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English Literature

AFRO-AMERICAN UNDERTONES IN THE WORKS OF BAMA: A CROSS-CULTURAL READING OF DALIT RESISTANCE

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Kanchana Devi

Research Scholar, Department of English and MELs, Banasthali Vidyapith

Dr. Sunil Kr. Jha

Assistant Prof., Department of English and MELs, Banasthali Vidyapith

ABSTRACT

Dalit literature portrays the slavery and oppression endured by Dalits in their lifetime. Bama, a celebrated Tamil Dalit writer, crafts narratives of Dalits and gendered oppression that resonate far beyond the geographical and cultural borders of India. While her works like *Karukku*, *Sangati*, and *Vanmam* are deeply rooted in the lived realities of Dalit Christians in Tamil Nadu, they share striking thematic and structural affinities with African American literary traditions. This paper explores the Afro-American undertones in Bama's literary consciousness, portraying how both traditions use autobiographical narrative, oral traditions, linguistic assertion, and intersectional feminism as strategies of resistance. Drawing parallels with the works of Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Maya Angelou, and Alice Walker, the paper argues for a transnational Dalit-Black aesthetic that foregrounds shared histories of trauma, survival, and hope. Through this cross-cultural reading, Bama's literary voice is contextualized as part of a global conversation on subaltern resistance, memory, and identity politics.

INTRODUCTION

Within the tapestry of Indian Dalit literature, Bama's *Faustina Soosairaj*, who is also known as Bama, appears to be a loud voice who advocates the intersectional experiences of Dalits in general and Dalit Women in particular. The works written by her challenge the dominant social orders around caste, gender and religion by voicing the experiences of the people who are marginalized. Despite being an author of Indian origin Bama's works have the universal undertones of resistance and oppression with explicit influences from Afro-American literary traditions, as referred to by Lakshmi Holmstrom who says, "... Bama's work is among those that are exploring a changing Dalit identity..." (Holmstrom xix). This comparative reading of Bama highlights a shared spirit of protest against deeply ingrained hierarchies within Afro American and Indian Dalit frameworks.

Shared Histories: Caste and Race as Structures of Oppression

Both Dalit and Afro-American communities have historically endured social exclusion, segregation, and systemic disenfranchisement. In *Karukku*, Bama writes of how her identity as a Dalit Christian placed her at the fringes of both caste Hindu and religious communities. This mirrors the "double exclusion" faced by African Americans—discriminated against by the state and alienated within predominantly white Christian institutions. W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness" is echoed in Bama's depiction of growing up as a Dalit Christian—torn between religious teachings of equality and the lived reality of caste discrimination.

Autobiography as a Tool of Protest

Bama's *Karukku* can be read alongside Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* or *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. All three texts employ life-writing as a form of resistance, narrating personal trauma while critiquing institutionalized injustice. In *Karukku*, Bama's discovery of caste consciousness is a political awakening that mirrors Angelou's growing awareness of racial inequality. Both writers employ confessional modes to destabilize hegemonic narratives and reclaim agency.

Language and Orality: Reclaiming Identity

A key Afro-American strategy of resistance is the use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), evident in the works of Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker. Bama similarly refuses to use sanitized Tamil, opting instead for the dialect of Dalit communities. This linguistic defiance reclaims both identity and authenticity, challenging dominant linguistic hierarchies. Like the African American spirituals and blues,

Bama's incorporation of oral traditions, songs, and proverbs in *Sangati* and *Vanmam* reflects a cultural memory rooted in collective experience.

Intersectional Feminism: Shared Struggles of Women

Intersectional feminism, as depicted in the works of Bama and African American writers like bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison, foregrounds the layered and interconnected nature of oppression faced by marginalized women. In *Sangati*, Bama provides a vivid portrayal of Dalit women's lived experiences, highlighting how they are doubly marginalized—first by caste and then by gender. These women perform strenuous physical labor, face domestic violence, and suffer social exclusion not only from dominant castes but also from within their own communities. This mirrors the themes explored in African American literature, where authors like Walker in *The Color Purple* and Morrison in *Sula* critique the dual burdens of racism and patriarchy borne by Black women. Both literary traditions reject single-axis frameworks of oppression, insisting that gender cannot be examined in isolation from caste or race. "You a lowdown dog is what's wrong. Its time to leave you and enter into the creation...But Nettie and my children coming home soon, I say. And when she do, all us together gon whup your ass". (Walker 207)

Instead, they advocate for a holistic, community-based liberation that recognizes the unique struggles of women at the intersection of multiple systems of power. The writings of bell hooks and Audre Lorde further reinforce this stance, emphasizing that true feminist liberation must include the voices of those historically silenced—Dalit women, Black women, and all those living at the margins. Through their narratives, Bama and Afro-American writers construct a powerful, transnational dialogue that underlines solidarity through shared struggles and affirms intersectionality as essential to social justice.

Religion and Resistance

Ambedkar writes : "The caste system does not demarcate racial division. The caste system is a social division of people of the same race" (238). A lot of parallels can be seen in comparing African-American and Dalit standpoints. While Dalits in India face oppression from within their own communities due to being born into a specific caste—a system legitimized by religious beliefs—African Americans endure discrimination based on their race, skin color, and associated traits. Unlike the African American experience of slavery, the Indian caste system includes the uniquely dehumanizing practice of untouchability, which stands out as its most severe aspect. Bama faces marginalization not just as

a woman and a Dalit, but also as a Christian. She understands that she is oppressed in three different ways: as a woman by birth, as a Dalit by caste, and as a Dalit-Christian by faith. Bama recounts "When I went home for holidays, if there was a Naicker woman sitting next to me in the bus, she'd immediately ask me which place I was going, to what street. As soon as I said the cheri she did get up and move off to another seat. Or she did tell me to move elsewhere. As if I would go! I did settle into my seat even more firmly. They did prefer then to get up and stand all the way rather than sit next to me or to any other woman from the Cheri....This happened to me several times" (Bama 18). Christianity occupies a complex space in both literary traditions. While it offers a moral language of justice, it is also shown to be complicit in upholding systemic discrimination. James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* critiques the church's failure to address racism. Likewise, Bama indicts the Catholic Church for perpetuating caste hierarchy even as it preaches equality. This ambivalence becomes a site of subversion, where faith is both interrogated and reimagined as a potential space of liberation.

Toward a Transnational Subaltern Aesthetic

By situating Bama's work within the broader scope of Afro-American literature, we open up a dialogue between two marginalized traditions. This transnational lens helps construct what can be called a Dalit-Black aesthetic—where resistance is articulated through personal testimony, linguistic subversion, and collective memory. As postcolonial and subaltern theorists like Gayatri Spivak and Paul Gilroy suggest, global solidarities are possible through shared experiences of marginalization.

CONCLUSION

Bama's writings are not confined to regional or national boundaries; they resonate globally, especially within the African American tradition of protest literature. Her use of autobiographical confession, oral narrative, linguistic reclamation, and intersectional feminism aligns her with a lineage of writers who transform personal suffering into collective resistance. This cross-cultural reading underscores the potential of literature to transcend borders and build solidarities among the oppressed. In doing so, Bama's voice becomes part of a larger, global chorus demanding justice, dignity, and visibility.

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