Dalit (paraya) community, she encounters discrimination constantly throughout her life as the Indian socio-cultural order classifies people based on their caste, belonging to a single race. According to *Manusmriti*, there are four varnas- the Brahmanas, the Kshatriyas, the Vaisyas, and the Shudras. Dalits are not categorized under the four varnas, and forms a fifth

category, and considered ‘untouchables.’ Later with Ambedkar, the term ‘Dalit’ has been replaced and used to denote people who are all oppressed socially, economically and culturally. Unlike the racial segregation, where identity marker is visible, the caste oppression is not explicitly visible. However, it is considered an ascribed status and is not subject to change and Dalits are oppressed with this communal identity.

Bama started her writing career with her well-known autobiography *Karukku*. It was written as a means of therapeutic cleansing to her wounded self, she says. Her writings often revolve around themes like Dalit oppression and discrimination. Like Lee Maracle, she underscores the multiple forms of oppression encountered by Dalit women in her works like *Sangati*, and *Vanmam*.

The marginalization against the oppressed is operated in many ways. Topographically, they are segregated from the mainstream society and are relegated to the fringes of the society. In the case of Bama, the village where she lives is divided based on caste system.

I don’t know how it came about that the upper-caste communities and the lower-caste communities were separated like this into different parts of the village. But they kept themselves to their part of the village, and we stayed in ours. We only went to their side if we had work to do there. But they never, ever, came to our parts. (7) Similarly, the First Nations Canadians are restricted into a place called Indian Reserve, which is restricted place for Indians outside the mainstream society. By confining them into a restricted place, the authorities control the protests against them.

Though both Dalits and First Nations Canadians are granted constitutional independency, socially they are branded with their communal/ethnic identity. As an individual is located in the society, society becomes a major force in shaping the identity of a person. Thus both Dalit and First Nations inhabitants are stigmatized based on their social identity. However, they try to deconstruct the stereotypes that have been foisted on them and set on a path of individualization as an autonomous self.

The realization of their marginalized status begins when they come into contact with society. Bama learns of her marginalized identity when she empirically witnesses an incident, where an elder man of her street carries a packet of *vada* by its string and stoops in front of a Naicker (an upper caste man) to give the packet. Being a child, ignorant of the caste system that prevails in the society, Bama perceived it as a comic incident. Later she learns the social stigma and discrimination attached with her community, when she narrates the incident to her brother.

...an elder of our street came along from the direction of the bazaar. The manner in which he was walking along made me want to double up. ...

The elder went straight up to the Naicker, bowed low and extended the pocket towards him, cupping the hand that held the string with his other hand. ...

After I had watched all this,... I told him the story in all its comic detail. Annan told me the man wasn’t being funny when he carried the package like that. He said everybody believed that Naickers were upper caste, and therefore must not touch Parayas. If they did, they would be polluted. That’s why he had to carry the package by its string. (*Karukku* 15)

When she hears this, Bama feels furious. She feels humiliated for belonging to Dalit community when she and other Dalit children are asked to stand up in front of all children in school. “When I was studying in the third class, I hadn’t yet heard people speak openly of untouchability. But I had already seen, felt, and experienced, and been humiliated by what it is.” (13) Similarly, Bobbi, as a child, was also unaware of how White people looked like and did not know that Whites looked down upon Indians. Only in school, she recognizes her Indian identity. “Three months after I entered school I became aware that I was an Indian and that white people didn’t like me because of the colour of my skin.” (33) Thus the marginal identity is conferred on people when they move into the society.

Both the authors live in utmost poverty since their childhood. They do not have proper clothes and shelter and food which represent the lives of their community. Lee Maracle describes the plight of native Canadians as follows:

The house we lived in had originally been an RCMP boatshed; my dad nailed hardboard sections (rooms) into the top part where we lived and worked on building and repairing boats in the shed below it. There was no electricity—no heating, hot water or other luxuries like television. (BLIR 22)

Likewise, Bama describes how the small children run for their free meal given in schools, when the church bell strikes at twelve.

As the lives of the oppressed are characterized by poverty and suffering, the small children help their parents in different ways.

Nowadays, poor things, they go to work like adults. At crack of dawn, ..., these days the van from the matchbox factory will arrive. These tiny, crab-like children pour their kuuzh into their carriers half asleep, totter along to the van, climb in and go off to work. They work at stitching on matchbox labels; ... At an age when they should be going to school, ... they are shut up the factories inside. ... How can they study when it is such a struggle even to fill their bellies? (55)

While Bama helps her mother and grandmother when they work in the fields of upper castes, Bobbi at her age seven started to help her mother by doing small jobs for Whites in the neighbourhood. Both Bama and Lee Maracle wonder how they are always poor even though they work hard. Both of them are “too young and inexperienced to understand the social and class nature of our oppression.” (Maracle 32)

The dominant group or authorities use poverty as a key factor to control the oppressed by providing money to them. The implied intention behind this is to control their lives and thus keep them in a confined place and exploit them. For instance, as Bama states in her *Manuci*, Dalits are forced to do all the menial works as their fee is provided by the school management. Similarly, Bobbi’s mother does not want to take welfare money as she considers it as a matter of pride.

Gradually when they grow up, they are denied opportunities of employment due to their communal identity. They confront discrimination due to their marginalized identity. In a sense, economic and social oppression forms a vicious circle where one cannot escape from any. In the early days, the Dalits or marginal groups were denied education. Though this was changing gradually and they were admitted in schools, they encountered discrimination from other students and teachers. After crossing all the hazards and studying well, they still were denied jobs due to their marginal identity, or exploited by giving them low salary. This is illustrated by Bama where the upper castes own all lands, and the Dalits always work as labourers or bonded labourers for them. Though they work hard always, they can earn only for their daily survival. “Our hard work was exploited half the time by our Naicker employers. The rest of the time we were swindled by these tradesmen. So how was it possible for us to make any progress?” (Bama 53) Similarly, Lee Maracle found many jobs in her life. All her jobs were menial in nature, and she gets very low wage. Thus the oppressed are always poor.

Whenever they are discriminated, they want to resist. But while the culture of Bobbi allows her to resist openly, for Bama the option to resist is restricted. Whenever Bobbi is teased or called by her community name, she yells back at them. “Once a gang of them ... started calling my names and beating up on me. I became furious and ferocious, screaming that if they didn’t stop I’d kill them all, one by one. “I’ll get every last one of you!” No matter how long it takes me! I’ll kill you all.” I yelled. (36)

Similarly, Bama encounters various instances where she is humiliated as a Dalit. But unlike Bobbi Lee, she cannot resist openly in a parochial patriarchal vicious Indian system. Had she vocally resisted like Maracle, she would have been lynched. Hence, Bama can only bottle up her emotions. However, the oppressed group develops a kind of imaginative resistance against the discrimination. When Bama learns that the Dalits are considered untouchables after witnessing the vada incident, she wanted to go and touch the vadas so as to pollute it. “How could they believe that it was disgusting if a Paraya held that package in his hands, even though the vadai had been wrapped first in banana leaf, and then parceled in paper? I felt so provoked and angry that I wanted to go and touch those wretched vadais myself, straightaway.” (15)

Both Bama and Lee Maracle constantly move from one place to another to assert their identities. Bama’s brother advises her that education will help her to remove the caste discrimination. Thus, Bama excels in studies and everyone wants to befriend her and the teachers also encourage her, despite of her Dalit identity. After Bama joins in a school and works as a teacher, she witnesses the predicament of Dalit children. They are used for menial jobs, and Bama becomes helpless to support them. Hence she decides to become a nun and help the downtrodden children. However, she is stigmatized by her caste identity even in convent. This implies that though education will eradicate the economic oppression of Dalits, the social stigma is still tagged on with them. She witnesses that the nuns who vowed to help the poor, forget their promises and enjoying their life. Bama also cannot help the Dalit children as she is appointed to teach children of rich families in English medium school. Hence, she decides to leave the life of renunciation. She also decides to remain single, an idea which is considered iniquitous in Indian culture. As revealed in her work *Manuci*, she voluntarily de-promotes herself in schools to serve the Dalit and poor children. Thus she discovers her matured ‘self’ after moving from one place to another in search of an identity.

Similarly, Bobbi Lee undertakes journey across Canada and to U.S. mostly by hitchhiking or by bus. In every place, she explores her ‘self’ more. For instance, when she goes to California at sixteen, she learns that racism between Mexicans and Whites was accepted as a normal act. When Lorenzo, her cousin insists her to get married to him, she realizes that she cannot get into a family life. Though she was a marginal, she cultivated knowledge regarding politics through her friends in her consequent journeys. As Bama pledges to help the oppressed group, Maracle also decides to do something useful to others. “I used to think that there had to be something I could do to leave my mark, to be useful to other people.” (97) From a kind of existentialistic view, she transforms herself into some utilitarian point of view. Finally she identifies herself as a native woman and she actively engages herself in politics to fight for their rights. She is currently mentoring the indigenous students at University of Toronto.

Both of their narratives, though written by an individual, represent the problems of their groups collectively. Though they are culturally different, both writers explore their female selves in many ways.

Through their subjective experiences, they portray the untold life history of large number of oppressed women in different lands. Bama emphasizes that the Dalits must resist the oppressive forces against them.

We must not accept the injustice by telling ourselves it is our fate, as if we have no true feelings. We must dare to stand up for change. We must crush all these institutions that use caste 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. (28)

Both actively reject the stereotypes, yet they do not regret their marginal identity. They resist the oppressive attitudes of the dominant group.

Through their narratives, the authors picturize the multiple levels of oppression that the marginal group enters. Both authors emphasize the right of living. Their personal/ subjective experiences, while recorded and transmitted through a written medium, become political. They have also transcended the traditional rules of autobiography. Rather than presenting the story in a chronological way, she presents in a way to mark the maturation of her 'self'. The realistic portrayal of Dalits' lives in a plain language made everyone to criticize Bama vehemently. Lee Maracle, on the other hand, adds stories in her second edition. (1990) Both of their journeys mould them into maturation, to find and explore their 'selves' and fight for social emancipation.

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