

## Bama's *Just One Word*- Writing from the Margin

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**Abstract-**Barma's characters are from lower caste and her short stories have shown that bits of wisdom can be found in the most ordinary places a school, an office or the village streets. Bama has introduced basic social issues in the subtle manner through these stories. In her all the short stories, 'discrimination' is the keyword that is evident. These stories have depicted the burning social issues like caste discrimination, female infanticide, environmental concern, hypocrisy and poor educational system. Being a teacher, Bama knows the school life very closely; most of the stories of the collection are about the school, teachers and students.

**Key words-** Feminism, Dalit Feminism, Casteist, Discrimination

Bama is popular for her three novels, *Karukku* (2000), *Sangati* (2005) and *Vanman* (2008). Her first short story collection titled *Harum-Scarum Saar* (2006) was published without any introduction. She left the stories to speak, for them, Bama's short story collection *Just One Word* is different from her earlier work, A. Mangai pointed out this difference in the 'Introduction' of the book. He writes:

The conspicuous difference between her novels (or long fiction) and her short stories is the mated summative voice of the authorial narration, characteristically substituted by a touch of ironic humour and the sensitive exploration of small acts of resistance and compassion. (xiv)

Barma's characters are from lower caste and her short stories have shown that bits of wisdom can be found in the most ordinary places a school, an office or the village streets. Bama has introduced basic social issues in the subtle manner through these stories. In her all the short stories, 'discrimination' is the keyword that is evident. These stories have depicted the burning social issues like caste discrimination, female infanticide, environmental concern, hypocrisy and poor educational system. Being a teacher, Bama knows the school life very closely; most of the stories of the collection are about the school, teachers and

students. In the story *The Verdict*, she has shown the beginning of the discrimination. The upper caste children are taught to not mix with the Dalit children in the school. Even they are restricted from mixing up with them. The worst part of it is that the headmaster of the school does not find anything wrong in spreading the teaching of untouchability in the school. The teacher Sarada teaches the butterfly to fly away to teach freedom in the story *The Yellow Butterfly*. Her experiment makes students to learn about binding and freedom are two ways of living. The innocent boy Raju is taught to speak the truth always in the story *Worldly Wisdom* but whenever he speaks the truth, he gets punishment. Telling the truth brings the wrath of his mother and villagers upon him. Raju's confusion between the teachers's teaching and worldly wisdom shows the turmoil of the little boy. The story *Wherever You Look* shows the worst situation of the caste discrimination, the teacher Kamlavalli believes in the caste discrimination but she teaches the lesson on equality in the class. The writer asks question that how a teacher who believes in the caste system can teach Subramania Bharathi's poem on the absence of caste system. Children are the future of the nation; it is the responsibility of parents, teachers and elders to nurture them without any inequality on the basis of caste. However, the little girl, Durga's family problem makes her a mature girl in the early time of her life in the story *Durga*

Bama has got a special attachment with the nature. She expresses her sorrow over the destruction of the nature in the story *Loss*. The story *Loss* also shows a struggle of a Dalit lady teacher to get a house on rent in the village. The first story *The Grazing Fields* shows Kirukkan's love for the nature and animals. He is called a mad man but his philosophy about the caste discrimination proved him a wise man at the end of the story. Colour discrimination of the birds hints at the caste system in the story *The woe, the Way*. The caste system plays important role, even in the urban areas. The story *Corpse* shows that the

relationships in the modern locality are hollow and caste based. The caste based references are made in the offices; the lower caste officer does not get proper respect from the junior colleague. The story *Just One Word* focuses on the caste stricken mentions of the Dalits, the upper caste colleagues just see from the prejudiced caste glasses to the lower cast officers. The protagonist Kaanchaarathan, from the story *This Man* is the tamil of the pied piper of Hamelin and his songs are enjoyable for the children. Adults fail to understand him but children are overjoyed by the presence of Kaanchaarathan. The two neighbors' quarrels on the reason of dirt in the locality but their pet animals live together peacefully; it is shown in the story *Man and Beast*. The workers in the story *Is It Fair?* do not want to purchase the bus tickets as they could not get any work on that day. As per rule it is not fair to go on the bus without buying the ticket but the poverty of the workers proved it fair. The story *Shards* shows the pathetic condition of the boy Chandran who was in the reformatory for juveniles. His wish for the freedom was an impossible dream for him. The last story *Wailing* points out the problem of female infanticide, this problem prevails in the upper caste families also. Bama has narrated all these problems through her stories, her observations and the skill of the narration has made the stories realistic.

The writing of Dalit women focuses on their experiences of being a Dalit woman; their lives are always with a 'difference' to that of the upper caste women. Munmoni Saikia comments on subjugation of the Dalit women in Bama's stories in the article, "Bama's *Just One Word: A Dalit Feminist Perspective*", he writes:

Besides being subjugated as a woman, a dalit woman has to suffer from the curse of caste that they inherit by birth. The caste that limits their means of livelihood by assigned occupations in a casteist society and it compels them to live a life of poverty. (179)

Bama's short stories have shown the Dalit women characters who suffer for being the Dalits, they are oppressed through internal and external patriarchy. Munmoni Saikia also studies the views of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar on the patriarchy, she says:

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in his analysis of caste considers patriarchy as the twin sister of brahminism. The nature of Indian patriarchy is 'brahminical' and keeping it in view Dr. Ambedkar coined the term 'Brahminical Patriarchy' or 'graded inequality'. (180)

As Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar said that it is not necessarily Brahmins who practice brahminism, anyone who encourages discrimination of based on the hierarchical structure is a follower of brahminism. Even woman can be a follower of brahminism, Bama has written about such a woman in her short story *Wherever You Look*. She has shown humiliation of a Dalit woman by a non-Dalit woman, this is the example of brahminical patriarchy. In this story an upper caste lady teacher named Kamalavalli humiliates her colleague Kanniyamma for using her plate in her absence. Kaniyamma is a Dalit woman who does not receive her portion of respect only because of her lower caste. Kamalavalli even did not call Kanniyamma to her daughter's marriage, because it is thought presence of a Dalit woman in the wedding would be inauspicious. However, this same Kamalavalli goes to the class after sometime to teach Subramania Bharati's poem urging social revolution. Bama delineates the irony through this situation, in which Kamalavalli teaches students that there is no such thing as caste and talking of high castes and low castes is a sin. The story is about an attitude of the upper caste woman, Munmoni Saikia comments on the story in the article, "Bama's *Just One Word: A Dalit Feminist Perspective*", she writes:

Surely education provided Kanniyamma a means of her livelihood and a status of honour in the society outwardly, but the caste stratification in our society is so deeply rooted in our society that the upper caste people are unable to accept them as their equals and so they are unable to treat dalits fairly. It is felt that sometimes education fails to provide self- esteem to dalits. (181)

In the same story, Lakshami- in charge of midday meal stops a dalit boy Kuppan from serving the food to her. Bama classifies caste with the concept of pollution and purity, through the story. She depicts a picture of how caste and occupation holds a status of

“Purity and Pollution” is governed religiously which are related to social structure and hierarchy. A teacher is considered as a reformer of the society, however, we often come across some teachers who not only believe in the discrimination but they become barriers in the development of a healthy society. Bama’s short story *The Verdict* speaks about how the seeds of hatred for the lower caste children are rooted in the school. Jenitha Blessy J. and Dr. V. Bhuvanewari write about discrimination in the schools and colleges in their article, “The Dynamics of Dalit Women Consciousness in the Select Short Stories of Bama”, they write:

Caste laws were made to prevent Dalits from entering in to civic and social spheres of life. The hegemony of high caste becomes so pervasive because knowledge was prohibited for Dalits. Ironically, though the Dalits occupied the lowest strata of society and were rendered as ‘untouchables’, the goods they produced were somehow accepted in some places. But the idea of pollution and purity makes the lives of the Dalits more difficult. This thought is enforced in young minds in order to raise them under their cultural heritage of discrimination. (1252)

The Indian society is one of the most hierarchical civilizations in the world; even in the modern time people continue to think that one section of the society is officially and unofficially superior to another section of the society. Uma Chakravarthi writes in this regard in her book *Gendering Caste Through a Feminist Lens*, she opines:

We need to recognize that cultural oppression as it operates in the lives of dalits and women, especially on women of the lower caste, is far more *dehumanizing* than economic exploitation, which we understand as the dominant feature of class, by itself. (7)

Bama is very much concerned about the nature; many of her short stories can be studied from the view of Eco-criticism. In the story *Loss*, Bama encapsulates a single Dalit woman’s experience. While searching for a home on rent she has to go through many obstacles of reality for being a Dalit woman. The story also expresses a sorrow on loss of

the nature in building the houses, the protagonist of the story wants to live in the nature but it is not possible for her because of development in her area. Gender discrimination is one of the themes in Bama’s stories, she writes on this issue in the story *Wailing*. The Indian society neglects the girl child and boys are nourished with lot of care because it is believed that only a boy can take care of the parents in their old age. Bama has created a character of Durga in the story *Durga* who suffers from domestic violence but never loses her hope for better future. The stories *Just One Word* and *Corpse* are about continuation of caste discrimination in the urban life. Though the time has changed and the Dalits are no more poor and uneducated but they are not treated with respect. The newly built colonies have got mixture of different people’s houses from various castes but at the time of social gathering the lower caste families are avoided from it. Maadasamy, the protagonist of the story *Just One Word* experiences the same humiliation of his childhood time when he becomes an officer. His lower caste identity continues to stick him even in his adulthood; his colleagues do not respect him for being a Dalit. All the stories in this collection are about the universal prevalence of intolerance, prejudice and discrimination of various kinds. A Mangai writes about the stories in the ‘Introduction’ of the collection, he asserts:

The short stories in this collection document the emerging influences on the lives and consciousness of people. The Mandal commission may not have noticed outbursts of castes feelings in Tamil Nadu, but the internalized caste sentiments that socialize children- pervasive in schools – practiced in our government offices, and clearly obvious in the new urban reformulations are perhaps subtler and therefore deeper. (xvi)

Bama has made an attempt to describe intersectional experiences with the help of the dalit characters in her short stories. She has brought out an important element of discrimination to give deep understanding of caste infected social realities. Jenitha Blessy J. and Dr. V. Bhuvanewari have commented on the issues raised by Bama in the stories in their article, “The Dynamics of Dalit Women Consciousness in the Select Short Stories of Bama”, they write:

She clearly states that the apparent problems of discrimination have deeper issues that are directly connected to personal upbringing. She also depicts that these issues that might lower person's self image, self worth, behaviours etc. (1254)

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