

## Voices from the Margins: Caste, Gender, and Class in the Writings of Bama, Sivakami, Baby Kamble, and Urmila Pawar

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### Abstract

*This research paper examines the triple marginality of caste, gender, and class as represented in the works of four significant Dalit women writers from India: Bama, Sivakami, Baby Kamble, and Urmila Pawar. Drawing from Bama's Karukku (1992) and Sangati (1994), Sivakami's The Grip of Change (1989), Baby Kamble's The Prisons We Broke (2008), and Urmila Pawar's The Weave of My Life (2009), this paper argues that Dalit women occupy the most oppressed position in Indian society because they are simultaneously marginalized by caste, by patriarchal structures both inside and outside their communities, and by extreme economic poverty. These three forces reinforce each other, creating a cycle of suffering that is very difficult to escape. The paper explores how each writer uses autobiography and fiction to document this suffering and to assert the dignity and resistance of Dalit women. The study concludes that these four writers together form a powerful tradition of Dalit feminist literature that challenges both Brahmanical casteism and internal patriarchy.*

**Keywords:** Dalit Women, Triple Marginality, Bama, Sivakami, Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Caste Oppression, Gender Discrimination, Class Exploitation, Dalit Autobiography, Dalit Fiction, Untouchability, Patriarchy, Resistance



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## Introduction

India's caste system is one of the oldest and most rigid systems of social hierarchy in the world. At the very bottom of this hierarchy are the Dalits, formerly called untouchables, who were denied basic human rights and forced to perform the most degrading forms of labor. Within this already oppressed group, Dalit women face an even harder reality. They are marginalized not once but three times over: by caste, by gender, and by class. This is what scholars call triple marginality, and it is the central concern of four of the most important Dalit women writers in Indian literature: Bama, Sivakami, Baby Kamble, and Urmila Pawar.

Gopal Guru, in his foundational essay, argues that "Dalit women are not simply doubly oppressed by caste and gender. They are triply oppressed, because their poverty adds a third layer of disadvantage that makes their situation qualitatively different from that of upper-caste women or Dalit men" (Guru 2549). This framework helps us understand why Dalit women's experiences cannot be fully captured by either mainstream feminist theory, which often ignores caste, or by Dalit politics, which often ignores gender. Dalit women need their own framework, and their own literature.

Bama and Sivakami write in Tamil and represent the Dalit experience in Tamil Nadu, particularly among the Paraiyar community. Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar write in Marathi and represent the Dalit experience in Maharashtra, particularly among the Mahar community. Despite these regional differences, all four writers share a common concern: to document the triple marginality of Dalit women and to assert their humanity, dignity, and capacity for resistance. This paper is organized into four sections, one for each writer, with three subheadings examining caste-based

oppression, gender discrimination, and class exploitation respectively.

## Bama: Writing the Body and the Community Caste Humiliation in *Karukku* and *Sangati*

Bama's autobiography *Karukku*, first published in Tamil in 1992 and translated into English in 2000, is one of the most celebrated works of Dalit literature in India. In *Karukku*, Bama describes her childhood in a village where caste discrimination was a daily and brutal reality. Dalits were not allowed to enter upper-caste streets, had to address upper-caste people with honorifics while being addressed by their bare names, and were expected to perform unpaid labor for upper-caste landlords. One of the most powerful moments in the book is when Bama describes seeing an elderly man from her community carry a packet of food for an upper-caste landlord, holding it by its string without touching it, so that the landlord would accept it. Bama writes:

"I was very angry. I thought, if we are human beings, why should we be treated like this? Why should we be treated as if we are dirt? I asked my brother. He said, that is how it has always been. But I could not accept it. I felt that something was very wrong, and that it had to change."

(Bama 18)

This moment of childhood anger is the seed of Bama's entire literary project. Meena Kandasamy, in her academic essay on Bama's work, argues that "*Karukku* is a text that makes the Dalit body visible in all its suffering and resistance. Bama refuses to let the reader look away from the physical reality of caste discrimination" (Kandasamy 67). In her second book *Sangati* (1994), Bama shifts focus from her own experience to the collective experience of Dalit women in her community, showing how

caste discrimination affects women in specific and gendered ways, including sexual violence by upper-caste men who know that Dalit women have no legal or social protection.

### **Gender Oppression and the Double Burden in Sangati**

*Sangati* is primarily a book about gender oppression within the Dalit community. Bama shows how Dalit women are oppressed not only by the caste system from outside but also by patriarchal structures from within their own community. Dalit men, who are themselves oppressed by caste, often take out their frustration on Dalit women through domestic violence and control over women's bodies and movements. Dalit women are expected to work all day in the fields, come home and cook and clean, and then endure beatings from their husbands without complaint. They are not allowed to speak in community meetings or make decisions about their own lives.

Anandita Pan, in her academic paper, argues that "*Sangati* is a feminist manifesto disguised as a collection of village stories. Bama shows that the liberation of Dalit women requires not only the abolition of caste but also a fundamental transformation of gender relations within the Dalit community itself" (Pan 8). This dual critique of caste from outside and patriarchy from inside is what makes *Sangati* such a groundbreaking text in Indian literature.

### **Class Poverty and the Role of Education**

Both *Karukku* and *Sangati* show how poverty is inseparable from caste and gender oppression for Dalit women. In Bama's village, Dalit families survive by working as agricultural laborers on upper-caste land. They are paid very low wages, women are paid less than men for the same work, and children are taken out of

school to work in the fields. This poverty is a direct result of the caste system, which has historically denied Dalits access to land, education, and economic opportunity. Ravikumar, in his introduction to the English translation of *Karukku*, notes that "for Dalit women, education is not just a personal achievement but a political act. Every Dalit woman who gets educated is challenging the caste system's attempt to keep her poor and powerless" (Ravikumar xii). Bama's own journey from a village girl to a teacher and writer is a testament to this transformative power.

### **Sivakami: Fiction as Social Critique Caste Violence in The Grip of Change**

P. Sivakami's novel *The Grip of Change*, originally written in Tamil in 1989 and translated into English in 2006, is one of the earliest and most important works of Dalit fiction in India. The novel tells the story of Kathamuthu, a Dalit man who tries to improve his community's situation through political activism, and his daughter Gowri, who becomes the central figure of the novel's exploration of gender and caste. Sivakami describes how Dalit villages in Tamil Nadu were surrounded by upper-caste villages that controlled all the land, water, and economic resources. Any attempt by Dalits to assert their rights was met with violent reprisals. M.S.S. Pandian, in his academic essay, argues that "*The Grip of Change* is a novel about the structural violence of caste, which operates not just through individual acts of cruelty but through the entire organization of social, economic, and political life in rural Tamil Nadu" (Pandian 112).

## **Gender and the Body: Dalit Women as Sites of Oppression**

The most powerful aspect of Sivakami's novel is its portrayal of Dalit women's bodies as sites of multiple oppressions. Gowri, the protagonist, is subjected to caste discrimination from upper-caste society and to patriarchal control from within her own community. She is expected to be obedient, silent, and self-sacrificing. Sivakami also shows how Dalit women are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence from upper-caste men, who treat their bodies as available for exploitation because Dalit women have no social protection and no access to legal justice. In one of the most powerful passages of the novel, Sivakami writes:

"Gowri understood that her body was not her own. It belonged to the village, to the caste, to the men who owned the land and the water and the roads. She had been born into a body that was considered dirty, and no amount of washing could make it clean in their eyes. She was Paraiyar. She was a woman. She was poor. These three things together meant that she had no protection anywhere, not in the fields, not in the streets, not even in her own home." (Sivakami 89)

This passage captures the essence of triple marginality with extraordinary clarity. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, in their landmark anthology of Indian women's writing, argue that "Sivakami's fiction represents a new kind of feminist writing in India, one that refuses to separate gender from caste and class, and that insists on the specificity of Dalit women's experience" (Tharu and Lalita 234).

## **Economic Dependence and the Politics of Land**

*The Grip of Change* is also a novel about the politics of land and economic dependence.

Sivakami shows how the Dalit community's lack of land ownership is the foundation of all their other oppressions. Without land, Dalit families cannot survive without working for upper-caste landlords, giving those landlords enormous power over Dalit lives. Dalit women are the most economically vulnerable members of an already vulnerable community. They are paid less than men for the same work, have no inheritance rights, and are the first to be dismissed when landlords want to punish the community. Karthikeyan Damodaran, in his academic paper, argues that "land reform is not just an economic issue for Dalit women. It is a question of survival, dignity, and freedom. Without land, Dalit women cannot be free" (Damodaran 78).

## **Baby Kamble: Memory, Community, and the Mahar Experience** **Caste-Based Humiliation and the Prison of Untouchability**

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, originally written in Marathi as *Jina Amucha* and translated into English in 2008, tells the story of her childhood and youth in a Maharashtra village, describing in vivid detail the caste-based humiliation and poverty that shaped her community's life. The Mahar community was considered untouchable by upper-caste Hindus and was forced to live in separate settlements outside the main village. For Dalit women, this humiliation was compounded by their gender. They were seen as doubly polluted, by caste and by the female body. Kamble describes the experience of going to school as a Dalit girl with painful clarity. She writes:

"We, the daughters of the activists in the movement, were enrolled in school no. 5 for girls. It was basically a school for Brahmin

girls, with a few girls from other high castes. There were some ten or twelve Mahar girls spread over in various classes. So each class had only a sprinkling of the polluting Mahars. All the girls in the class had benches to sit except us Mahar girls. We had to sit on the floor in one corner of the classroom like diseased puppies. We were like fiery godflies burning for vengeance." (Kamble 62)

Aarti Vishwakarma, in her academic paper, notes that "Kamble's narrative exposes the systematic dehumanization of Dalit women through the institution of untouchability, which operated in every space from the school to the temple to the street" (Vishwakarma 111). The phrase burning for vengeance shows that these girls were not passive victims. They felt anger, and that anger would later become the fuel for resistance.

### **Gender Oppression and Patriarchal Control Within the Dalit Community**

The second prison in Kamble's book is the prison of gender. While upper-caste society oppresses Dalit women from outside, Dalit men often oppress Dalit women from inside the home and community. Kamble shows how Dalit women are expected to serve everyone including their husbands, their in-laws, and their children without complaint. They are married off young, beaten for small mistakes, and denied any say in family decisions. Even within the Ambedkarite movement, women were often expected to cook and clean while men gave speeches and made decisions. Sanjay Kumar argues that "Dalit women face a double burden of the Brahmanic patriarchy of upper-caste society and the internal patriarchy of their own community, and Kamble's autobiography is one of the first texts to name this double oppression clearly" (Kumar 45).

### **Class Poverty and the Watan System**

The third prison in Kamble's book is poverty. The Mahar community was forced by the Watan system into hereditary, unpaid labor for upper-caste landlords, leaving Dalit families with no economic independence. Women worked the hardest but received the least. Komal Pareek explains that "the economic exploitation of Dalit women is inseparable from their caste and gender oppression, and poverty is not just a material condition for them but a tool of control that keeps them dependent and powerless" (Pareek 78). Yet Kamble also shows that Ambedkar's call for education slowly began to change things. By writing and publishing her autobiography, Kamble broke the most fundamental prison of all: the prison of silence.

### **Urmila Pawar: Weaving Words, Weaving Resistance**

#### **Caste Discrimination and the Inheritance of Pain**

Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*, originally written in Marathi as *Aaydan* and translated into English in 2009, uses the metaphor of weaving to describe how suffering is passed from one generation of Dalit women to the next. Just as Pawar's mother wove bamboo baskets to survive, Pawar weaves words to tell the story of her community. The book begins with Pawar's childhood in a small village in the Konkan region of Maharashtra, where Dalit families lived in constant fear of upper-caste violence and humiliation. Dalit children could not drink water from upper-caste wells. Dalit women had to remove their footwear when passing upper-caste homes. Pawar writes about this inherited pain:

"My mother used to weave aaydans, the Marathi generic term for all things made from bamboo. I find that her act of weaving

and my act of writing are organically linked. The weave is similar. It is the weave of pain, suffering, and agony that links us. Every strand of bamboo she wove carried the weight of caste, the silence of a woman who had no other language but her hands. And every word I write carries that same weight, that same silence, transformed now into sound." (Pawar 12)

Rochona Majumdar notes that "Pawar's use of the weaving metaphor is a deliberate literary strategy to show how caste oppression is structural and generational, not just individual" (Majumdar 204). This generational dimension of caste discrimination makes it even harder to escape.

### **Patriarchal Control and the Suppression of Women's Voices**

Like Kamble, Pawar also shows how Dalit women face patriarchal control from within their own community. When she wanted to study, her family was not fully supportive. When she wanted to work and write, she faced opposition from her husband and in-laws. The expectation was that a Dalit woman's place was in the home, not in the public world of literature and politics. Pawar also shows how the Dalit movement itself was often dominated by men. Women were expected to participate in protests and marches but were rarely given leadership roles. Manavee Singh and Prachi Priyanka argue that "Pawar's autobiography is a feminist intervention within Dalit literature, challenging not only upper-caste society but also the male-dominated structures of the Dalit movement itself" (Singh and Priyanka 33).

### **Class Struggles and the Search for Economic Dignity**

Pawar's book traces three generations of Dalit women moving from village to city in search of

a better life. Her mother weaved baskets to survive. Pawar herself moved to Mumbai and worked in various jobs before becoming a writer. In the city, Dalit women face new forms of exploitation including low wages, unsafe working conditions, and continued caste discrimination in the workplace. Basavaraj Naikar observes that "Pawar's narrative shows that urbanization does not automatically liberate Dalit women from class oppression, and caste continues to operate even in modern urban spaces" (Naikar 156). Yet by becoming a published author, Pawar achieved economic independence and a public voice, proving that Dalit women can break the cycle of poverty through creativity and determination.

### **Conclusion**

The works of Bama, Sivakami, Baby Kamble, and Urmila Pawar together constitute one of the most important bodies of literature in modern India. They give voice to the experiences of millions of Dalit women who have been silenced by the combined forces of caste, gender, and class oppression. All four writers show that caste discrimination is a structural system that organizes every aspect of life. All four show that Dalit women bear the heaviest burden of this system because they are oppressed by caste from outside and by patriarchy from inside. And all four show that poverty is not just a material condition but a political tool that keeps Dalit women dependent and powerless. At the same time, all four writers are writers of resistance. They document the ways in which Dalit women fight back through education, community solidarity, political activism, and the act of writing itself. Sharmila Rege, in her landmark study of Dalit women's writing, argues that "Dalit women's autobiographies and fiction are not just literary

texts. They are political interventions that challenge the dominant narratives of Indian society and demand a fundamental rethinking of caste, gender, and class" (Rege 112). Each writer contributes something unique to this tradition. Bama gives us the sharp, angry voice of a woman who refuses to accept humiliation. Sivakami gives us the analytical eye of a writer who exposes the structural violence beneath everyday life. Baby Kamble gives us the collective memory of a community slowly breaking free through Ambedkar's teachings. And Urmila Pawar gives us the lyrical, deeply personal voice of a woman who has woven her own life story into a testament to the strength of Dalit women. Triple marginality is real, it is painful, and it is ongoing. But so is the resistance of Dalit women. And as long as the works of Bama, Sivakami, Baby Kamble, and Urmila Pawar are read, studied, and taught, that resistance will continue to grow and inspire new generations of readers, writers, and activists.

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