



From Suppression to Expression: A Comparative Study of Alice Walker and Bama

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Woman all over the world is one who is made to obey the orders of others throughout her life. The Dalit woman in India has been suffering from additional pain and torments on all sides. The African American woman, her counterpart, confronts a similar situation in the USA. But time has come to put an end to the bondage of suppressions. Women are educated and empowered now. They have derived their own way to get out of this slavery. This paper presents the success of one such woman, Bama, who has empowered herself through the light of education. Bama is compared to Alice Walker, an African American Feminist writer, who asserted her identity through literature.

Dalit, the very word, made people avert the entire community just because they belong to Dalit. But time has the power to change anything and everything in its own way. So has come the change to assert their identity, integrity, power and existence by their own literature, presenting the sufferings of suppression and slavery executed on them. Dalit literature came to light with a prominent force after 1960 starting with the Marathi language and soon appeared in languages like Hindi, Kannada, Telugu and Tamil languages, through narratives such as, poems, short stories and, most importantly autobiographies, which stood out due to their stark portrayal of reality and the Dalit political scenes. The primary motive of Dalit literature is the liberation of Dalits. Dalit struggle against casteist tradition has a long and varied history. In general women were always treated low and secondary to male in the man's world. Even upper class women suffer oppression but in a different way. But the sufferings of a Dalit woman are unimaginable. She is oppressed at home because she is a woman and outside home just because she is a Dalit. She is exploited, socially, economically, emotionally and sexually. It has taken years to break these clutches of oppression and express her thoughts and feelings before the entire world. Even though it is late, there has arrived a day for the sufferings of darkness to be put to light, to fight, to retort, to oppose, to win and to assert a better position in the society.

Bama is the first Dalit woman writer in India. Bama Faustina Mary was born at Puthupatty near Madurai in 1958. She began to be noted as a writer with the publication of *Karukku*, an autobiographical novel that was first published in 1992 in Tamil. *Karukku* is the first autobiography of its kind in Tamil Dalit literature. It was immediately translated into English (2000) and many other Indian languages. It won the Crossword Award in 2000.

According to Bama, Dalit Literature is “Liberation literature like Black literature, Feminist literature and communist socialist literature.” *Karukku* is such a beautiful autobiography of a woman who succeeded in empowering herself and there by chooses to enlighten the poor, the downtrodden, and the oppressed and neglected children of her community. Bama, in *Karukku*, brings out a clear picture of her experience as a Dalit woman in her society. Right from her childhood she has a quest in her, a quest for identity, which she attained through education and literature. “*Karukku*” means the serrated edges on both sides of palm leaves. By a felicitous pun, the Tamil word “*Karukku*” containing the word hare, embryo or seed, also means freshness, newness. In her foreword, Bama draws attention to the symbol, and refers to the words in Hebrews (New Testament), “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews, 4:10).

Karukku is the first autobiography of its kind to appear in Tamil, for Dalit writing in this language has not produced the spate of autobiographies which have appeared, for example, in Marathi. It is also in many ways an unusual autobiography. It grows out of a particular moment: a personal crisis and watershed in the author's life which drives her to make sense of her life as Dalit Christian woman. Many Tamil authors, both men and women, use the convention of writing under a pseudonym. In this case, though, this convention adds to the work's strange paradox of reticence and familiarity, it eschews the "confessional" mode, leaving out many personal details. The protagonist is never named. The events of Bama's life are not arranged according to a simple, linear or chronological order, as with most autobiographies, but rather, reflected upon in different ways, repeated from different perspectives, grouped under different themes, for example, Work, Games and Recreation, Education, Belief, etc. It is her driving quest for integrity as a Dalit and Christian that shapes the book and gives it its polemic.

The argument of the book is to do with the arc of the narrator's spiritual development both through the nurturing of her belief as a Catholic, and her gradual realization of herself as a Dalit. We are given a very full picture of the way in which the Church ordered and influenced the lives of the Dalit Catholics. Every aspect of the child's life is imbued with the Christian religion. The day is ordered by religious rituals. The year is punctuated by religious processions and festivals which become part of the natural yearly cycle of crops and seasons. But parallel to this religious life is a socio-political self-education that takes off from the revelatory moment

when she first understands what untouchability means. It is this double perspective that enables her to understand the deep rift between Christian beliefs and practice.

Bama's re-reading and interpretation of the Christian scriptures as an adult enables her to carve out both a social vision and a message of hope for Dalits by emphasizing the revolutionary aspects of Christianity, the values of equality, social justice, and love towards all. Her own life-experiences urge her towards actively engaging in alleviating the sufferings of the oppressed. When she becomes a nun, it is in the stubborn hope that she will have a chance to put these aspirations into effect. She discovers, however, that the perspectives of the convent and the Church are different from hers. The story of that conflict and its resolution forms the core of *Karukku*. In the end, Bama makes the only choice possible for her. But she also sees the beginnings of an important change, if not in the Church's practice, yet in the gradually growing awareness among Dalits, of their own oppression:

But Dalits have also understood that God is not like this, has not spoken like this. They have become aware that they too were created in the likeness of God. There is a new strength within them, urging them to reclaim that likeness which has been repressed, ruined and obliterated; and to begin to live with honour and respect and love of all humankind. To my mind, that alone is true devotion.

A similar note of identity quest is found in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. As Dalit women suffer oppression in the name of communal discrimination Black American women suffered racial discrimination of their color. Just because they were black they were deprived of even their basic rights. After a long period of silence, the black women started protesting against the domination of the white as well as the men of their own community. With the Black women refusing to be silenced, they raised their voices in some of the fieriest writing of the era. Their struggle was aided by the writings and work of progressive black artists who focussed on destroying the myths and images which had crippled and degraded black people and the creation of new myths and images that would liberate and empower them.

Walker has dedicated *The Color Purple* "To the spirits:/without whose assistance/Neither this book/Nor I/would have been/written." The dedication underlines the fact that the novel, through its women characters, quintessentially represents the collective consciousness of the black women—their moments of pain and misery, fear and fortitude, experiences and hopes are cleverly woven into the thematic patterns of the novel. The experiences of Celie, the black female protagonist, are presented through her letters written to God, as she has no other contact with life. This subjective self-encounter shows us the cruel barrenness of her life and its gradual transformation. Her sister Nettie's letters constitute the second-half of the novel and acquaint us with the rich African heritage and the inter-mingling

American history. The epistolary technique has been successfully used by Walker in her other novels also.

Through different stages of Celie's life, Walker has underlined the fact that despite their odious circumstances the black women are able to raise their collective voice against the patriarchal order and attain an autonomous state. This idea is supported by the other women characters of the novel too. All the women characters gradually redefine themselves with their own efforts and with the help of other women. Through these characters, Walker has epitomized the realities of the lives of the black women and registered a vociferous protest against the debilitating sexism of the patriarchal society.

Though the narrative tone and the protagonist are different in Bama's *Karrukku* and in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, the cause, the purpose of writing and subject matter are same. Both has felt the pain of suppression as they belonged to a neglected class or community. And both of them have determined to protest against the suppression and assert an identity in their own way. Bama has brought in autobiographical note in her idea of representing her people, whereas Walker has made Celie to represent all the black women of her class to express her ideas. Both have even presented a similar idea about God; when Bama speaks of God she says, "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 about him, but rather, are taught in an empty and meaningless way about humility, obedience, patience, gentleness." And when Alice Walker says share her views about God through Celie, she says,

Celie's changing attitude to life records a shift in her attitude towards God too. Her initial letters addressed to God under the interdiction "*You better not never tell nobody but God*"(10) indicate a total dependence on an external phenomenon in the absence of any faith in her own potential. In the face of life's cruelties her perception of God changes gradually. At later stage, when she is on the path of recovering her identity she is also able to understand the full extents of gender-based and racial connotations of Christian patriarchy. She addresses her letters to Nettie because she realizes that the God she has been writing to is a man, and "act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown. (199)

Women are always more oppressed and are victims of male domination. The plight of dalit women in Indian society is horrible as they are oppressed on the basis of class, gender and caste. But nowadays women have started protesting against the discrimination, oppression and Injustices leveled upon them and are trying to create a female space for themselves. In this context the work of women writers who come out to the mainstream to explore the problems faced by the oppressed women become highly important. There are a large number of women writers in Dalit discourses who brought dalit texts into mainstream visibility. The dalit women

have started searching for the root cause of these injustices leveled upon them. Women in these discourses bring their own identification as women as well as dalit. It is in this context that Bama's *Karukku* becomes relevant.

In *Karukku*, Bama foregrounds multi-layered oppression against dalit women. She focuses on the 'work' that is routinely done by Dalit women both at home and outside. She explores how violence against Dalit women is legitimized and institutionalized by state, family, church and upper caste communities. Her fiction documents how Dalit women toil and get exploited at home and outside, are subjected to violent treatment by upper caste landlords, the panchayat, the police as well as by Dalit men within their homes. In her representation of Dalit women, Bama presents Dalit women primarily as workers who join the work force right from girlhood and toil through adolescence, womanhood, middle age and old age almost until their last breath. Their work goes unrecognized by their community as well as by the society at large and they are exploited at every conceivable turn. Bama's representation of Dalit women's life span mirrors the Dalit community's struggle for empowerment and realization of a dignified existence. Her fiction, through a detailed account of Dalit women's trials and tribulations, triumphs and aspirations, thus, documents the Dalit struggle for social, economic and political empowerment.

The novel *The Color Purple* articulates the complexity of the struggles of black women in America and illuminates indomitable will which enables them to burgeon as individuals, defying the exploitative constraints of a society dominated and conditioned by white people and black men. Despite the shabbiness, brutality and humiliation of their lives the women in *The Color Purple* remain contumacious and refuse to function as servants to men. Walker has constructed her novel on a thematic base of multiple concerns, sensitively handled and culled together in a story-line capable of gripping the readers' constant attention. Walker herself has interpreted this novel in terms of spiritual and religious development' and stated that these two are the main themes in the book. She has made the purpose of her writing quite clear, "I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival whole of my people. But beyond that I am committed to exploring the oppressions, insanities, the loyalties and triumphs of Black women." *The Color Purple* fully exhibits this concern, as it explores not only the effects of sexism and racism, but also the black women's determination to overcome these barriers and emerge unscathed and whole ultimately. All the woman characters of the novel exhibit this determination and attain a state of autonomous selfhood defying and overcoming their dilapidated and opprobrious state in order to live a purposeful life and be content with themselves: that's why the protagonist of the novel Celie is able to assertively state her identity, "I am pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook . . . But I'm here." (69)

The tension throughout *Karukku* is between the self and the community: the narrator leaves the status of religious women in order to join another as a Dalit woman. We are given a

very full picture of the way in which the Church ordered and influenced the lives of the Dalit Catholics. The major problem for all dalit women is the denial of education. Periyar E.V. R. believed that woman should have information and knowledge of herself and her body(232).

It is the patriarchal division that defines woman as a marginalized creature .As Simon de Beauvoir states “It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine”(16). The condition of Dalit women in their society is lowered and they are lowered into mere objects. For Bama writing was to liberate Dalits, the women and children. Bama’s writings celebrates dalit women’s life, resilience and creativity and every where she suffer humiliation each and every time. *Karukku* becomes the testimony of not only her own life but also the life of dalits. Her decision to become a nun and later realizing the situation that every where the situation of dalits is the same, she walked out of it. Later she questions “Why. Is it impossible for the Harijan to study or what”? (19).

“Literature does not grow in a vacuum, it is given impetus, shape, direction and even areas of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society”, says Nguagi wa Thiang’o in his preface to *Home Coming*. Political and social atmosphere motivated Bama to write. In the opening chapter of *Karukku* begins with an introduction of the people and village. Bama traces the geographical details of her village and comments that to the east of the village lays the cemetery. The dalits live next to that and they are treated as dead. The divide between the upper class and dalits is thus in a way maintained. They are denied their identity and history. The evil of untouchability is prevalent there and Bama tries to oppose it by asserting her identity is highly notable. *Karukku* also portrays how people are identified by their streets name and discusses the life of a Dalit Catholic Christian women in retrospect and focuses on the caste based atrocities in her village, experiences of untouchability in the Catholic convent and the final breaking away from the nunnery.

Written in autobiographical style *Karukku* describes how the female narrator comes to understand the various dimensions of her dalit identity. Bama discusses the question of identity crisis and how they are denied identity and a history. Patriarchal societies consider women as unworthy and have always engaged in the task of constructing and deconstructing identity. The context of dalit women should be understood not only from the perspective of a woman but also that of caste. She states “When I saw our people working so hard night and day, I often used to wonder from where they get their strength...”(47) for her this is a community that was born to work. They laughed and remain cheerful even though they had to suffer lots of hardships. Their poverty and their manual jobs do not allow their children especially girls to go to school and receive education. Bama breaks free from the shackles of unemployment and poverty by educating herself and by becoming a teacher and by educating her people the so called unprivileged. She asked her people to stop working as slaves to the upper class Naickers and Nadars by doing menial jobs like cleaning the lavatories, sweeping and swabbing. The police harassments, beatings, imprisonment shows how the modern dalit has been imprisoned. Every time she went for work discrimination was there “I knew I should not touch their goods or

clothes. I should never come close to where they were...these were heir rules”(46). Bama battles against the superstitions and myths around her. Even Roman Catholic church use and abuse dalits and force them to attend meetings and offer offerings.

Walker’s Celie feels herself as a bird whose wings are clipped and she desires to live a meaningful life. *The Color Purple* is the narration of painful memories, despair, disillusionment, dejection and the pathetic conditions of the life and culture of women who are subjected to sexual harassment and physical assault. Incidents are narrated and over narrated and reinterpreted each time to express the oppression of the black women. Walker explains how the male perspective has been encountered and questioned by feminine perspective. Her works voice the emergence of liberated woman.

“Karukku”, which means the searing edges of a Palmyra leaves, is indeed a double edged sword directed towards the reader which highlights the atrocities caused by the gender discrimination, caste and class divide. “The Color Purple” is the flower that stands for the freedom of woman. Thus we could find varied similarities in *Karukku* and *The Color Purple*, though both are from entirely different authors of different country, different class and different creed. Both have dedicated their life to enlighten and empower women of their community and class. Also they have chosen literature as the right path to achieve their identity.

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