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Humanist and Multi-Culturalist Approach in the Representation of Subaltern Literature

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This paper is a discussion of “subaltern studies”, and the paper explains how this discussion falls into the rubric of humanism and multi-culturalism. The emphasis in this paper as the ‘human being’ is the ‘centre’ of inquiry, is to high light the ‘dignity’ of the ‘human individual’ in the works of subaltern studies.

In literary theory, the term, ‘humanist’ often connotes those thinkers who base truth on human experience and reason, and base values on human nature and culture as distinct from those who regard religious revelation as the warrant for all truth and values. There is a need for the recognition of the ‘other’ and living in ‘peace’ with each other; that is, you can have your own different religion, culture, and even caste- but, let me live peacefully and indiscriminately with you; and, this may be called the essence of multiculturalism.

According to The Edinburgh Encyclopaedia of Modern Criticism and Theory, the multicultural movement was developed in the 1970s in response to the charge that traditional American education was focused too narrowly on the dominant Euro-American literary culture and History ignoring other alternatives.

We can also notice that ‘Munticultural’ fiction that has gradually emerged since the mid 1970s (Thomas Pynchon, Toni Morrison, Maxine Hong Kingston, Jamaica Kinkaid, Ismail Reed, Bharathi Mukherjee, Sandra Cisneros, and other writers.) The word ‘subaltern’, according to The New Oxford American Dictionary, came to English in the sixteenth century from Old French via late Latin *subalternus* (sub-‘below’ or ‘under; alternus ‘alternate’ or ‘every other’)- thus, the general basic meaning of the word ‘subaltern’ is somebody who is below every other’. In the military field, for instance, ‘subaltern’ is ‘an officer in the British army below the rank of captain, especially a second lieutenant’.The ‘subaltern’ connotes ‘inferiority’ as is clear from the following synonyms which *Roget’s II New Thesaurus* provides for the word: ‘ inferior’, ‘junior’, ‘lesser’, ‘low’, ‘minor’, ‘ petty’, ‘secondary’ , ‘small’, ‘subordinate’ and ‘under’. In this sense , Dalits, ethnic minorities, indigenious groups, conflict victims, and victims of other stigmas, superstitions and circumstances are generally seen as ‘subalterns’. Sonya Fernandez argues that within legal thinking, the concept of subaltern has been most frequently invoked to explain relations of dominance and difference by faminists, critical race, and post-colonial theorists.

In his ‘Towards an Aethetic of Dalit Literature’, Sharan Kumar Limbale shows how Dalit is the subaltern ‘Other’ of the elite in Indian society. Limbale establishes Dalits’ subalternity

not in a colonial structure but in the caste-based social, cultural, and economic structure of Hindu society. He argues that living in the village, Dalits exist literally on the periphery. Their settlements are not only apart from the upper caste's settlement; they are actually outside the boundary of the village. This physical segregation signifies other separations as well.

The work discussed below can be exemplified under the discussion of humanist-multicultural-and subaltern studies.

Dr. Ambedkar used the Marathi word "Dalit" which means oppressed. In Tamil, it was used as 'Taazhhtappattor' or 'Odukkapattavar'. Now the word "Dalit" is used widely. It is *conceptualized* into Dalitism and has become a part of subaltern studies.

'Sangati' written by Baama is a rare, remarkable, native novel reflecting the stories of paraiya Dalit Christian community. Bama became a noted Dalit Feminist writer with her first autobiographical novel "karukku" published in 1992. At present, she is rendering her services as a teacher at Uthramerur in Kanchipuram district, Tamil Nadu.

Sangati is Baama's second novel. Sangati means events or happenings. The novel has interconnected anecdotes in which we find memorable protagonists. According to Lakshmi Holmstrom, "Sangati moves from the story of individual struggle to the perception of a community of Paraiya women, a neighbourhood, group of friends and relations and their joint struggle". Thus the story takes another plane to describe the autobiography of a community. This novel depicts the real life stories of risk taken, of challenge, choice and change.

In this autobiographical novel, the stories not only explain sorrows, tears, sexual harassment and restless labour of Dalit women but also their rebellious nature and their eagerness to face the problems in life. Their self-confidence enables them to overcome adversities of life. Thus this novel as a whole brings out the Dalit feminist picture before our eye. It plays significant role in contributing both to the Dalit movement and to the women's movement in general.

"Sangati" reflects the voices of many Dalit women. They share the experiences of their daily lives. In fact, Bama's mother and grand mother used to narrate the stories. With the influence of which, she has been able to write the novels such as Sangati. This novel has written in the

spoken language without giving any glamour of modern Tamil language. She uses idioms and songs which show her skill of writing.

Through this novel, she throws light on various aspects such as economic inequality, authority of men, traumatic situation of women, child labours, helplessness, bitter experiences and ceremonial occasions. The observation and experience from the childhood and the questions which aroused in her mind about the problems of Dalit women inspired her to present the novel more effectively exposing the Dalit characters and their predicaments.

Lakshmi Holmstrom Successfully translated this novel into English in 2005. She says, "Hard labour and precariousness leads to a culture of violence is a theme that Bama explores boldly throughout this novel." All the twelve chapters in this novel are important in revealing the miserable and the restless conditions of Dalit women from the childhood to the old age. The first chapter opens with a lovely idiom, "Munavadu ponnu Muthamellam ponnu". It means the joy in the birth of a third female child is equal to the showering of gold. This has become true in the life of Bama. Because she is the third child in family and now, she is being considered as precious gold in the field of feminist writing.

Vellaiyamma paati, the grand mother of Bama is the central character in Sangati. She is introduced in this novel as a social worker especially attending deliveries without expecting any benefits. But ironically the upper caste women did not invite this expertized lady because of caste discrimination. After the disappearance of her husband Goyindan, she lived independently and brought up her two daughters she worked restlessly till her death. She had close contact with Bama and revealed such experiences. She discussed and described the prevailing customs and rituals of her community. This helped Bama to acquire more knowledge about the historical situations from her grand mother's time to her age. This old lady was converted into Christianity. As a result of it, Bama's mother Sevathi studied up to the fifth class. Whether a husband is living or left or dead, the family burden rests upon the helpless woman. It is expressed through the life of Vellaiyamma.

The episode of Mariamma in the beginning chapters creates deep feelings she stands as an example in experiencing the hardships of Dalit Woman in every stages of life. Her irresponsible father lives with another woman. He does not take care of his children. His

cruelty and sexual harassment causes the death of his wife. He represents the life of a husband and a father in every Dalit family of that village.

Mariamamma as a motherless child takes care of her two sisters and earns restlessly in order to feed them. One day, while working she fell into the well and she was hospitalized for months. But poverty forced her to work; she went into the hill to gather firewood. She was attacked by an upper caste landlord, Kumara Swami Ayyah. In order to defend himself from his illegal deed, he himself complained against Mariamma and Manikkam. This case was brought before the community panchayat. The male dominated panchayat, which could have given justifiable verdict, gives more importance to that upper caste man. The leaders of this panchayat raised the questions only to Mariamma and penalized her more. They were in want of moral courage to resist the landlord's cruelty and snobbishness. Therefore, they always tried to protect the interest of the land lord, sometimes at the cost of Dalits. This is an example of feudal deception which has worked to entrap especially the Dalit women. The poor Mariamma was insulted publicly which injured her future and made her to suffer through her life. She was forced to marry a wicked young man, Manikkam. Through this event of Mariamma, Bama shows how Dalit woman miserably suffers, when she has careless father and an irresponsible husband. In another incident, Mudaliyar's educated son misbehaves with Paralogam, who hides the event out of fear.

These incidents are quoted to illustrate the cruelty of the upper caste people.

Some of the Dalit women such as Shanmuga Kelavi tried to resist the oppressive nature of the upper caste men. In claiming the essential resources, Kelavi revolted but in her own humorous way. She was caught up while swimming in the well that belongs to Srinivasa. She tried to escape from the supposed punishment humorously responding, "Ayya, the well water is not at all good, and it's all salty." She also showed her revolt by urinating into Srinivasa Ayya's drinking water pot, when he punished a little boy for touching the same pot unknowingly. It appears shabby but it is her way of revolt in order to meet the ferocious means of rebelling. Likewise during election, claiming the car for her return journey and reluctant to vote any one are some of the deeds of her revolt.

Bama presents a lovely little girl, Maikanni in this novel. She is very much impressed by this girl. The story of this girl depicts how a mother, a wife and a daughter in a Dalit family become victims to the terrible situation. Maikanni started to work for the family when she

learnt to walk. Her mother was busy in producing the children and her father was irresponsible yet who thought his manliness could be proved in keeping some other house hold with other woman. The example of Maikanni also focuses on the problem of child labour and harassment of the children. It is the social and the biological harassment.

The subaltern scope includes the gender and sex discrimination also. When a girl child is born, there will be curses but when a male child is born there will be praises. In general, it is seen in all the communities. But Bama focuses on such events to say that a girl child is not a curse to the family. She projects the social discrimination between the boys and the girls taking common examples of games. As the boys play many games, where as the girls play the game related to cooking. Thus, Bama narrates so many incidents to show the discrimination.

Bama also talks about the torments of Dalit women relating to health. Dalit women are not able to get proper food and drink. They never go to the hospital even at the time of child birth. Thus, she portrays the vulnerable position of women in Sangati.

Coming of age ceremony and marriages in paraiya Dalit community are described through several characters from the old age to the modern. The people, who are economically better, celebrate the coming of age ceremony in grand way. In this novel, a group of wedding of five couples at church is described in detail.

In paraiya community parisam system was existed. It means a monetary gift given by the groom's parents to the bride. But now the dowry system is practiced imitating the upper caste. "Tali" is not important among the paraiya Dalit women and they have the privilege of widow re-marriage. But it is not possible in the case of upper caste women. The plight of Kuppusami Nayakkar's daughter, who is made to suffer as a widow, is one of the examples.

In Dalit communities re-marriage tried to bring some solution. But Bama does not say the widow re-marriage is the ultimate solution. A girl has no individuality of her own. She is socially imprisoned or she is kept in the web of masculinity from which she cannot come out. In this way, Bama discusses the problem of widowhood and socio-economic stability of a woman. If she does not work and she does not earn, she has to depend on others for their livelihood.

People believe that Christianity is a religion of freedom and brotherhood. But in paraiya Christian community, a girl or a woman is not free to choose the life partner. Once she is

married, she has to live with the husband though he is unworthy till her death. Pariya Christian community believes in the chastity and the commitment, whether it is for good or bad the people have accepted it. Bama does not want to portray such incidents as if they are disastrous. Because for her, marriage is not all that.

Bama projects some couples in the quarrel scenes. In the sheer freedom, the Dalit women pick quarrel with their husbands for the wages or for the equal responsibilities. A woman has a longing to have a better domestic life. She does not want any disparity between herself and the husband. Bama proves it in three types of quarrels in a domestic situation.

The Dalit women have the feeling of insecurity. They are threatened in many ways both inside and outside the world. When a Dalit woman is deprived of some kind of love in a family, then she wants to take it in one way or the other form. Hence, she behaves as if possessed with a ghost. But according to Bama, possession of a ghost is a psychological activity born out of depression. The suggestion of the writer for the women folk, who have no education is that they should not be scared of any calamities any crisis that comes in their lives.

After completing education, Bama finds very difficult to face the life as a Dalit woman. House owners, neighbours and even colleagues pestered her with hundreds of questions. Her courage and confidence moulded her to go against the challenges in life.

She concludes her novel with a message, "we must bring up our girls to think in new ways from an early age. We should educate boys and girls alike, we should give freedom to girls". In her opinion, education is the only way to eradicate poverty and casteism. It is appreciable that now Dalit are awakened and enlightened through education and they are aware of their responsibilities.

The text discussed above can be discussed under the subaltern studies as the features we noticed in the text resembles with the texts that belong to the subaltern category. Again, we can assert that an effective cure from casteism is a radical change in the thinking of each and every Indian citizen.

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