

Research Article

**Breaking The Fetters - Resonating Feminine Voices in Bama's and Sivakami's Select Novels**

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**Abstract**

Literature has always been a reflection of the society and the issues in it, it has always brought to the fore the problems in the society by means of stories, novels, plays and poems which influence the minds of the readers and make them ponder over them .It has contributed a great deal by creating a sense of awareness and realization among the readers and address their problems .Dalit literature is one such literature which has brought to the fore the trauma and suffering faced by the Dalits in their everyday lives .Dalit women writers, have to a great extent articulated the woes and sufferings of the Dalit women by means of their literary works and have strived greatly for their emancipation by stressing on education as the need of the hour. Both Bama and Sivakami are prolific Dalit women writers who have carved a niche for themselves in the realm of literature. The present paper traces the arduous journey of their women characters who traverse through their problem -ridden lives with grit, determination and courage and overcome all odds. The manner in which these courageous women face their problems and confront them is indeed noteworthy, the fact that they manage to get a foothold in this male-dominated society is indeed worth a mention here. Each of them asserts their individuality in a unique way and make sure that they voice their disagreement in a world dominated by patriarchy.

**Keywords** – Reflection, Realisation, Emancipation, Arduous, Determination, Disagreement, Patriarchy.

**Introduction**

*Women is the companion of man,  
Gifted with equal mental capacity.*

--Mahatma Gandhi.

Mahatma Gandhi, The Father of Our Nation recognized the worth and importance of women and stressed on the need for their empowerment but unfortunately the women, especially in India have always been considered secondary and inferior to man. Such differences have been long erased by

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the rest of the countries, especially the developed ones but India still grapples with it. The condition of the Dalit women is all the more pitiable as they are bound by the shackles of caste, class and gender which render them voiceless and powerless. Belonging to the Dalit community themselves both the novelists Bama and Sivakami have presented before us their deeply personal and painful experiences which strike a chord with us readers and prod us to think about the oppressive caste-system in our society which deprive people of their respect and dignity. The caste-system in India is rigid and is centuries old, many people belonging to the lower classes are victimized by it and are deprived of their dignity because of it. The women belonging to the lower castes have to confront the dual discrimination of the upper castes and also their own men who suppress them and exploit them. These issues have been highlighted in the novels of Bama and Sivakami who have successfully reflected them in their notable works. The novels taken up for study are Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati* and Sivakami's *The Taming of Women* and *Cross-Section*.

Bama the Dalit -Feminist writer established herself as a prolific writer with her autobiography *Karukku* which won her the Crossword Book Award in 2000. Her journey was far from easy as she was born into a family of Dalits who were agricultural labourers and were converted Christians. She was born in the year 1958 in Pudhupatti, Madras and had a humble beginning. Her father Susairaj worked in the Army and her mother Sebasthiamma was a housewife. Bama became a writer by chance rather than choice as she had earlier intended to become a nun and serve the people of her community with sincerity and dedication. As she was discriminated against on the basis on the community she belonged to, she left the convent after being a nun for seven long years. Her meeting with Father Mark Stephen of her village inspired her to talk about her unpleasant experiences as a narration which resulted in her book *Karukku* which came out in the year 1992. The next novel *Sangati* established her skills as a writer and helped her gain recognition and so did *Vanmam* her next novel. Bama's novel focused on caste-discrimination and gender discrimination, and she proved to an upholder of Dalit feminism in her novels. Her very first novel *Karukku* traces her journey and her search for identity as a woman and as a Dalit Christian. She uses the stones hurled at her as steppingstones to her success and manages to pull along despite the innumerable setbacks she faces in the convent. *Karukku* is a record of her life which lays bare before us her spiritual upheaval and turbulence. Balakrishnan observes," Because her faith failed her, Bama leaves the order only to revisit her trauma with words that are forged in the smithy of her soul, which sear the conscience of the empathetic reader" (19)

In Tamil *Karukku* implies palmyra leaves that are double-edged and sharp causing damage and discomfort. Though the word never appears in the novel it stands for the trauma caused to the narrator. Bama's narration traverses from her village to the convent exposing the fissures between the Christian sermons and the actual implementation of these sermons. Bama commences the novel describing the beautiful surroundings of her village and the lush greenery, she also brings to light the manner in which the residences were divided and demarcated on the basis of the caste people belonged to. The novel is replete with incidents that bring to the fore the caste-hierarchy and the way it functioned in the village. Bama mentions an incident when as a child she was falsely accused of stealing a coconut while playing with her friends. She recalls how she was humiliated and put to shame in-front of her classmates for committing an act she was not aware of. She mentions in the novel that she did not know of caste-based discrimination until she reached the third standard when she was a witness to an elderly man carrying a packet of snacks with a string and handing it over to an upper-caste Naicker. Though initially she laughs at the incident, she later realizes the seriousness of the situation after her brother Raj Gautaman makes her understand the relevance of

the incident. Bama realizes the power of education after the advice given by her brother, and she follows his words diligently by pursuing her studies. Though she works hard and with sincerity she is confronted with the disgrace and blot of the caste she belonged to. She has innumerable experiences in school as well college which are far from pleasant and questioned her very existence and identity. When her siblings expressed their wish to go home for their First Communion, the Principal and the Warden passed insulting remarks asking: “What celebration can be there in your caste, for a First Communion?” (19). These words reflected the biased attitude of people towards the people of her community and brought to light their condescending attitude. The thought that education and a respectable job would free her of these attitudes proved to be wrong when Bama had to face the discriminatory conduct of the authorities at the convent. At the convent where she worked, she realized that there was no love for the poor and the meek and they were terribly exploited and made to work like slaves. Krishnaswamy is of the opinion that: Both Bama’s disillusionment with the professional beliefs of the Catholic Church and her subsequent reinterpretation of the Christian scripture emphasizing the revolutionary aspects of Christianity, the values of equality, justice and love, are throughout informed by a robust engagement and a practical understanding of a religious practice in everyday life.”(77)

The novel *Karukku* exposes many secrets of the Church, its attitude and its discriminatory nature. Bama leaves the convent as she is disillusioned and dissatisfied with the way it functioned, returns to her village to join the women of her community even though a sense of insecurity enveloped her greatly. Bama tells us the stories of these women in her next novel *Sangati* which lays bare before the readers the everyday happenings and the implications of caste and gender in their lives. Bama incorporates the story of three generations of women in *Sangati*-Bama’s grandmother, Bama herself and the coming generations. The book just like her earlier novel *Karukku* celebrates her identity as a Dalit woman and a feminist. Bama brings to life some powerful women characters, some meek and submissive and others asserting their individuality with authority resisting their age-old oppression. Bama expresses her anger and rage against the caste-based tyranny and patriarchal mind-set here in this novel and her characters based on real life speak for themselves giving vent to their agony and frustration. Bama’s grandmother Vellaiyama Kizhavi is left to fend for herself and her two daughters after Bama’s grandfather moves to Sri Lanka, never to come back. She struggles to raise her two daughters and toils hard to earn a living. She says:

We have to labour in the fields as hard as men do and then on top  
of that; to bear and raise our children as for the men, their  
work ends when they’ve finished in the fields. You are born into  
this world, it is best you were born a man. (6)

These words uttered by Bama’s grandmother reveals the gender -based differences in the dalit community and the way it influenced the lives of women whose lives were ridden with problems and challenges of all kinds. The difference in wages of men and women doing the similar kind of a work is clearly brought out by Bama:

The women, in any case, whatever work they did were paid less  
than men. Even when they did the same work, they were paid  
less. Even in the matter of tying up firewood bundles, the boys

always got five or six rupees more. And if the girls tied up the bundles but the boys actually sold them, they got the better price  
(18)

Another problem of grave concern was the sexual harassment which Dalit women faced while working and Bama clearly recollects her grandmother's warnings not to venture out alone to collect firewood. These lines clearly bring to light the dangers that these women are exposed to. Bama brings to life many memorable women characters in this remarkable piece of work. On one hand there are meek characters like Mariamma, Thaayi and Rose and on the other hand there are rebellious characters like Rakkama and Sammuga Kizhavi who dare to raise their voice against atrocity. Mariamma is molested by Kumarasami ayya and is falsely accused by him of having a relationship with her cousin Manikyam, despite her efforts to convince the elderly people of the Panchayat. She is asked to pay more fine as compared to Maniikyam and eventually ends up getting married to him despite being unwilling and reluctant. Her problems do not end here as she is relegated to a life of endless misery suffering blows at the hands of her worthless husband. Thaayi too suffers in a similar manner because of her husband who beats her mercilessly and so does Rose. All these women lack the guts to prevent their abusive husbands from raising their hands against them as they are docile by nature. They lack the courage to walk out of the abusive relationship and be independent. Rakkamma makes her sharp tongue and filthy language a weapon against her husband who vents his fury upon her and tries to beat her mercilessly, through her character Bama reveals how some women make use of their obscene language as a defence mechanism against their husbands. Rakkamma justifies her actions before the crowd by saying that her foul language and actions are the only means of escape from her husband who has no pity or remorse on his violent behaviour. Though one is taken aback by the uncivilized language used by her, we understand her plight as this is the only means of escape for women like her who are tormented day in and day out by their abusive and alcoholic husbands. Bama is of the strong opinion that perhaps it is due to the oppression and exploitation faced by these men at their workplace that instigates them to vent all their anger and fury on their hapless women who have to put with their violent and aggressive behaviour. As they unleash their fury at home women like Rakkama are left with no choice but to resort to vulgar language to save themselves. Bama brings to light how these women use abusive, uncouth and obscene language without embarrassment and display their resistance. Bama leaves no stone unturned to shower praises on the women of her community by praising them for their hard-working nature and the ability to manage multiple tasks skilfully. She says: "How many jobs they are able to do simultaneously, spinning about like tops Even machines can't do as much"? (78)

This picture of these women who are side-lined is not one of Perumalpatti solely, this is the story of millions and millions of women living in India especially in the villages, lacking access to education and employment. Bama has revealed to us the ugly side of their lives tinged with reality. She does present before us a positive identity and is hopeful that better days lie ahead as there is hope for change. Bama does not fail to talk about certain advantages that dalit women had as compared to the upper-caste women. She says that a dalit woman has more freedom as is financially independent as she is strong both physically and mentally and is also diligent and industrious by nature. As she works hard and earns some money, she is less dependent on her husband as compared to the upper-caste women. A dalit woman who is a widow has the freedom to marry again, something which is unheard of among the women of the higher castes. Bama also

says that the practice of giving dowry also did not exist among the Dalits and that this was also an added advantage. Another promising aspect of their lives was the freedom to dissolve a marital relationship in case the woman was not interested in continuing it. Thus, there seems to be some respite for these women according to Bama, in their otherwise dreary and monotonous existence.

Simon de Beauvoir's famous words: "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (295) is suggestive of the way the image of a woman is perceived and the fact that she has been accorded a secondary status in the society.

Bama makes a particular mention of how girls and boys were treated even in their childhood. Girls were often saddled with household work and responsibilities whereas the boys were left free to play around. Girls had to eat only after the men and the boys had finished eating their fill and had to wait, even while they were children a baby boy was picked up immediately if he cries and a girl child was left to cry for long. The neglect and pain became a part of the life of a girl child at a tender age and this attitude of the elders was indeed heart-breaking and disappointing. Bama remembers the differential treatment meted out by her own grandmother who was more partial to her grand-sons and favoured them more. Girls did not have the liberty to play the games like kabaddi or marbles but were only allowed to play with shells and stones. Boys were given more priority as far as education was concerned as the girls were restricted to their homes burdened with chores at home. Bama tells her grandmother: "it is you folks who are always putting us down; from the time we are babies you treat boys in one way and girls in quite another. It is you folks who put butter in one eye and quick lime in the other." (29)

Bama lays emphasis on the need for education and makes her people understand that they themselves should strive for their betterment rather than expecting others to help them. She makes it very clear that education is the only solution to their problems and if they gain access to education and make use of the opportunity only this would help them in raising their economic and financial status. She becomes a mouthpiece of the Dalit women voicing their grave concerns and issues which hamper their growth and development.

P. Sivakami is another Dalit feminist writer like Bama who shot to fame with her first novel *Pazhayana Kazhidalum* translated into English as *The Grip of Change*. *Kurukku Vettu*, *Kadai Mandhar* and *Nalum Thodarum* are some of her renowned works. She is not only a novelist but also a former IAS officer and has gained recognition in the field of politics too. She is active on social media and also expresses her views on society and politics. Most of her novels primarily focus on the Dalit and their lives and represent Dalit feminism. In the novel *The Taming of Women* she brings to us a mosaic of characters in a typical village in South India dominated by patriarchy. Anandhayi is the protagonist in the novel, the whole novel revolves around her and her six children who are her universe. Her husband Periyannan is a contractor by profession, he is portrayed as a dominating, short-tempered and an unfaithful husband who never cares for his wife Anandhayi. The opening scene of the novel introduces us to the main characters and their innate nature, Anandhayi is shown to be meek and submissive yet voices her dissent, retaliating against the actions of her husband Periyannan who has brought home a mistress named Lakshmi, at the time when she is about to deliver her fifth child. Periyannan pays no heed to her words, in fact he manhandles her without considering the fact that she was heavily pregnant when Anandhayi objects to the presence of Lakshmi. Periyannan seems to be dominant and unfaithful, having an insatiable appetite for women. He had an inflated ego and exhibited a violent behaviour with his

daughters, Kala and Dhanam as well. His mother very often referred to as 'the old crone' in the novel too is not spared from the wrath and anger of Periyannan who did as he pleased. Sivakami attempts to highlight the condition of dalit women through these women characters who are dominated by the male members in the family-their fathers, brothers and husbands. Anandhayi is a typical wife, clinging on to an unfaithful husband, taking care of the house and the children yet suffering blows for no fault of hers. Periyannan never respects her or cares for her as a husband, but Anandhayi still stays with him bearing all atrocities, crying silently thinking about her parents who died when she was young. She even thinks of ending her life, but the thought of her children makes her change her mind and she manages to pull on with her life despite all difficulties. She is burdened with the household responsibilities and taking care of her children with no help from her husband. Repeated pregnancies add to her woes, but no one understands her, and she finds herself powerless and helpless as she has no one to go. Even her children do not respect her as they have seen their father ill-treat her and dominate her, for them their mother is a defenceless being totally at the mercy of their father. Kala and Dhanam, their daughters fail to connect with Anandhayi and seldom try to understand her or the sacrifices she made to bring them up. Both Kala and Dhanam grow up to be resentful and have no regard for their mother. The sons Mani and Anbu are treated differently as they are boys, they are seldom scolded or rebuked by their father and grow up to be irresponsible individuals having no regard for their mother. Both Mani and Anbu take after their short-tempered father and dominate their sisters and restrict their movements. It is surprising that both Kala and Dhanam fail to understand the position of their mother and emphasize with her, as she too is a victim of their father's anger. Being powerful and authoritative he commanded more respect from them hence the daughters fail to sympathize with their own mother. Lakshmi the mistress of Periyannan, is described to be very beautiful and charming but though initially Periyannan treats her well later on his ego is hurt when she tries to run away, and he beats her mercilessly. Lakshmi too, finally commits suicide to escape from the torture of Periyannan who wanted to keep her under his control forever. Lakshmi who looks for comfort and security meets a tragic end, falling a victim to the adverse circumstances. Both Lakshmi and Anandhayi are crushed under the powerful force of patriarchy and are unable to free themselves from it. Though initially Anandhayi is resentful towards Lakshmi, gradually she develops a soft corner for her and even feels sorry on her tragic end. Both the women sometimes seek solace in each other as both are victims. Both the wife and the mistress are denied any respect or dignity by the cruel Periyannan. Through these characters Sivakami lays stress on the need for education and upliftment. Under the given circumstances a dalit woman has no one to look up to and ends up being frustrated and bitter. Alice Walker in her novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, points out, 'And we cast out alone, to heal and Re-create ourselves' (213)

Sivakami finds Anandhayi an apt medium through which she brings out the sufferings of a dalit woman and shows how her movements are restricted to her area at home. Anandhayi has lost her parents and she has no place to go and vent out her frustration, she is uneducated too and cannot fend for herself therefore she has no other choice but carry on with her miserable existence. Though she is well aware that she has no means of escape she does not refrain from voicing her displeasure against the actions of her unfaithful husband, even though she loses her battle with him every time. Like Bama's characters the characters of Sivakami too are sincere, hard-working and display a briskness and are active and spirited despite the domination and subordination by men. Anandhayi is shown to be working tirelessly and the home she is restricted to becomes a place of hostility where she expresses her disapproval and voices her dissent despite facing failure every time. The novel centres around her rather than Periyannan and her life is a living example of how a typical

dalit woman leads her life living under the shadow of her husband completely at his mercy. Her life is not her's alone it represents many other women who suffer in a similar manner yet manage to go with their meaningless existence. Sivakami thus highlights the structure of a society where the rules are laid down by a man and he reigns supreme. So, in the words of Simon de Beauvoir Anandhayi becomes “the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential”.

The saga of Anandhayi is that of her marital life with six children to whom she is greatly attached, and she continues to carry out her responsibilities despite her dreary existence. Sivakami portrays a variety of characters in her novel, some are docile like Anandhayi, some are like Lakshmi who attempt hard to escape from the adverse circumstance. Poongavanam and Dhanam try to go against the restrictions imposed on them, Poongavanam decides to remain a single mother and live independently. Thus, the writings of Bama and Sivakami signal and herald a massive transformation and change as Helen Cixious talks of in *The Laugh of Medusa*: writing can serve as a springboard for subversive thought... transformation of social and cultural structures. They are in a way “re-drawing the map of literature by exploring a new continent of experienced that had so far been left ton darkness and silence”.

In the novel *Cross-Section* Sivakami brings to light a character named Saro who denies going by tradition, the novel traces the psychological turmoil in her mind which is puzzled by the question of her marital status as she is attracted to Kumar despite being married to Ravi. Saro and her relationship with Kumar is far from satisfying as they have bitter moments of quarrel and Saro looks at Kumar with suspicion. Saro is working and is financially independent and thus has more freedom and liberty to move around. Though her character is completely different from Anandayi who clung on to Periyannan one common thing between them was the immense love for the children. Saro too was attached immensely to her children Vivek and Sowmya and put up with Ravi only because of them. Saro remains unhappy despite her affair with the married Kumar which meant that there was no means of escape for her. Her relationship with Ravi remains strained till the end and her affair with Kumar continues till the end of the novel leaving the readers to interpret the end. Ravi physically assaults Saro in the novel and strikes her while she tries to defend herself, Sivakami thus brings to the fore the male -ego and the violence women are subjected to in their homes. Though Saro's behaviour cannot be justified, Ravi's actions cannot be considered correct either. The novel does bring to the fore the complexities of relationships and the deceit in married life, especially in India. Saro, Kumar and Ravi, all three characters do not have the will or the grit to admit their relationship before the society and continue with their secret lives. The novel primarily focuses on Saro and the complexity of her mind and character, the novelist is also desirous of portraying a massive change in the outlook and perception of women which has taken place over the years on account of various reasons like women becoming financially independent and becoming more aware of themselves and their needs. Saro represents a modern woman who is more conscious of her own self and desires to give priority to her own needs. This woman does not want to be caught in the bond of tradition and wants to step outside proving that women too have a right to their own needs. Though her actions cannot be justified in any way they bring to the fore a marked change in the society, as far as the mindset of a woman is concerned. While Anandhayi continues to cling on to Periyannan proving herself to be a dutiful wife, Saro decides to take refuge in the arms of another man. Saro's behaviour is a marked change from the women depicted by Sivakami in her earlier novels, she seems to be different from any of the women characters portrayed earlier, perhaps because of the fact that she was economically independent and not that dependent on her husband like the earlier characters or maybe due to her own innate

nature which was free-spirited. Her dreams often brought to light the insecurities in her mind which was always restless and not at peace. The novelist has however created her character to be bold, assertive and not so traditional, a clear departure from the earlier women characters. The metaphysical sub-text running at the end of each page in the novel is an added feature which makes it different from Sivakami's earlier novels. There is no doubt that she has experimented with a novel style and a novel character.

### **Conclusion**

Bama and Sivakami have created powerful characters who have boldly voiced their dissent and dissatisfaction against male domination and oppression. There is no doubt in the fact that there is a new sense of awareness among the dalit women today and this awareness would lead to their emancipation. It is high time the society understands the true potential of a women and treats her with respect.

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