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Research Paper

Writing as Healing: How the Dalit Women Writers are Writing Back

Dr. Somali Saha
Associate Professor
Department of English
Women's College, Agartala

Abstract:
From womb to tomb, Dalit women's lives are pestered by caste, class and gender discriminations in the caste – ridden, patriarchal Indian society. Unlike other women, they suffer more and differently because of being women and being Dalits. As the experiences of Dalit women are different, writings of these women differ from the writings of non-Dalit women writers as well as Dalit men writers.The content, the style and the language of Dalit women's personal narratives convey their pains and pangs as well as reflect their indomitable spirit to bounce back against all odds. Their lifewritings are emerging as luminous testimonies with the ability to transmute raw wounds into candid tales. This article seeks to identify the process by which Dalit women's personal narratives unearth the layered oppressions as well as stitch a tapestry of resistance and resilience to heal their scars. The act of writing becomes a ritual of healing for them-each sentence acts as anemollient agent, each memory lights a lantern to illuminate the path towards reclaiming their identity. By foregrounding the embodied language of pain, desire and survival in the selected texts of Bama, this article attempts to focus how Dalit women's personal narratives perform a dual function as therapeutic exorcism and radical sociopolitical manifesto, heralding a reimagined social order in Indian society.
Keywords: Dalit women, personal narratives, resistance, resilience, healing

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The caste system of India ostracized certain sections of people by classifying the society into four varnas- where the Dalits are called 'avarnas', marginalized and alienated in every walk of their lives by the mainstream society. They have been reduced to men who "left no foot prints in sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirror". (Roy, 216) In the caste-ridden, patriarchal Indian society, Dalit women are the most vulnerable constituency, who suffer from being Dalits and being women. Not only caste and gender, they are marginalized multiply by the clutches of class (poor), patriarchy as well as religion. Dalit women are defined by gender which is instrumental in making them victims of patriarchal social order and is responsible for assigning them stereotypical feminine positions. Along with it, the curse of patriarchy further downgrades them in hierarchal social order and being Dalits, they suffer from more economic deprivation. Ruth Manorama often uses the expression 'Dalit among the Dalits' or 'downtrodden among the downtroddens' (qtd in Mary. E. John 445) to represent the Dalit women. For centuries, these women have lacked a political, economic and social 'space for utterance' and their lives have been characterized by 'culture of silence'. But amidst all the inequalities and injustices pondered on them, they have doughty courage to free themselves from the bondages of class, caste and gender. After centuries of silence, the Dalit women are feeling the need to express themselves; they are turning inward to talk about their own experiences through their writings.

The attempt and endeavor of the Dalits to confirm their own identity by expressing their agony, assertion, resistance, anger, protest and mobilization, leads these writers towards forming a new aesthetics which is based on negation. (Saha, 25) Dalit women writers, in their writings confront the layered oppressions of caste, class and gender by subverting the Brahminical narratives that erase their voices. Dalit women writers' act of writing often reiterates the concept of 'writing back' introduced by Ashcroft in his 1989 book *The Empire Writes Back*, co-authored with Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, wherein he refers to the ways in which postcolonial writers from formerly colonized countries challenge, subvert, and rework the narratives imposed by colonial powers. Their writings are acts of resistance, reclaiming agency and rewriting histories often

marginalized or misrepresented by colonial discourse. Similarly, 'writing back' for Dalit writers involves countering the historical silencing and misrepresentation of their voices, using literature as a means of asserting identity, dignity and humanity. Dalit women's writings are becoming a potent form of 'writing back', a multifaceted resistance against the systemic oppression, patriarchal norms and literary erasure and thereby reshaping narratives and asserting diverse voices. For Dalit women, writing becomes a way to confront and articulate trauma, a mode of asserting their humanity and an act of self-definition against imposed stereotypes. The process of writing allows for emotional release, a way to channel grief, anger or resilience into creativity.

The consciousness of Dalit women towards affirming their 'self', carving their 'identities' and urging for 'solidarity' give birth to Dalit feminism which puts emphasis on the issues of self-consciousness, reactions, rebellion, self -realization and self-assertion. It is often described as a 'discourse of discontent' or 'a politics of difference' from mainstream Indian femininsm, which has been critiqued for marginalizing Dalit women. Gopal Guru in his essay *Dalit Women Talk Differently*writes about how Dalit women suffer due to caste patriarchy that exists within Dalit communities and outside and writes that Dalit women should express their opinions without any mediation by Dalit men so that they can enjoy their freedom. Guru also argues that to understand Dalit women's need to talk 'differently' it is necessary to delineate both the internal and external factors involved in their sufferings.

SharmilaRege in her essay *Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of 'Difference' and Towards a Dalit Feminist StandpointPosition*(1998) has also argued that in order to address Dalit woman's questions, an interdisciplinary approach must be made because Dalit women are heterogeneous. She argues that Dalit men representing Dalit women put forward their own views of Dalit women whereas while upper caste women talked about oppression they considered Dalit women to be similar to themselves and talked about a generalized victimization of womanhood. As a Dalit woman's situation is totally different because her doubly-cursed societal position, there is strategic necessity to think differently about her. This difference has been neglected by mainstream Indian feminist discourse; despite its abiding relevance to theorizing the lives of everyday women and in fighting patriarchy in a concrete sense. The selective amnesia and the silencing and stereotyping of the Dalit women has led them to search for an alternative 'different' voice, an authentic and pragmatic feminist theory. M. Swathy Margaret also underlined that the focus on 'difference' is a call for interrogating the 'ideal subject of feminist politics' and rethinking the histories and futures of Indian feminism. (Rege 70)

In recent years, Dalit literature has come into prominence and is increasingly being engaged with all the major genres: poetry, short stories, autobiographies, memoirs, novels, plays, critical essays etc. Since Dalit writers draw inspiration from their own experiences, almost all genres of Dalit writings are autobiographical in nature. There is also a surge in the translations of Dalit literature into English. In recent years, many prominent publishers are bringing out volumes of Dalit writing in translation and many universities of India and abroad are introducing Dalit literature in their syllabus, thereby posing it a major entry into the literary field in India.But, the aesthetics espoused by the mainstream writers have either ignored Dalit subjectivities or romanticized the Dalit characters in their writings. Therefore Dalit theorist SharankumarLimbale argues about the need of a Dalit aesthetics to portray Dalit characters in a realistic mode.

Dalit women writers espouse Dalit aesthetics to portray Dalit subjectivities in a realistic tone. Writings of Dallit women are based on raw, harsh reality which is far away from the world of the aesthetics and imagination. Their mental and emotional scars become festering wounds while they delineate their excruciatingly painful life stories through their writings. However, it is with this pain that the process of healing starts as it purges out the poison emanated from the pangs of class, caste, gender and religion based discriminations. The writings of these women shake the readers to come out of the slumber of false consciousness and judgmental mindset through which they have tasted literature for long. Through their personal narratives, the 'breakdown' self of Dalit women writers gets a 'breakthrough' to come out of their victimized existence. They turn their pain into power, with an unleashing energy to resist, rebel and to reconstruct a more humane social environment by deconstructing their already manufactured fractured identity.

Among all the genres of Dalit literature , Dalit autobiographical narratives are the tales of personal sufferings of the Dalit writers which are fused with their interpersonal responses and community feelings experienced by them in the hierarchal Hindu society. These writers with their growing perceptions and genuine experiences, capture the tensions which grow out of a continuous battle between 'loss of identity' and 'asserting of self' and the very process of writing autobiography by the Dalits is a form of resistance against various forms of oppression. But narratives written by the Dalit women give a close view of female experiences and are the statements about real patriarchal society as well as documents of struggle for female autonomy. The household, food, hunger, community, castes, culture, labour practices, humiliation, violence, resistance, collective struggles are widely found in autobiographies written by them. Bama herself has written many creative and critical writings on Dalit woman's subjectivities addressing caste and gender issues.

Simone de Beauvoir in her book 'The Second Sex' says, "He is the subject, he is the absolute-she is the other" (Beauvoir xix). Even in traditional literary history, women have been the discredited 'other' to the

sovereign man-few in number, deemed limited in ability and restricted in scope. While a Dalit woman is an 'other' for the upper caste people, she is also an 'other' for her own community. But when the 'other' is silenced into suppression, the silenced voice lies latent for a certain period, only for an opportunity to break free and make itself heard. Dalit women's autobiographies is the representation of the voices of the repressed 'other' that not only utters the singular voice but also encompasses multiple voices of human experience representing various forms of dominance and exploitation. These autobiographies are the weapons of the weak Dalits which not only stand with resistance but also foster universal fraternity by paving way to many literary voices.

Dalit women's autobiographies, often in the form of first person narratives, challenged the homogeneous idea of 'woman' shared by all women. Their narratives revealed how their everyday lives differed from those of non -Dalit women due to their being forced to do stigmatized labour for their community rather than their own family. Their heterogeneity compelled them to shift to the first person experience to reveal that it is not possible to assimilate their lives under the simplistic rubric and homogeneity of Indian feminism. First person narratives clearly play a role in expanding the canvas of feminist thought-demonstrating how the challenges posed by caste identity reveal the absence of homogeneity among women-that women are different. Moreover, personal testimonies by Dalit women are a resource for seeing how their subjectivity constituted in contexts of humiliation can become a source of survival and resistance through alliances with the non-Dalit women. These writings open up the opportunity for women of privileged castes to engage in self-criticism and question the ground of their own privilege.

Dalit women writers use 'everyday language', peppered with slang and abusive terms which is a real challenge to the official standard language of the upper castes. Dalit theorization of aesthetics challenges the way upper caste writers and theoreticians write and propagate Indian aesthetics in general. It interrogates the notion of literature and particularly the way Indian upper caste writers express their worldviews through their art. SharankumarLimbale, the author of *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature*, observes,

> "The sentiment of freedom is present in Dalit literature not only in its life essence, but also as beauty. The three values of life-equality, freedom and solidarity-can be regarded as constituting the essence of beauty in Dalit Literature. The aesthetics of Dalit Literature rests on: first, the artists' social commitment; second, the life-affirming values present in the artistic creation; and third, the ability to raise the reader's consciousness of fundamental values like equality, freedom, justice and fraternity."(Limbale, 119-120)

For Bama, the Tamil Dalit writer, writing is a cathartic process which allows her to purge out trauma and find solidarity with other Dalits. The act of narrating her story is a step toward healing and empowerment as Bama herself shared in an interview, "Writing Karukkku was the lashing out at the pain…it was a way of freeing myself." (Bama, in an interview) Drawing from Trauma studies it can be said that the act of learning becomes a testimony, a process of bearing witness to pain and resisting erasure. (Felmen&Laub, 1992) BamaFaustina's first novel *Karukku*(1992) has evoked responses as a feminist text with its semantic richness and reached into the purview of global literature. As aproponent of Dalit feminism, Bama has found in *Karukku* a right platform to express the hardships and agonies of Dalit women. Beginning with the first person narration, *Karukku* moves from the past to the present in exploring the varying manifold sets of different incidents which have taken place in Bama's life. It is also a powerful portrayal of Dalits' life and their exploitation and suppression, their excruciatingly agonizing life which is charred by experiences which did not find any room in other literary creations.

In *Karukku*, the readers can gain insights into the complex social relationship between the Dalits and the upper-caste people mainly the 'Pallars' and 'Paraiyars'. The title of her narrative *Karukku* means the saw-like double-edged stem of the 'palmyra' leaves with their serrated edges on both sides are like double-edges swords resembling the life of a Dalit woman who are tortured by the double edged sword of upper caste patriarchy as well as Dalit patriarchy. The metaphor of karukku comes alive in Bama's self-presentation and in the representation of various women in her life. Like the interlocked knife-like edges of the karukku, Bama highlights the interwoven layers of caste, religion and gender structures that strangle the Dalit woman's subjectivity.

Another meaning of Tamil word 'Karu' means embryo or seed, which also represents freshness and newness. The embryo that Bama refers in the book actually means the Dalit consciousness and the symbol is the new revolution, which aims at bringing a new social order onto the Indian society. Apart from 'scratching' and 'tearing' with its double-edged leaves, karukku has a different function of sprouting new consciousness with its fresh seeds. As she writes, "There are other Dalit hearts like mine, with a passionate desire to create a new society made up of justice, equality and love. They, who have been the oppressed, are now themselves like the double-edged Karukku, challenging their oppressors" (Preface xiii) Thus, *Karukku*signified both Dalit oppression and Dalit struggle to get out from such an oppressive state.

Throughout her writings, Bama uses the colloquial Tamil, the everyday language of the ordinary and common people, which is often condemned as 'unclean tongue' by the upper caste people. By adopting the

'unclean, paraiya' tongue, Bama challenges the so-called mainstream Tamil, which is considered to be chaste and pure and therefore casteist. The language of the Dalit discourses is reiterating what Ashcroft and his associates write in *The Post-colonial Studies: Reader*,

> Language is a fundamental site of struggle for post-colonial discourse because the colonial process itself begins in language. The control over language by the imperial centre- whether achieved by displacing native languages, by installing itself as a 'standard' against other variants which are constituted as 'impurities', or by planting the language of empire in a new place-remains the most potent instrument of cultural control. Language provides the terms by which reality may be constituted; it provides the names by which the world may be 'known'. Its system of values-its suppositions, its geography, its concept of history, of difference, its myriad gradations of distinction-becomes the system upon which social, economic and political discourses are grounded. (Ashcroft, 261)

Using Tamil, Bama grounds her narratives in lived experience, disrupting the dominance of 'high' literary languages. It seems to be the reclaimimg of voice, making the language of the margins a tool of resistance. Even in the translated version, some of the tamil words are deliberately retained to maintain the uniqueness of such writings. Bama's use of everyday spoken Tamil language of the streets, the raw and unflinching style is an example of how Dalit writers subvert the hegemony of the upper castes by exposing the discredits of the existing language, its grammar, its refinements and its falsifying order as symbols of dominance. (Introduction, *Sangati*xii-xiii) This is a language, uniquely her own, genuine and unaffected, very much different to the traditional notions of the literary language.

Apart from using a new language, Bama also deploys several literary devices which are distinctly different from the narrative strategies of mainstream literature. In her writings, sometimes, the names of people, places and institutions are left unnamed. Anonymity runs through her narration, perhaps to make a universal message about their oppression so that every reader can relate their own subjugated experiences with the experiences of the Dalit women. By refusing to give names to her characters, Bama's narration serves a definite purpose of invoking larger solidarity. With unmistakable clarity, she documents the suppressed people's language, dialects, proverbs, idioms, lifestyles and the daily activities of the oppressed in her writings. She also records her protest, alongside arguing for social empowerment, through literature.

Another redeeming feature of Bama's writings is the importance she gives to social change denouncing the caste ideology of Hinduism which preaches that change is impossible as everything is already fixed according to one's own karma. In her narratives, Bama subsumes rhythms, dance, sport, entertainment, and a sense of humour that serves to shatter caste –based ideology and hegemony. She foregrounds the consciousness of her people and truthfully depicts the terrain of the Indian village, the beauty of the ponds, the slumber-inducting breeze of the streams (Kumar 9) as her 'anubhava' (experience) was preceding over 'anumana' (speculation) in her writings (Limbale) to record the experiences of her own people, taking into account their cultural history and the resilience of their unwavering spirit. The folktales, myths and swear words used by Bama in her writings realistically reflect the basic way of life around her and recreate the culture of the Dalits.

Moreover, Bama's handling of the folklore offers a revival of folkloric tradition of canonical genre to offer a critical perspective on culture too. Bama's use of folklores is not a simple 'use' of folk genres like proverbs, folk tales, folk songs, and legends but a conscious 'stylisation' of these lores that would subvert the romanticised folk culture. (Azhagarasan). In Bama's writings, we find a brilliant use of the 'tragic mode' of ballad narrative which has been stylized in such a way that a critical perspective on the inhuman practices of caste can be offered by folk culture too. For example, Isakki is circulated as a popular legend and a folk goddess in the novel, *Sangati*, where a wealthy trader, wedded to Isakki, killed her when she was pregnant and married another woman. Once, when the trader was returning to his home, the spirit of Isakki as a desolate woman with a baby sought his help. When they reached the village, the spirit of Isakki convinced the villagers of being his wife and forced the man to stay with her. Next morning, the villagers got the news of the gruesome murder of that trader. Isakki could take her revenge as a spirit. But Bama'sMariamma could not act like Isakki, but finds herself in a situation of speechlessness. As a Dalit and as a woman, she has no space in literary history. The folk narrative of Isakki in *Sangati*ceases to be mere ballad, but 'stylised' with a view to see its function in shaping the folk/social consciousness. Bama, in her texts, wants to offer a critique of injustice through a stylization of ballad narrative with an aim to construct a narrative space to collect peoples' stories and to rewrite them.

Bama often portrays the exploitation of Dalit women alongside the exploitation of nature. Her narratives highlight how marginalized communities, tied to land and labour, suffer disproportionately from environmental degradation. Bama also states how Dalits, often relegated to 'polluting' labour like manual scavenging, are seen as 'outside' the dominant social and ecological order. Bama also critiques the Brahminical notions of purity by depicting the spiritual and material connection of her community with nature. In *Karukku,* the 'sharp edges' as mentioned in the line "We climbed the palmyra trees, plucking the karukku leaves, careful not to cut our hands on their sharp edges." (*Karukku*) symbolize the painful realities of caste-based labour, while the act of plucking becomes a testament to Dalit women's resourcefulness and resilience. In another course of

events, Bama expresses, "when the rains came, they drenched us, just as drenched the parched earth. We danced in them, feeling alive, forgetting the weight on our soldiers for a moment' (*Karukku*), it is showing nature as a momentary liberator, a witness, offering joy and relief to these women. It also blurs boundaries between human suffering and earth's cycles, suggesting a fleeting sense of equality in vulnerability.

In her writings, Bamaintertwins the physical labour of Dalit women with the resilience of nature as reflected in the line "We worked in the fields from dawn till dusk, bending double, our hands stained with mud, our backs aching. The earth was hard, unyielding. But we grew used to it, like the palmyra trees that stood like sentinels, unbending." (*Karukku*, ch 2) Here with the 'unyielding earth' Bama mirrors the endurance and oppression of Dalit women, emphasizing a shared struggle rather than a romanticized harmony.Bama's narratives also show women's bodies and land as sites of exploitation as well as the sites that initiate resistance, mirroring how both are seen are resources in patriarchal and casteist systems. Bama even touches upon 'coming-of- age' ceremonies as a quiet assertion of womanhood, questioning the silences around female bodies. The struggles of Dalit women working in fields or facing domestic violence reflect intertwined oppressions. Bama included the frames of Dalit women's bodies, doubly battered by Brahminical and Dalit patriarchies, as powerful sites of resistance. Bama shows Dalit woman's ability to take control of their bodies, achieve a sense of autonomy and empowerment, exercise agency, and deploy them (body) as a tool to counter violent men across the caste divide. (Haidar, 192) An incident of Bama'sSangati runs thus:

> His mother was out one day, cutting grass for the cow. She was pregnant at that time, nearly full term. She went to labour then and there, and delivered the child straight away. She cut off the umbilical cord with the sickle she had taken with herbto cut the grass, dug a whole and buried the placenta, and then walked home carrying her baby and her bundle of grass. (Sangati 3)

Here the labour pain and even the giving birth of a child that is her reproductive role in no way disturb her productive role of cutting the grass and rearing the cattle.

Bama insists Dalit women to shun the traditional Tamil 'feminine' ideals of 'accham'(fear), naanam (shyness), madam (innocence), payirppu (modesty) and imbibe the qualities of 'courage, fearlessness, independence and self-esteem'(Holstorm, xix) and looks at the 'politics of disrobing (Sharp 40) as reflected in Rakkamma's gesture of defiant disrobing as her only way of escape from the dehumanized existence (Sangati) which underscores how Dalit women expose their nudity as an act of resistance and defiance. As language sometimes is imbricated in hierarchies and asymmetries of power, Dalit women writers innovate emancipatory ways by creating a new idiom, a dialectal Tamil full of profanities and invectives with which they can express the embodied experiences of being a Dalit. In *Sangati*, Rakkamma uses licentious language when she says,

> How dare you kick me, you low life? Your hand will get leprosy! How dare you pull my hair? Disgusting man, only fit to dring a woman's farts! Instead of drinking toddy every day, why don't you drink your son's urine? Why don't you drink my monthly blood? (Sangati 61)

The use of sexually explicit speech by Dalit women helps them not to overcome fear of authoritarian power which categorized them into a disgraced and debased existence but also to realize their desire for a new, experimental, subversive language that reinscribes Dalit women's subjectivity in language as opposed to decorous upper class language subservient to Brahminical order and patriarchy.

Narratives written by Bama, especially *Sangati* is polyphonic because of its unique structure and voices. The narrative of *Sangati* frequently revolves around conversations, reports of past and present events, gossip, oral gestures, laughter, speech acts of swearing, wordplay and jokes to rupture and subvert the monologism of dominant discourse. The characters in Sangati 'create a language of the self (personal), that interacts with and draws upon the language of the tribe/community (oral) and, finally, the language of history itself' (Nayar, 368) This text shifts between different women's voices, ages and experiences, creating a 'chorus of voices' rather than a single, linear storyline to highlight differences in their struggles and also to build a collective testimony against oppression. *Sangati*creates a textured, embodied portrayal of community life by resisting a singular, homogenized narrative of 'Dalit womanhood'.

Thus the act of writing not only fosters solidarity among Dalit women, but also creates a collective space for empathy and resistance. It heals not just the wounds of the writer, but soothes the sufferings of the readers too. For Dalit women, writing autobiographies is a radical act of healing which transforms pain into power, blends personal trauma with sharp political commentary, and converts silence into eloquence and isolation into solidarity. In essence, Dalit women's writings are a potent form of 'writing back' against the multiple bondages of society as well as the systematic literary erasure. By articulating their pain, asserting their identities and challenging oppressive structures through personal narratives, the Dalit women writers engage in a form of 'writing back' and becomes an act of resistance and healing . Being emerged from the conflicts as well as creative dialectics of self and society, these narratives of Dalit women are establishing themselves as a distinct genre as well as contributing to a broader project of social transformation.

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