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High/Low Dichotomy: Comparing the protagonists of *Karukku* and *Mother of 1084*

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Abstract: Sexism and Casteism as tools of oppression have made deep impacts on the lives of women. Stereotypically, women are the focus of oppression, whatever be their social, political and economic situation they are bound to get oppressed. It is further because in our society this has become the norms and hence goes unquestionable and un-interrupted. Women, all over the world, are dominated by the patriarchal system but the intensity worsens when it comes to Third World countries. Furthermore, it becomes inhuman towards the Dalit women in Indian context.

This paper engages in the narratives of oppression of two subaltern figures Sujata from Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* and the narrator-protagonist of Bama's *Karukku*. Through an in depth analysis of various accounts and situation it shows how, both subaltern, creates a difference by attitude and determination. It questions on the role of cast as the only agent of oppression and focuses on various other agents of oppression.

The two stories set on entirely different backdrop marks the course of two women figures of their trouble, protest and rebellion. It further aims at showing the incapability of the protagonist of *Mother of 1084* to unshackle herself from social agents of oppression which Bama's protagonist was able to do.

Key words: Sexism, casteism, high/low dichotomy, *Karukku*, *Mother of 1084*.

Introduction

Our social structure and hierarchy places women in a position to be eternally suppressed. Indifferent to her class and status she is the victim of oppression everywhere.



However, in Indian context if it a Dalit woman the case worsens as she is oppressed by gender, class and caste. A Dalit woman resembles Alice Walker definition of Afro-American women: “The mule of the World” in her much acclaimed essay *In Search of Our Mother’s Garden*; who is doubly oppressed by the society. She is dominated by hierarchical power as well as gender power. She is exploited by upper caste (men-women) and lower caste i.e. men of her own community.

Oppression can be both forced and willing. Though no one likes getting oppressed yet people are oppressed in the name of caste, creed, sex, nationality, religion etc. as Michael Foucault rightly observes in his *Power/Knowledge* that “Power is employed and exercised through a netlike organisation . . . Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application”(Foucault 98). Every individual in this society tries to exercise control over other beings inspite of his/her own hierarchical status. This explains why and how a Dalit woman is oppressed by even men and women of her own community. Furthermore, women from their childhood are programmed to get oppressed by various forces, from elders, more powerful or influential. The phrase used by Simon de Beauvoir in 1950s ‘one is not born, but rather becomes a woman’ finds utter relevance here. These oppressions of feminine sex are a socially constructed and reinforced idea which has taken the shape of a prevalent norm. As was heard Nietzsche saying ‘God’s second mistake’. The notion of biological superiority endows male with a birth right of dominating the other sexes.

The sense of oppression is implanted in our minds, what in Jungian term is our Collective Unconsciousness hence oppression has been naturalized. Generation wise girl children are taught to be submissive, sacrificing, kind and passive generally by the elder female members. So, it needs a lot of courage, strength and confidence to question the normative order prevalent through ages. As the saying goes ‘He jests at scars who never felt a wound’, women have emerged into the literary sphere to mark their presence in the canvas emphatically voicing the concerns with the plight of women.



Background

In women's psychology the reactions to these oppressions are much more complex and vary greatly depending on person, situation, society and various other factors. In this paper some of those factors will be discussed in detail. Both Bama and Mahasweta Devi are renowned Subaltern writers, who have emphatically voiced their concern for the plight of Dalit women. In this paper the two text chosen is *Karukku* (1992) by Bama and *Mother of 1084* (1974) by Mahasweta Devi, are written by female authors and are centred on a woman protagonist. However, there is a striking difference between their caste, community, social standard, upbringing etc. where Bama's text entirely deals with Tamil Dalit life, society and protagonist, Mahasweta Devi's does not. *Mother of 1084* deals with an upper class Bengali Brahmin family and its female protagonist Sujata is an educated, working woman. Yet, they both are dominated by the family and society in their turn. The use of these two novels multiplies the dimensions to be discussed in this paper.

Aim

This paper focuses particularly on the struggle of narrator-protagonist of *Karukku* and Sujata throughout their lives and studies the marked contrast in their attitude towards life. Since, subjugation and revolt forms the basis of the respective characters it becomes important to explain them in details. It, at a depth, shows that strong will and desire to move forward can defeat all opposition. Bama's zeal to fight for the cause that birth is not in our hand and inequality in terms of birth is vague, takes her long way. Though hardships embrace her at every turn yet she never gives up and reaches her goals.

Coming out of the grips of Dalit and subaltern this paper with example has shown how individual will play an important role in shaping up one's life. It is Bama's struggle and firmness, her zeal of questioning the standards, defying the unspoken laws. The shift from nothingness to being able is beautiful rendered in *Karukku*.



Dalit Identity And Bama

Bama belongs to the Tamil Catholic Dalit, Paraya community; a community oppressed up to the core. The use of so many adjectives opens arena of discourses as each is somehow responsible for the oppression of her community, which shall be unveiled as the story progresses. She is one of the first Dalit woman writer, her *Karukku* translated into English by Lakshmi Homstrom reflects her perceptual transformations imparting a sense of self-esteem and consciousness among her community members and articulates her experiences. According to her Dalit literature is 'Liberation literature like Black Literature, Feminist literature and Communist-Socialist Literature.'

'The word *Karukku*, in English means palmyra leaves, which look like double edged sword with their jagged edges on either side'(Bama *Karukku* xv) This word *Karukku* is a pertinent pun used by the author as in Tamil it also means freshness, vibrancy. 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-edge 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)" (Bama *Karukku* xiv).

Being a Dalit writer she narrates her personal experiences of hardship and the consequences of low birth. As Nayar argues to call it a testimonio it describes the Dalit system of Indian Society. Caste, borrowing Padma Velaskar's words, may be described as a '...specific type of feudal organization and castes are economic and political groupings with the distinguishing essence of being status groups founded on distinctions of purity'. Without analysing the role of caste as an agent of oppression it is impossible to comprehend the true character and composition of subalternity in the Indian context. Partha Chatterjee in his thought-provoking article "Caste and Subaltern Consciousness" aptly remarks; "Subaltern Consciousness in the specific cultural context of India cannot but contain caste as a central element in its constitution" (Chatterjee 169).



Chatterjee urges upon the readers to 'look at caste... as the level of social reality' (Chatterjee 181) supposedly because even affluence and gender equality cannot redeem the marginality that one inherits by the ill-luck of being born in a so called 'lower' caste.

Dalit women in South Asia are the worst victims of the system not only because they are poor and women but also because they are Dalits. The words of Paatti, in *Sangati* which throw ample light on the precarious *Dalit* state are worth quoting here; "Women should never come on their own to these parts. If upper-caste fellows clap eyes on you, you're finished. They'll drag you off and rape you, that's for sure..." (Bama *Sangati* 1994).

It is autobiographical in nature, depicting the hardships she went through, the discrimination she faced, the cruel social odds prevailing within our society. It shows how caste and sex becomes obstruction in the progression of an individual being. From the beginning of the story readers can see how her community has been rejected by the upper caste. At one place she claims her community people as nothing more than human labour. As except the strength of their body all other human instincts are denied to them, treating them as mere crawling insects. Furthermore, on progressing with the story incidents of oppression of the women by the Paraya community males unfold. The men-women issues are more dealt in more details in her next novel *Sangati* (1994). Where *Karruku* describes the obstacles faced by her because of her being a Dalit, *Sangati* throws light on the hurdles crossed because of being woman.

In the process of this auto biographical novel the protagonist cum narrator unfolds the tale of her journey from innocence to wisdom. In the beginning at a point her elder brother advises her to get educated as education is the only source of freedom from this life of humiliation

Because we are born into the Paraya jati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that. But if we study and make progress we can throw away these indignities. Sp study with care, learn all you can. If you are always ahead in your lessons, people will come to you of their own accord and attach themselves to you. Work hard and learn. (Bama *Karukku* 17)



She continued with this faith that education will erase inequality. The continuous opposition on her Patti (grandmother) she continued her studies to finally join a nunnery, completing her graduation. To her surprise there also she faced utter discrimination owing to her caste and community 'Most of the nuns there were Telegu people. They didn't care for Dalits like us.'(Bama, *Karukku* 23). From such a crude repelling environment, the author- protagonist, Bama steps into a self dependent life. The journey wasn't smooth at any point neither it was after she secured a job and a livelihood because in this society it is difficult for a girl to be free and it becomes even more difficult if she is a Dalit. This is also echoed by the narrator-author 'Being a Dalit creates a problem. On top of that, being a Dalit woman makes it more difficult'. (Bama *Sangati* 120)

One thing that is undeniable is her insurmountable mental strength and will to defeat her low birth and rise above it. From their very birth in the Paraya community they are reduced to a mere thing, an object of use by the upper class and men of their own class. They are denied any voice. Another important aspect that Bama and her narrator-protagonist articulate is the fact that the people of Paraya community are converted Christians and not Hindus. This denied them the benefits of reservation and excluded them from the government upliftment initiatives of any kind. While describing *Karukku* Bama says:

The story told in *Karukku* was not my story alone. It was the depiction of a collective trauma – of my community – whose length cannot be measured in time. I just tried to freeze it forever in one book so that there will be something physical to remind people of the atrocities committed on a section of the society for ages.

Devi's Cornered Sujata

On the contrary the other novel under consideration *Mother of 1084*, an English translation of Mahasweta Devi's novella *Hazaar Chaurashir Maa*, translated by Samik



Bandyopadhyay(1997) and inspired by Maxim Gorky's famous novel *Mother* (1907), is set in an entirely different background. The novel documents the Nazalite Movement of 70s' West Bengal. Sujata, the protagonist belongs to an upper middle class Bengali family. She is the wife of Dibyanath Chatterjee, though she is self dependent, works in the bank, she is unable to create an identity of her own. She is always constrained by the roles she is playing of mother, wife, Daughter-in-law, mother-in-law etc. quite interestingly at this point the Socialist Feminist view is laid bare as money here is unable to bring freedom. She is still chained by the social norms and family relations. Again quite interestingly as Bell Hooks has said in the Preface to First Edition of her *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984) 'To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body'. In right temperament of this argument Sujata though being a part of the family, is an outsider. She can never take the role of her mother-in-law or daughters who are more adjusted in the family.

The novel has a political backdrop of the infamous Naxalite movement of 70s Calcutta. A period when the whole generations aged between 15 years to 30 years were wiped out. They just vaporised echoing the fate of rebels in Orwell's *1984*- a Utopian novel where anyone who goes against the regime of State ceased to exist. The movement has its roots in the peasant revolution of Naxalbari. From there it attracted the young university minds of Bengal who were losing hope on the social system and were fascinated by the theories of Marx. The growing inequality between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat further instigated the movement. Sujata's family is the microcosm of the whole movement where the hypocrite indifferent upper class is symbolized by Dibyanath, Neepa, Tuli etc, Sujata describes the naive common mass who have simple living and mostly unaware about the realities outside. While Brati Chatterjee, Sujata's youngest son, is the rebel, the staunch critic of upper class morality and an extremist who has no place in this world of lie and duplicity and hence, perishes.



The Social Environment

Sujata is not the centre of her family even, she has been marginalised there, initially by her mother-in-law and then by her daughter Tuli. Hence, she belongs to the periphery of the system, where her voice is eternally subdued. She paternally belonged to a affluent household, had higher education than was the custom of that age and society, and never faced caste discrimination. However, with all these she could earn was a job and nothing else. So the character of Sujata raises a question on the limits of subaltern discourse. A character like Devi's Sujata, educated-high born but marginalised, both is and is not subaltern. She is not Dalit being born in a Brahmin family. Again going by the meaning of the term she is not even subaltern- she is a bank employ. So her just being a woman is enough reason for her oppressed state.

On contrasting with the author-protagonist Bama, Sujata's life was smooth with adequacy of all sorts of comfort. Where Bama strived for the bare minimum Sujata had everything in plenty. This is in turn realised by Sujata when she visits Somu's (Brati's comrade) house. The class distinction is vividly portrayed here by the author. Sujata by her family, their class consciousness, social image has been taken far away from normal human expressions. She has become indifferent to oppression as even in her young age she could not rebel against the standard norms.

Hegemony plays a great role is this oppression as the oppressed also plays an active role in oppression. For Bama it's a continuous fight to rise above, in spite of oppression of her community in the name of caste, and they have started believing it that being of lower caste they are bound to be treated like animals. But the other female members consider it to be the rule and their fate to be dominated by the males. Sujata also falls on the same category who considers it to be the rule to be within the family boundaries suppressed by husband, mother-in-law and others. Her education could not elevate her state.



Birth, Status And Power

In the beginning, Bama at certain points exclaims her helplessness and growing frustration at being a Dalit. When innocent she is repeatedly accused by various authorities at various times just in the name of her low birth; “You have shown your true nature as Paraya, he said. ‘You climbed the coconut tree yesterday after everybody else had gone home, and you stole a coconut’...‘After all, you are from the Cheri. You might have done it. You must have done it” (*Karukku* 19).

In school for coconut, in high school for food, in bus for seat, in nunnery for receiving order i.e., in every plane it was a fierce battle of existence as a proper and equal human being. However, all these incidents instead of weakening her, seemed to have strengthened her spirit opening her eyes towards the prevailing odds and inequalities of the society. On the contrary, Sujata never had such experiences of inequality nor was she ever dominated by the outer society as she belonged to Brahmin house hold both before and after her marriage. Her understanding of society came only after losing her beloved youngest son Brati, when on his 22nd birth and 2nd death anniversary she met Somu’s mother, again and learns various truths. Though being educated she was confined within her family and class and could not penetrate into the surrounding. This very fact took her away from Brati while he was living, because Brati could come out of his class consciousness and be one with that society which consists of proletariats. Even Nandini could reach to this truth but Sujata remained naive about it. The way her indifference and silence made her insignificant in her family, with her husband and children going away from her; her ignorance and naivety also took her permanently away from Brati. Had Sujata, had been vocal she might have stopped this catastrophe from occurring; she could have saved and retained Brati. Devi’s at this point also adds how state machineries discriminate between rich and poor. As a matter of fact Brati’s name was never published because of his family reputation, and his body was only referred as number 1084 whereas Somu and other names were published. Even Somu’s Sister will never get a job just for being his sister. ‘Didi, my daughter tells me she’ll never get a job because she’s Somu’s



sister. Can it be true?’ (Devi 59), says Somu’s mother to Sujata whereas Sujata’s i.e., Brati’s family members are all well settled. Similarly, in Bama in an episode describes how the Chaaliyar community invites the police, feeds them and use them against the Parayas . Paatti asks: ‘here we are, struggling just for this watery gruel. So how will the police or the government be on our side?’ (Bama *Karukku* 31). The law is also discriminatory.

Interestingly, where Bama’s attitude towards her low birth changes from that of embarrassment to pride; “And on that day I wasn’t embarrassed to singled out as Harijan child who has gained the best marks. I was even pleased” (21). Sujata could not achieve any such realisation regarding her existence. What she acquires is a keen knowledge of the surrounding, knowledge about Brati and his comrades’ visions, the pitiable conditions of Partha’s mother, the poverty of Samiran’s family, the helplessness of Somu’s family, the truth of the society where Somu’s sister is still taunted by the murderers of Somu, Brati and others

They tell my daughter, Hey, why didn’t you have last rites for your brother? It would have been a great feast for us. They’re fiends, Didi...

It had never struck her that they (Brati’s killers) could move about freely, could taunt Somu’s sister so mercilessly. (Devi 63)

Sujata, in a vain attempt, goes to Somu’s mother because she knows that Somu’s mother is capable of human emotions which Sujata’s clan is incapable of. Somu death is a loss to his family but Brati’s is a shame on Sujata’s family. However, she because of social and economic class barrier is unable to feel at a par with Somu’s mother. The difference exists on her mind- the class difference.

Sujata learns how close Brati has been to Somu’s mother and Nandani while living and discovers her utter failure. Sujata has been a prey of patriarchal hegemony that is educated and groomed to serve the patriarches, and she could defy it unlike Bama. Sujata’s limits of ‘permissibility’ are drawn by a social censorship. A voice that can subvert the very



foundations of this fraudulent traditional social order has to be curtailed. This curtailment is done as a part of institutionalization and disciplined of female agencies, in the paternalistic society. As a result it can be seen Sujata could never win over her mother –in- law and husband; yielding up to their wishes. Sujata has been made invisible by the hierarchical division of characters and their domain of activities, for the sanctity of the order to prevail.

Furthermore, Bama's difficulties become visible from the fact that the male member of the community who boast on their strengths and masculinity before their wife and other female members are treated with equal indignity by the upper caste dwellers, they feel castrated before both upper class men and women. Though existing on a patriarchal society the Dalit men are not shielded, they lay bare for exploitation.

“The elder went straight upto the Naicker, bowed low and extended the packet towards him, cupping his hand that he held the string with his other hand” (Bama Karukku 15).

In an influential article of S. Anandhi, entitled *Work, Caste and Competing Masculinities: Notes from a Tamil Village* portrays how in the village the upper caste young Mudaliar women call the aged Adi- Dravida by their name and makes sexual advances towards the lower-caste men:

...the sexual encounters between Mudaliar women and Dalit men were a terrain of more complex negotiations with serious consequences for the masculinity of dalit man (Anandhi)

Sujata, however, is seen dwelling in a more complex predicament. She belongs to the upper strata of the family both socially (being a Brahmin) and economically. Where her family members have influential and powerful contacts and can manipulate a lot of things e.g. the news of Brati's encounter, which they checked from getting published in newspaper. On the contrary Brati is seen sought after the state labelling himself as the denied and out of the



system. Sujata, is even unable to remember her beloved son, as not only the society but the family had also denied his existence.

Education

The treatment of education in the novels is equally diverse. This polarity exists as Bama and Sujata hailed from different sections and cultural communities of the society. Bama is painfully reminded of her caste through untouchability everywhere throughout her student life. She faced objection at every step which started from her family members where *patti* (grandmother) remarks; “As soon as she gets periods, you stop her from studying, hand her over to some fellow or the other and be at peace” (Bama *Sangati* 9).

At this her mother replies that her father wants her to study more, furious at this Patti replies back; “Have you any idea what that will mean? How are you going to keep a virgin girl at home and not get her married” (Bama *Sangati* 9). The outer world was even harsher. Bama opines that the government granted financial aids for the Harijans are more of humiliation than help as they singled them out according to their caste identity. And, once the identity is disclosed Bama faces “Among the other students, a sudden rustling; a titter of contempt” (Bama, *Karukku* 19). She, further, narrates a similar inequality faced by her in college hostels. Once she pleaded to the warden for leave to attend her brother Raj Gautaman’s communion. Though her request was rejected, the warden granted leave to the upper caste students without any form of query. At this, the educated girl Bama voiced against the authority “...there cannot be different rules for different castes, only the same rules for everyone” (19). Her courage paid off, and she went home with the granted leave. Quite surprisingly, her label of Dalit- Christian showed her discriminations in Christianity as well. With immense strong will she completed her nun-training after facing multiple obstacles yet, at the end of the training a nun-sister commented “...in certain orders they would not accept Harijan women as prospective Nuns and that there was even a separate order for them somewhere” (22).



On the contrary Sujata belongs to a society where girls graduating, that too from Loreto College is common enough. The prevalence of education among women and its normativity among women of that social section is wittily summarised by Devi in just a single line. "For there were lots of women looking for a job, with a BA from Loreto College" (Devi 9). The casual tone of the sentence refers to the common practice of imparting high education among women of high class in Bengal.

So it can be assumed that, unlike Bama, her education was not demurred at every step. Yet, Bama could learn certain truth about her own self and the world which Sujata could not. As already stated they both are prey of social hegemonic rules- Sujata being more tightly bound under it and more affected by it.

Moral Strength

Just being from upper class doesn't protect women's life, being a woman she is still vulnerable to the social odds. This is well portrayed in Devi's another novella *The Breast Giver* where Jasodha, the protagonist towards the end of the story, is thrown off by Kanganicharan, her husband as well as by her own children:

His mind had already rejected Jashoda....His sons are his sons. Their mother had become a distant person for a long time. Mother meant hair in a huge topknot, blindingly white clothes, a strong personality. The person lying in the hospital is someone else, not Mother. (Devi *Breast* 72)

Thus, though belonging to upper-caste Brahmin, Jashoda is economically impecunious as well as gender-marginalized in patriarchy and Sujata marginalized only because of her gender hence are examples that only caste cannot improve one's situation in life. Spivak aptly formulates; "This ... identity is a cover for the brutalizing of the Brahmin when the elite in caste is subaltern in class." (Spivak 114)



Contrasting against Bama's strong will Sujata's feeble cry to be her own self, which also she is not been able to put up and though disheartened finally joins Tuli's engagement party, further confirms Bama's firm is determination and will.

Sujata yearned to tell Brati- I can't bear to go down the stairs today, Brati. She longed to say- You would always tell me how difficult it was to be oneself. Brati, if only I could be myself today, and act as my heart dictated! (Devi *Mother* 106)

Conclusion

In conclusion this paper celebrates the moral strength of a 'low birth', her power to protest and question the prevailing odds of the society and finally to reject that society for something better whereas Brahmin Sujata, highly educated remains strangled within the house hold chores. Furthermore, where Bama is proud of her understanding Sujata shrinks within away from her inability to understand Brati which Somu's mother and Nandini could. The two Subaltern characters are equal at one place but the difference is made through one's determination and ideology. Bama flies high with her determination and struggle whereas for Sujata every kind of education that she received becomes futile. She is never able to hold the reign of her own life.

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