

The rapeutic Power of Language: An Analysis of Bama's *Karukku*

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ABSTRACT

Alternate literary discourses like dalit women's life narratives have challenged hegemonies of caste and gender. The articulation of new subaltern voices comes under the purview of new knowledge production. Subaltern voices have been muted until recently. Dalits have rewritten the historiography of the nation through socio-political interventions and literary discourses. Many social and political changes after independence has brought some improvement in the economic status of the dalits. But economic stability alone cannot erase their caste identity. It is an inescapable stigma; caste tag follows like one's shadow. Dalits believe in the therapeutic value of language. Discourses and psyche are analogous and they consolidate the healing power of language. The paper tries to study the healing power of language by focusing on the narratives in the text *Karukku*, the autobiography of a dalit female from Tamil Nadu. Bama's *Karukku* focuses on the life of dalit Christians.

Keywords: culture, dalit, language, narration, therapeutic power

Article History

Culture is a problematic term in Dalit Studies. According to Raymond Williams, "culture is a system of signs through which a social order is communicated, reproduced, circulated and valorised" (*Key Words* 4). Culture represents the signification of the social structure. Williams argues that: "culture is structured through the analysis of all forms of signification . . . within the actual means and conditions of their production" (*Culture* 64-65). Cultural studies identifies some common factors in the production and consumption of knowledge. Cultural Studies plays a key role in the evaluation of the present society.

Nation and culture have a powerful centre and vulnerable margins. People at the margins or subalterns have only limited powers. They are socially, politically and economically oppressed or marginalised. Power and resistance are associated with each other. Discourses play a vital role in the construction and controlling of individual subjects. They do not just articulate the meanings, but "constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects which they seek to govern" (Weedon 108). Weedon means that discourses are conditioned by the body, mind and evolution of the subjects.

Dalit discourses function as various forms of resistance and perform both verbal and nonverbal protest in their desire to live a dignified life. In order to overcome the humiliating experiences, dalits have experimented with many resistance movements both violent and silent.

The marginalised communities believe in the therapeutic power of language. Their stories and other genres of literature are written with a desire to heal themselves of the bitter experiences that the society has inflicted on them. In this regard, Jeanette C. Armstrong comments: "although severe and sometimes irreparable damage has been wrought, healing can take place through cultural affirmation" (244). Though most of the dalit writers express their subjectivity in regional languages, many contemporary writers have started to use English

as their medium of writing to articulate to a larger and more diverse audience. Dalit literature is essentially based on community consciousness and it seeks to heal the trauma of oppression through a psycho-social integration wherein the different marginalised communities are connected to a larger whole. There are many dalits, especially in the cities, who hide their identity as they consider perilous in their interaction with others. But, hiding one's identity has a negative impact on the formation and development of identity of the future generation.

The marginalised communities all over the world have experimented with the indigenous knowledge on the healing power of language. The indigenous people of Africa, Canada, Australia and America have been using their native tradition in oral, graphic and even in performative forms to speak out their anguish. In this regard, Muskogee poet, Joy Harjo, emphasises: “. . . to speak, at whatever the cost, is to become empowered rather than victimised by destruction. In our tribal cultures the power of language to heal, to regenerate, and to create is understood” (22). Harjo points to the power of language as an agent of regeneration. In this context, Joseph Gold also argues, reading literature helps people to make sense of the text “of their lives” (xii).

The need for self-expression is a form of ceremony for the community for the betterment of life and writers are expected to perform the task. Self-expression is a way to deal with the suppressed anger and humiliations that the marginalised people have been experiencing. It is a way to find out a channel for releasing out repressed emotions, associated with their marginalised existence. The narratives of the marginalised helps to construct a space of shared past. It advocates for justice and change in the contemporary society. These writings operate as counter narratives that disprove of the hierarchical social structures. They try to restore the self-respect and self-esteem of the dalits. Dalit literature also serves as a socio-pedagogical tool. They try to change the society by educating the readers with the dalit perspectives and dalit view of life. They interrogate the passive compliance of society in the continued marginalisation of the dalits. The stories of dalit experiences of humiliation, whether narrated in the form of poetry, novels, testimonies or performances, implicate their readers by giving voice and authenticity to their collective experience. They render a sense of solidarity among the dalits by arousing their consciousness that they are not alone and that their life experience is worth mentioning. In this regard, Jo-Ann Episkenew quotes Terry Tofaya to underline the indispensability of stories in dalit life:

“Story, rituals, and ceremony operate on a concrete level, rather than operating in abstraction, and are, therefore, easily understood. Stories provide vocabulary for readers to discuss trauma for which they might not have vocabulary in their lives. As well, stories bypass self-defence mechanisms and make it safe for readers to examine sensitive issues”. (85)

Stories enrich and defend dalit life: they provide a language of trauma and moulding to express the agony of marginalised experience.

Narration thus becomes an exercise which helps to heal the mental trauma of dalit women. Till then they have no one to hear their grievances, but by writing them down, they invite the attention of a larger readership. Many of the readers, who share similar experiences, are empathetic towards the female characters.

Bama remembers that much of her anguish that goes unarticulated finds a space for expression. Writing life narratives opens up a new ray of hope to express her pains, and it turns out to be a healing process. She gives expression to her helplessness:

“If you are born into a low caste, every moment of your life is a moment of struggle. People screw up their faces and look at us with disgust the moment they know our caste. It is

impossible to describe the anguish that look cause. But along with the anguish, there is anger, too. What can our anger do to them, though? It seems we have to swallow our anger and just carry on with our troubled lives". (*Karukku*27)

At another instance, she remembers with pain her college days when she had to compromise with many of the desires that a college student of her age cherished in her heart. She was a very brilliant and ambitious student and thus she got admission in a college, which was very uncommon among the girls of her community. When she came to a new world, where people lived in comforts and luxury, she was so baffled to know how poor she was. She had just one skirt and jacket to wear for one whole week. She had nothing to wear in the ears or neck, not even chappals for feet, whereas the other girls moved around with all kinds of trinkets and fine dresses. She had to manage with just two sets of clothes. A pair of small golden earrings, which was her sole rich possession, was pawned in order to pay the college fees. Bama accounts her miserable existence thus:

"For a whole week I went around in the same skirt, jacket, and daavani. All my classmates looked at me as if I was some outlandish creature. Some of them asked me, Did I only possess one set of clothing? Didn't I have any others? I felt deeply humiliated". (*Karukku* 74)

She was struck with humiliation when, on the College Day celebrations, they were invited to a party by their juniors and all her friends attended the party dressed in silk clothes and decked with ornaments. But poor Bama, had not even a decent sari to wear. All her suppressed emotions are recollected and expressed in her life narrative. The humiliation and anguish are well expressed:

"So at last, I made up my mind and went and locked myself up in the bathroom. I wanted to weep and weep when I considered my plight. And I realized how deeply shamed one can be for the lack of a few rupees in one's hand". (*Karukku* 76)

Her silence, on the life of humiliation, for years, is broken with the verbal articulation of the pain which remains embedded in the inner most corner of her heart.

For the first time in Indian literature, the dalit women writers have succeeded in presenting the collective psyche of the dalit community, their expressions of different sorrows, breaking the prevailing pattern of narration and expanding the realms of dalit literature. The myriad array of emotions of gendered subalterns is reflected in their narratives. Bama has succeeded in translating her concealed sentiments, love, anguish, humiliation and rage with due intensity to the readers through her narratives. She could successfully give expression to her individual as well as communal self. Above all, her life narrative is remarkable for its healing power; it is an epitome of the marvellous power of words to transcend the psyche of human beings. With the narration of the culture specific experiences of the dalits, she has developed an alternative discourse on the culture and literature of the marginalised. The emergence of alternative literary discourses has accelerated the cultural production of the marginal discourses. Literatures from the margins or minority literatures intersect with the mainstream national literature. But the marginal discourses of dalit women's writings stamp its seal on the national Indian literature. Thus, the reader is engaged in the complex and divergent culture of a group of people marginalised by the caste Hindus and the Varna system.

Dalit literature reflects on the politics of narrating the dalit experiences and histories and cultures of the dalits. Caste specific histories generated in the process have contributed extensively to the intellectual growth in mapping the history of the nation. The ideas about different elements of life such as locality, religion, language, history, caste, class, gender and ethnicity are the theoretical underpinning of dalit studies. This literary

history helps in the dissemination of knowledge about such groups to non-dalit researchers or academicians. The dalit writers themselves turn out to be literary historiographers who sensitise the readers on the politics of reading that considers factors such who is writing, what is read/expressed, and for whom it is written. We also find inter-disciplinarity among culture, literature and history while analysing the narratives from the margins. These narratives include specific and multiple viewpoints of the writer, the dreams, hopes, memories and aspirations of the community he/she represents and their difference from those represented in canonical literary texts. The intervention of the marginalised in the cultural production has changed the very idea of literary history. Dalit women's life narratives are ideological and polemic. The politics of narration of these writers are evident in the themes and techniques of narration. They have rendered the gendered dalit self in the politically appropriate autobiographical form in culture-specific dalit dialects. These life narratives articulate the collective gendered dalit experience from the twin perspectives of caste and gender.

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