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Language of Resistance and Aesthetic Appeal: Bama's Linguistic Activism - An Analysis of the Subaltern Aesthetics in *Karukku* and *Sangati*

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Abstract:

Beauty and truth have been conceived as the two most important criteria of literary creations. Aesthetics however holds a greater relevance to beauty rather than truth, assigning beauty and truth two antagonistic zones. In fact if art and literary art at that, takes the side of truth then it is supposed to be aesthetically unappealing. Subaltern literature like every other serious writing that evaluates power relations and oppression, is more leant towards truth and hence judged by populist ideas as being unaesthetic in the use of language and linguistic device. These judgements are most often produced by stating that the subaltern texts are uncouth and unrefined in their language, and shocking and rude in their diction.

*But subaltern writers believe that aesthetics has nothing to do with flowery and imaginative language. All that matters in literary expression is involving the reader in the experience narrated in the text. Writers like Bama have broken all rules of linguistic expression and yet believe in an aesthetic connect with the reader. What writers like Bama have achieved is very relevant to Bharata Muni's Rasa theory as written by him in *Natyasasthra*. The present paper shall analyse the aesthetic appeal that Bama's work create with the reader and how it exemplifies the concept of beauty in its own right. Further the paper shall demonstrate the various linguistic nuances that Bama has used in her *Karukku* and *Sangati* that has made her texts powerful authorities against hegemony and oppression, yet no less aesthetic.*

Aesthetics is a term that is usually associated with serious mainstream Literature. The imposed subaltern space as against mainstream literature, urged a protest that involved the conception of a unique form and content for subaltern writing. The popular standards of aesthetics judged the language of subaltern writing as being shockingly candid and violently uncouth. The only way the subaltern writer could encounter the biased attitude was by redefining aesthetics, or in other words by aestheticizing protest. What is referred to as alternate aesthetics is actualized by dismantling the received images and the presupposed conventional ideologies on beauty and appreciation of the same. Aesthetic experience or *Rasa*, states that inspiring an emotion in the audience (or reader) is the essence of aesthetics in any form of art or literature. The fact that *Rasa* or aesthetics involves the audience makes it a democratic theory. Bharata Muni, the ancient Indian theoretician of drama declares that 'Rasa' is the combination of *Vibhava* (Determinants or Stimulants), *anubhava* (consequents), *vyabharibhavas* (the transient emotional states). According to Bharata Muni, *Rasa* can be tasted by the audience or readers in any literature or art form across the world, irrespective of caste, class, race, gender, nationality, etc. This way *Rasa* theory coincides with the Aesthetic standpoint of the subaltern. The present paper shall explore the Aesthetics of and by the subalterns, throwing light upon the Dalit Aesthetic Movement.

The Subaltern Aesthetic Movements politicize poetic language and propagate the aesthetics of protest. It is true that the subaltern Literature is more concerned with the sociological perspectives on life, focusing on more serious values than beauty. It would be inappropriate to expect pleasure or beauty from subaltern literature that serves to heal the oppressive inflictions on the marginalized for centuries together, to procure social justice and bring awareness. So should the prime concern of literature of the marginalized disregard aesthetic considerations? Sharankumar Limbale suggests:

- Rejecting traditional aesthetics, they insist on the need for a new and distinct aesthetic for their literature an aesthetic that is Life-affirming and realistic. In other words, Dalit writers have demanded different yardsticks for the literary appraisal of their works. It is the firm conviction of Dalit writers and critics that if yardsticks change, the concept of aesthetics will change too. (*Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature 19*)

The main core functions of subaltern aesthetics reside on questioning marginality. The conventional conception of 'beauty', 'clean', 'purity', 'holy' were derived from '*varna*' – the scripture that instigated by the elitist ideology that structuralized caste bound society. It projected the upper class-elite community to be clean, pure and holy and pronounced the low caste to be unclean, impure and unholy in order to subjugate them. Limbale's aesthetic approach on Dalit Literature challenges the implied dualism of *varna* such as upper class / lower class, holy / unholy, clean / unclean, pure / impure, evil / good, blessed / cursed etc. He suggests that the analysis on the aesthetic parameters of Dalit Literature must be based on Ambedkar's thought, as its literary value is embedded in its social value.

The proposed concept of Limbale's approach on Dalit Aesthetics had a much greater impact on marginalized writing and profoundly acknowledged in the criticism of subaltern literature.

Dalit literature has created its own alternative aesthetic principles by redoing the map of literature, by discovering and creating a whole new continent of experience that had so far been left to darkness and silence, by discovering the sterile complacency of the dominant social groups, and by challenging their set moves and fixed modes of looking at reality, countering their die-hard habits of defining knowledge, beauty and power and their established literary canons, thereby bringing the neglected, the suppressed or marginalized aspects of experience, vision, language and reality under focus, and forcing the community to refashion its tools and observe itself critically from its own indigenous standpoint. Dalit Literature also questions the bourgeoisie or the middle-class notions of Linguistic "decency" by using words that classical aesthetics would consider "uncouth" (*chyutasamskara*), "rustic" (*gramya*) or "obscene" (*asleela*)" (*Mainstreaming the Subaltern* 78).

According to Nagaraj, the most important strategy of the Dalit literary movement is the coupling of the cultural theory of despair with the politics of hope (105). To quote the words of Arjun Dangle, "Dalit Literature is a creative rebellion, which is based on revolt, un-acceptance and scientific viewpoint. Dalit writers do not only write for entertainment, but for a social purpose" (Ajay Kumar, 47), which is indeed the vision of Bama's writing.

Bama is considered to be the torch-bearer of the Dalit aesthetic movement in Tamil. She has formulated an alternate aesthetics and captured the unexplored, suppressed beauty of the ethnic and cultural values of the so-called uncivilized Dalit community. Bama in fact celebrates the vitality of the life of Dalits in her writings.

The downtrodden who were denied development and pushed out to be on the margin, to carry their lives through a never-ending saga of misery and pain; with no means of expression, they remained speechless, subjected to the unfairness and injustice of the society. Literature bears a witness to their subjugation but not a dumb witness. Literature became their voice of resistance against injustice and oppression. Subaltern literature at that is not just a mirror of the realistic picture and a medium of resistance but a threshold of liberation. Writers like Bama in their commitment towards the society have used their writings as cudgels against exploitation and injustice inflicted upon the subaltern communities. In its own right Dalit writing takes upon itself the language of the real world, thereby attempting to deconstruct the linguistic parameters long-held by the so-called mainstream literature, its prime excuse being their choice between refined versus unrefined language, signified as the elitist versus subaltern writing. Bama's subaltern narrative primarily rests upon her use of language and style simulating that of the commonplace lifestyle of the Dalits.

Lakshmi Holmstrom, the translator of Bama's *Karukku* in her introduction says, "Bama is doing something completely new in using the demotic and the colloquial routinely, as her medium for narration and even argument, not simply for reported speech. She uses a Dalit style of language which overturns the decorum and aesthetics of received upper-class, upper-caste Tamil. She breaks the rules of written grammar and spelling throughout, elides words and joins them differently, demanding new and different pattern of reading" (*Karukku*, Introduction, XIX).

Dalit Literature and its language is characterized by pain, agony, revolt, oppression and humiliation, as experienced by the Dalits. The extremely aggressive energy of the diction paints a gruesomely genuine picture of the oppressions underwent by Dalits. Dalits approach life with a rebellions spirit which is exhibited in their music and words. Bama deliberately uses the vernacular which disturbs the reader, to capture the agony and rebellious nature of the oppressed. Throughout her works she breaks the rules of grammar, spelling and earthy language. Words like she-donkeys, common whore, bastard, slut, my husband's whore, savage monde, drunk woman's farts, drink your son's urine, drink my monthly blood, black tongued monde, etc. shocks the reader, but that's what Dalit language is like.

Bama gives an account of nick names which again is typical of Dalit culture and most often found missing in the diplomatic upper caste society. *Munkovam* (Short temper), Midday masala (one who makes curry in the afternoon), *Kazhinja* (leaky), *Medenta* (floater), *Konnavaachi* (Starrer), Deaf one, Dumbo, Crazy, *Severia* (Xavier), Black art, *Manacchi* (Flat nose), *Uzha muukki* (running nose), *Paccha muukki* (green nose), *Needle bum*, *Mai Kuuzh Kizhavi*, *Damaata maader*, *Maikkanni*, *Big stomach kizhavi* are some of the names given to women. *Dal bum*, *Endrayya*, *Teppa tuuzhu*, *Black mouth*, *Nezhucchaan* (Staggerer), *Belly button*, *Kaaman* (jack of all trades), *Bodan* (shatcher), *Vidvi* (idiot), *Naadodi* (wanderer), *Kaatu raasu* (king of forest) are some of the nick names she uses in her

works. Such enormous nick names and lively interactions depict the community life of Dalits and the characteristic features of their language.

Bama in her writing captures the exclusiveness of the folk narrative in its unique, expressive idiomatic style, which is conveyed through a plain, raw passionate language of emotions. Even while it is subjected to the severest of oppressions, the language of the subaltern is informed by a rhythmic, lyrical quality.

Bama writes, 'From birth to death there are special songs and dances'. (Sangati, 79)

- "Even the little ones were good at singing and dancing. Even the bare-bottomed toddlers would sing out 'Sanjanakka – Sanjanakka' as they strummed away on broken clay pots strung with cattle-membrane, and they danced beautifully, never once losing the beat" (*Karukku*, 62)

Women too sang, as they planted out paddy seedlings, or weeded the fields, or harvested the grain, they worked to the rhythm of their songs. They sang to their babies as they rocked them in their cradles. They sang to the young girls when they came of age. They sang dirges to their dead. After the Easter *Pusai* was said in the Church, the women stood in a circle and sang: "Theruvil varaare, theruvil varaare – Yesu theruvil varaare, He is coming through our street, he is coming through our street – Yesu is coming in his chariot" (*Karukku*, 63). They would sing this and dance a Kummi, clapping hands. It was only after they did this that the *sapparam* procession was taken around our parts.

Bama is specialized in her sarcastic satires with humorous touches shooting sharp questions against caste bias, And it's because we drink this dark-coloured stuff that our children are born coal- black in colour, just like crows. Look at those upper-caste children, they are all pink and white.....even if our children are dark- skinned, their features are good and there's a liveliness about them. Black is strongest and best, like a diamond (*Sangati* 114)

Bama explicits the varieties of Dalit art forms and she makes a special emphasis on how the women folk are naturally skilled and instinctive in performing them. "Roraatu (Lullaby) to oppaari (dire) it is only the women who will sing them" (*Sangati*, 79) Bama uses a many of these songs in her fiction. She also narrated the energetic rendition of *Kulavai* (Ululation) – where women perform in chorus.

A song sung at a girls coming-of- age, with a chorus of ululation at the end of every four line begins as:

On a Friday morning, at earlier dawn

She became a pushparati, so the elders said her mother was delighted, her father too, the uncles arrived, all in a row. (*Sangati* 17)

Bama also encloses several examples of witty rhymes and verses made up on the spur of the moment to fit an occasion. Her narrative seems to be a brilliant composition of simple life-situations with the hint of serious socio-political factors.

There were a few games that we played most frequently. Two or three boys would play at being Naicku. The rest of us would call them, 'Ayya, Ayya', and pretend to be their pannaiyaal. These boys would act as if they had a lot of power over us. They'd call out to us, 'yeppa, yeppa', humiliate us and make us do a lot of work. We'd pretend to work in the fields all day, and then collect our wages and go home. We also played at keeping shop. They boys managed the shops, pretending to be the Nadar Mudalaali, we'd go there, hand over our tile-money and buy all sorts of gravies to take home. There were other good games too. We'd play at giving circus shows, or kuuthu performances: sometimes we danced or did a kummi. Sometimes we played at being nuns and priests who came and gave us blows.

Then we played at being married and setting off on a bus journey, the husband coming home drunk and hitting his wife; the police arriving and beating him up (*Karukku* 56-57).

Bama is exclusive in her narrative technique with a mere illustration of children playing games. She is able to communicate the impact of caste-class, gender oppression, family, culture and socio-economic status of the community. The caste-consciousness is deep-rooted that it is indeed even reflexive in the games of the children as they replicate the role of the ruling 'Naicku', 'Nadar Mudalaali' who suppress the outcaste. The miniature life and culture of the Dalit community is visualized through these children games.

Although the subaltern texts in general are angry in tone, the sense of humour of its characters cannot be neglected. Bama's style is unique as she blends pain and humour in a curious combination in her writings. Such a style vouches for the fact that even under suppression Dalits are able to celebrate their lives with joy and fun. The characters make fun of each other throughout and they even sing songs teasing people. "Even though they left at dawn and hardly ever came back until after dark, they still went about laughing and making a noise for greater part" (*Sangati*, 76). Bama gives an account of such songs composed and sung on the spot in her texts. For example:

“Handsome man, dark as a crow
 More handsome than a blackened pot?
 I have given you promise
 You who can read ingilissu” (Sangati, 77)

This song is a teasing song about a dark bridegroom who has studied up to eighth standard and therefore can read some English. Illiterate Dalit women with no knowledge of rhyme and meter compose such songs of creative excellence.

“They sang teasing songs to the prospective bride and groom who were usually cross – cousins;
 “As I was grinding the masala, machaan You peeped over the wall What magic powder did you cast upon me?
 I cannot lift the grinding stone any move”. (Karukku, 63)

Bama also narrates some fun-packed incidents like a child inserting hibiscus flower in a socket and perceives current shock as God’s punishment, Bama and her friend (in *Karukku*) worship a tooth from a skeleton thinking it might possess special power. She intersperses her narrations with the most hilarious episodes involving the people of the locality, which are innocent as well as humorous like Shammuga Kizhari taking her *kuuzh* in a broken flask and the incident of Bhabiyam offering a hen to the priest.

The so-called elite class writers have branded the subaltern language to be submissive but Bama proves it to be more assertive, independent, energetic and reactive than the literary language supposed to be befitting the aesthetics of mainstream literature. Dalit life has its own style, vernacular, culture and identity which are in its minute details captured by Bama in her narratives. The sense of communal life and intimate relationship with the group can be felt while reading her texts.

Bama explores in particular the language of women, if *Karukku* echoed Bama’s own voice, *Sangati* resonates the voice of the women of her community. Their voices sometimes raise in anger or in pain, or against their oppressors. Bama enough and more valid reasons for the violence of their language as a shield to protect them, sometimes a sharp tongue and obscene words used by women, only help them to escape from extreme physical violence caused by men and to shame them. All other times Bama implies that, such language may grow out of a frustrating lack of peace and pleasure in their lives.

Bama explores many aspects of Dalit language in her narratives, she enhances her narratives with a special ingredient enriched in Dalit language that is ridicule or lampoon, and subtle sarcasm. Raj Gauthaman says in his foreword to the collection of her short story, *Kisumbukaaran* says “Their customary habit of joking and lampooning finally gives Dalits the strength to stand up courageously against caste oppression. Dalit jokes and banter (*Pagadi*) lead the way to the language of insurrection (*kalaga mozhi*), and so, finally, to insurrection itself (kalagam). Her stories convey this, not overtly, but very naturally and easily, with their own rhetoric” (*Kisumbukaaran*, iii)

Bama’s uses language the way she uses to inspire the emotion of the reader at first hand, as underwent by any person who lives amongst Dalits, or to enable Dalits relate with the experience portrayed in her works. Bharata Muni’s *Rasa* in fact is a tool to involve the audience in the *natya* – the play. The way Bama’s language correlates with Bharatha Muni’s *Rasa* is just a happy coincidence, however Bama’s style and diction stand out in their own way claiming a unique identity for herself as well as for the life and stature of the Dalit characters she is spinning her story around. Ultimately her work only proves that Bama is an aesthete in her own right and each of her characters are in no way anti-aesthetic, or unrefined or uncivilized. By using the language of resistance and insurrection Bama has tried to knit the language of Dalits.

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