

Narratives of Resistance: Bridging Dalit Literature and Films

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the Dalit films and the Dalit literary works examining the struggles and resistance of the marginalised communities. The autobiographical narratives of Bama and P. Sivakami along with the Dalit-centric films of Vetrimaran and Mari Selvaraj are analysed with a common mission of challenging the systemic oppression. All the mentioned works present the Dalit experiences with unflinching honesty. It not only creates a stir among the audience but also celebrates the resistance and empowerment. The creators have highlighted the role of education for empowerment and the assertion of identity as the key feature of their works. The underlying significance of the Dalit culture and symbols is also recognised through the authenticity of the narratives. By bridging Dalit-centric films and the Dalit literature, this paper highlights the resistance and resilience found among the protagonists and foster awareness to the future generations.

Keywords: Dalit films, Dali novels, marginalised, oppression, resistance.

Dalit literature is a revolutionary movement that originated from the real-life struggles, experiences and aspirations of the Dalits. The Dalit community was marginalised for years and stayed as a prey for the caste hierarchy. Their demand for equality and justice rooted for the emergence of Dalit literature. The origin of Dalit literature can be marked in the 20th C influenced by the establishment of Dalit rights in the Indian Constitution by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Dalit literature's major focus lies on the injustices happening to the marginalised communities, importance of their culture, resistance, resilience and their struggle for identity. Most of the works under the genre of Dalit literature are raw and confrontational often because they are either autobiographical or semi-autobiographical.

Most prominent Dalit writers like Bama Faustina Susairaj, Sharankumar Limbale, Baburao Bagul, P. Sivakami, Omprakash Valmiki, Meena Kandasamy have played an important role in witnessing the emergence of Indian literature from a different perspective. These Dalit writers have paid keen attention to narrate the untold stories of their people by incorporating their perspectives and experiences in their native language to affirm their identity. Dalit literature has marked its significant place in the Indian Literary Discourse and has highlighted the struggles, resistance and aspiration of the Dalit community which was historically marginalised for years.

Writers like Bama and P. Sivakami have taken a step ahead to narrate their own struggles as a Dalit woman in the patriarchal society. Their works not only highlight the intersection of caste, class and gender but also the oppression faced by the Dalit women in the patriarchal society. Both Bama and P. Sivakami's writings challenge the societal norms and mark a significant rise of Dalit women. One of the most prominent contributors of Dalit literature is Bama Faustina Soosairaj. Her works *Karukku*, *Sangati* and *Vanmam* documents the real-life experiences of the Dalits and also challenge the oppressive societal structure.

Karukku written by Bama is an autobiographical novel that chronicles her journey as a Dalit Christian woman. The narrative shares Bama's self-discovery by calling attention to the prevailing casteism in Christian institutions. She boldly comments on the caste discrimination that exists within the religious institutions contradicting the idea of faith. As *Karukku* is analysed as a personal narrative of Bama, her other novel *Sangati* is considered to be a collective narrative. She shifts the focus from herself and explores the struggling lives of

the Dalit women. *Sangati* exposes the double marginalisation faced by Dalit women and the social stigmatization.

Bama as a Dalit autobiographical writer has grabbed the attention of the readers through the use of colloquial language and fragmented narrative. Her emphasis on the dialect, oral traditions and the cultural practices of the Dalit community has made her novel distinctive. This approach has made her works accessible not just to the elites but to the marginalised as well. The marginalised readers found a connection with Bama as her works involved her own struggles and experiences in the stigmatized society. The Dalits who were denied the freedom to speak or express found their voices in Bama and her works. Her works were not just acts of defiance but a serious effort to reclaim the identity of Dalit community.

Another major contributor to the genre of Dalit Literature is P. Sivakami who is an activist and former Indian Administrative Service officer. As an IAS officer, she sought to help her community but later resigned from her position and changed her path to writing, aiming to expose reality and bring change. She has also edited and published various works in her magazine named *Pudhiya Kodangi*. Kodangi is a musical instrument used to drive away the evil forces. She used the magazine to publish the articles of marginalised communities who were restricted access for publication elsewhere. She states that, “My interest slowly drifted from literature to the living characters or human subjects of my fiction and essays, namely the subaltern women, Dalits, tribals and the transgendered communities.” (Sivakami. P)

Sivakami’s narratives are packed with realism and rawness. Her first novel *The Grip of Change* is originally written in colloquial Tamil and later translated into English. She exposes the physical and emotional violence thrust on the Dalit women confronting the harsh reality of the marginalised. Her works not only feature the struggles of the Dalits but also voice out for equality and social justice. Her experiences as a Dalit woman have shaped her writing to be revolutionary and challenges the oppressive structure of the society.

Similarly, Tamil films have also provided the platform for the audience to explore the experiences and struggles of the marginalised in a more effective way. Tamil cinema has transcended its role as mere entertainment to a powerful medium for raising awareness about caste discrimination. Some films are inspired by Dalit literature while others are based on real-life narratives. The Tamil Film industry is capable of directors delivering a realistic narrative and depicting the harsh reality to the audience.

Tamil Dalit films and Dalit literature have become a crucial medium in representing the cultural heritage, socio-political struggles and the aspirations of the Dalit communities. Films like *Pariyerum Perumal*, *Asuran* and *Vaazhai* explicitly focus on the characters who belong to Dalit community, their struggles and advocate for social reformation. Both Dalit literature and Tamil Dalit movies stay as a significant force in blending art and activism. They challenge the societal hierarchy and appreciate the resilience of the marginalised.

Vetri Maaran is a famous Tamil Director who directs realistic films and explores the socio politic fabric of rural Tamil Nadu. He approaches the Dalit scripts by collaborating either with the Dalit writers or by extracting details from the community. For instance, his national award-winning film *Asuran* is an inspiration from Poomani’s *Vekkai*. Another filmmaker who delivers powerful Dalit scripts is Mari Selvaraj whose works are often traced from his life experiences. His films are filled with symbolism, rural aesthetics and folk traditions. His narration of the rural life’s beauty is often contradicted with the unfortunate truth of caste-based societies.

The film *Asuran* deals with the violence faced by the Dalit families working under the dictatorship of the upper-caste landlords which is so similar to the narrations of Bama and Sivakami. In the film, there is a sequence where a Dalit woman named Mariamma was assaulted in the street for wearing slippers and was even forced to walk along the streets with the slippers on her head. When the hero Sivasami, the Dalit hero of the film shows his resilience for this act, false cases were filed against him and was arrested. Meanwhile, Mariamma and her family members were burned alive in the huts. These sequences are very much related to the narrative of P. Sivakami in her novel *The Grip of Change* where the Udayar men try to kill Thangam for filing a case against her landlord who harassed her.

Another director with a significant voice in Indian cinema is Mari Selvaraj whose narrations are mostly inspired from his real-life experiences maintaining the authenticity of his works. His films take the responsibility to expose the systemic oppression and challenge the cast hierarchies. Like Vetrimaran, he also invokes the audience psychologically and emotionally through the aesthetics of his films.

The film *Vaazhai*, directed by Mari Selvaraj features the distress of young boys who are forced to drop school and work in the banana fields. It also unveils the deceit involved in withholding the fair wages from the downtrodden. This is so similar to an incident in Bama's novels *Karukku* and *Sangati* where she discusses the cruel treatment of the landlords towards the daily-wage workers who pluck the peanuts from their fields. She explains how the children were taken to the fields during their holidays and their meagre wages were used to run a family.

The film *Pariyerum Perumal* also directed by Mari Selvaraj revolves around the protagonist who belongs to the downtrodden community and challenges the status quo. The film revolves around the protagonist Pariyan, a Dalit boy who aspires to be a Lawyer. The harsh realities of the caste-based society are exposed when a genuine friendship blooms between Pariyan and an upper-caste girl named Jo. The film sheds light on the barriers encountered by most Dalits in attaining the education and equality they deserve.

P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* highlights education as a tool for empowerment and a site of oppression. Gowri, the daughter of a hypocritic Dalit leader hopes to escape the toxic household with the aid of education. Unfortunately, her caste identity dominates even when she excels in her education. Similarly, in Mari Selvaraj's *Pariyerum Perumal* the protagonist desires for social mobility but put down by the society repeatedly, reminding him of his marginalised status.

As the films and literary works expose the unpleasant facts of the society, they also pave a path for the future generations towards victory through their characters' resistance and resilience. When Bama shares the horrifying truth of the religious institutions and her story of failure as a Nun, she also continues further by discussing her act of resistance. She restores hope in the readers by concluding her novel *Karukku* by writing a note on her successful life she gained through education. Similarly, the protagonists of the Dalit films are often revolutionary who seek for justice through education and communal action.

The Dalit-centric films and the Dalit literary works of Bama and P. Sivakami share a common ground in exposing the difficult truths of caste-based oppression faced by the marginalised communities. Though few of Dalit literary works and Dalit films face criticism for projecting the hidden truths of the society, they have been appreciated for its wild portrayal and provoking awareness among the audience. When Vetrimaran and Mari Selvaraj uses the visual medium to capture the caste violence and resistance of the Dalits, Bama and P. Sivakami employ their words to focus on the psychological turmoil of the marginalised. Either through the imagery of the movies or through the powerful words, the creators make sure that the Dalit voices are heard and validated.

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