



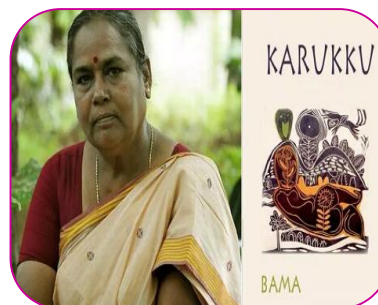
CASTE, GENDER AND RESISTANCE: A STUDY OF BAMA'S SHORT STORIES**Suman Bala¹ and Dr Kalpna Rajput²**¹Research Scholar , Jayoti Vidyapeeth Women's University , Jaipur.²Supervisor , Jayoti Vidyapeeth Women's University , Jaipur.**ABSTRACT**

Hindus believed that caste is as pure as religion. They believed it to be the benchmark of one's capability and purity. In Hindu society people are divided by their caste, not by their profession. Even in 21st century when world has become a global village, problem of caste still persists. Being a part of same country, same religion Dalits have been exploited and ill-treated by the upper castes because of their caste and poverty. But now they are fighting for their dignity and self-respect against the cruel upper castes. Similarly Dalit women have been doubly exploited, by the upper castes and by their own men. But Dalit men and women have been showing their resentment and rebellion actively and passively. Dalits' exploitation and ill-treatment and their passive and active resistance for their dignity and self-respect have been described by Bama in her collection of short stories titled *Harum Scarum Saar & Other Stories*. This paper tells how the Dalit men and women were treated inhumanly by the upper castes who crossed all the limitations of humanity for their selfishness. In my paper I shall try to explore the lives of Dalit men and women which are full of poverty, starvation, ignorance, insult, injustice, sexual exploitation because of poverty and caste and their resistance against the odd conditions and upper castes.

KEYWORDS: Dalit, Caste, exploitation, gender, assertion.**INTRODUCTION**

Bama's collection of short stories titled *Kisumbukkaran* was written in Tamil and later translated into English under the title *Harum-scarum saar and other stories* in the year 2006. This collection contains ten powerful stories; five of them delineate issues related to gender identity and five show active and passive resistance of Dalits. Bama has depicted powerful men and women who exhibit grit, courage and determination to fight against the oddities of life. Most of the women characters fight against their own men and wealthy upper caste people. Dalit women adopt different strategies of resistance and rebellion to challenge upper caste domination as well as against the cruelties of their own men. In my paper I have traced the exploitation of Dalits because of their caste, gender-discrimination and resistance of Dalits against inequalities of the upper castes.

Women all over the world have been exploited. They work hard everywhere as men do but they are paid less as compared to men. Dalit women have been marginalised by their own men as well as by the upper castes. They didn't have the right to speak for their dignity or self-respect. They were just believed to be slaves and were born on this earth for merriment. When God created Adam, he (Adam) was alone in the Garden of Eden. He demanded a companion. God created a woman from the ribs of man. Despite this, man always exploit and ill-treat woman. He doesn't want to give her equal status. Regarding this, Iqbal Kaur has very rightly described the status of women: "The image of woman was created by man. It was



what he wanted her to be and he never wanted her to be an equal, co-sharer of all the privileges he was enjoying. Because the image of woman was created not by women or by men and women jointly but by men alone and the standard or womanhood was set for women by men, women could not have a clear perception of themselves.” (xi) Similarly Simon de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* observes: “One is not born a woman: ‘one becomes one’ encapsulates as argument that women’s inferior position is not a natural or biological fact but one that is created by society. One may be born a ‘female’ of the human race but it is civilization which creates ‘woman’ which defines what is ‘feminine’ and prescribes how women should and do behave. And what is important is that this social construction of ‘woman’ has been continued oppression of women. The social roles and modes of behaviour that civilization have assigned to women have kept them in an inferior position to that of men. (14-15)

Apart from depicting caste-discrimination in her stories, Bama has given many examples of gender-discrimination. Being a Dalit herself, Bama sympathizes with the lower caste women who face sufferings and exploitations at the hands of their wealthy landlords. In her collection of short stories, Bama has represented diverse shades of women characters, describing their experiences, hardships and their resistance, active or passive. While on the one hand, she has painted characters such as Arulayi, Chellakkilli, Kaliyamma and Ramayi who passively and without any resentment submit to the injustice and exploitation by upper castes, she has also drawn powerful characters such as Arayi, Ponnuthayi and Pachayamma who retaliated against the dehumanized treatment and injustice meted out to them by their upper caste employers. In her story titled “Ponnuthayi” a Dalit woman Ponnuthayi was exploited not only by the upper castes but her husband also tortured her. She was a woman of thirty five years old, mother of four children. Refusing to submit meekly to the cruelties of her husband, she left him and her children and she started living alone. She did her own business like men. She faced many taunts from her own caste people. Some of the Dalit women remark: “Look at her, walking away so arrogantly! Why can’t she toil like the rest of the village to earn her daily meal? She wants to do business like some upper caste person!”(63) She also lived alone after leaving her husband, and her children with him. This became the talk of the town: “What kind of woman is she? Not one bit of love for her own children! Roaming around like nab! Have you ever seen a woman leave her children with her husband like this?”(65) Bama has described the resistance and retaliation by Ponnuthayi. She lived alone after leaving her husband, and her children with him. When her husband wanted to leave the children with Ponnuthayi, she retaliated: “Why leave the children here? They are your children, you take care of them. I want neither you nor your children I got from you! Is there a law that only the mother should look after the children? Don’t bring them here, and don’t you dare show your face here again.”(69) When her husband Mookkandi left the house in rage, her mother wailed and cursed Ponnuthayi: “He is going to get some other woman and live with her, and she will harass your children. Listen to me! Made of stone or made of grass, for a woman her husband is everything. Instead of lying at his feet, you are lying here.”(69) Listening to all this, she (Ponnuthayi) retaliated and went inside the house of her mother and she brought the blade and cut the wedding-knot *thali*: “Stop crying and keep quiet for a while, Amma. Don’t fathers know how to bring up the children? Let them try. It’s enough that we have lived by marrying stones and grass.” So saying, Ponnuthayi went inside the house and came back with a blade in her hands. She sat on top of the chicken coop in front of the house, and taking the blade, slashed the wedding-knot around her neck and removed the *thali*.” (70) Such ill-treatment evokes resentment and revolt in Bama’s story Ponnuthayi.

However, Chellakkili in the story “Half-sari” offer an example of meek submission by her and her family. She was sent outside the village by the Zamindar with his daughter on the pretext of getting education. But she was forced to work throughout the day by the landlady of the house. She was ill-treated and raped many times and was murdered for the alleged reason that she delayed the work deliberately. She was kept like a slave in the house. Her parents could not meet her for eight months. When her father asked to meet Chellakkili, the upper caste landlord replied arrogantly: “Will your daughter vanish? I went and saw her only last month. She has put on weight with all the gold and food she’s getting. Hardly any work to do. You yourself will not recognize your daughter if you see her now.”(75) Chellakkili’s father Irulappan and her maternal uncle Kaliappan came to know that the upper caste Zamindar had murdered Chellakkili

mercilessly. When after the death of Chellakkili her father along with his brother-in-law Kaliappan visited the place, the upper caste landlord offered a half sari and two thousand rupees to them so that they remained silent. The upper caste landlord says: "Look here Kaliappan! Don't lie blatantly, saying that she was killed. *Etho*, it was her fate and she departed! Here, take this, there are two thousand rupees in it." (79)

Hindus believed that caste is as pure as religion. They believed it to be the benchmark of one's capability and purity. In Hindu society people are divided by their caste, not by their profession. Since ancient times in India, Dalits were tortured, exploited and marginalised because of their caste. They were treated like scums of the earth. Caste has been always a major hurdle in their progress and in acquiring social equality. Caste creates untouchability. Untouchability becomes the cause of tortures and exploitation of Dalits. This is illustrated by Omparkash Valmiki in an incident of his school days when he was not allowed to sit with the upper class students. He remarks: "I had to sit away from the others in the class, that too on the floor....Sometimes I would have to sit away behind everybody, right near the door. And the letters on the board from there seemed faded." (2-3) Regarding this Limbale remarks: "How is a person born with his caste? How does he become untouchable as soon as he is born? How can he be a criminal by birth? From his feet Lord Brahma gave birth to a vast low community. Since then this community has been living as untouchables..." (82) Sharankumar Limbale in his book titled *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature* has very rightly remarked about caste: "...the caste of a Hindu Indian determines everything about his life – dress, marriage and even food." (28) It is true that the poor and destitute have always been exploited by the rich and the upper classes all over the world. Negroes were sold and purchased by Americans in an open market as slaves. They were treated like cattle and were forced to work excessively. Negro women were exploited physically. They were discriminated and tortured because of their race. But they are not untouchables like Dalits. But Dalits in India belonging to the same religion and same country have been tortured and exploited and treated as untouchables by the upper castes. They are still the victim of rigid Hindu caste system. In this context G. N. Devy in the Introduction of *The Outcaste* remarks that the phenomenon of , "caste as a status marker has probably been the most unique feature of Indian society." (xiv)

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, a highly qualified Dalit, faced humiliation and discrimination because of his caste. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar the pioneer of Indian Constitution fought for the social equality for his brethren. He believed that the caste-system was the reason for dividing human beings. Regarding this Zakir Abedi has quoted Ambedkar: "Ambedkar strongly states that Brahmins have succeeded "to idealize the real and realize the ideal." "Caste is divine, caste is sacred." Caste system is not merely division of labour, it is division of labourers." (204-205)

Bama has illustrated this caste-discrimination in many of her stories. Bama in her story "Pongal" has described how Madasami was discriminated because of his caste. He started a teashop but the people of high caste refused to drink tea from his shop. Madasami remarks: "These people gobble up whatever the other caste fellows sell. When I try selling, the same people say this is a *paraya* teashop, this *paniyaram* is made by a *parayan*, and they won't buy anything." (2) Similarly in her another story "Those Days" Bama has given examples of caste-discrimination and resistance. She has described how the old generations in the past submitted meekly to the upper castes without any rebellion. One of the old Dalit men Masanam Thatha remarks: "Those days, if landlords came upon us street fellows while we were smoking, we would quickly hide the beedis and stand up respectfully." (51)

Dalits have been ill-treated and exploited by the upper caste landlords. They submitted meekly to their exploiters without any rebellion. They believed that it was their moral duty to serve the upper castes. In ancient times some individual efforts were made by some Dalits to attain social equality. But none was successful to attain his dignity. Shambook was killed by lord Rama when he tried to rise above his social status. But employment and education has given them self-confidence. They have started resisting against the exploitive caste system. This caste system has forced them to live a miserable life. In the olden times Dalits submitted meekly to the upper castes. With the onset of education, Dalits got education and became economically empowered and influential. Not only had the educated Dalits started resisting against the

onslaught of the upper castes, the uneducated Dalits also asked for their due place in society. They fought for their human dignity and social equality against the inequalities imposed by the upper castes. But after getting education, the younger generation became aware of their identity and self-respect. Now Dalits don't want to be exploited any more at the hands of the upper castes. Indian villages are dens of exploitation against Dalits. Those who have migrated to towns and cities faced less exploitation and discrimination because of their caste. They work in various spheres and are being empowered. Dalits are now speaking subjects. They have been fighting passively and actively against the rotten caste system. This active and passive resistance has been very rightly described by Bama in her stories. She has given an example from her story "Pongal" where Madasami and his wife Rakkamma wanted to offer pongal to their master as a custom but their son Essakimuthu resists: "Why do we have to take all this to the landlord? We made a curry with them, we would have a healthy meal for once, at least."(3) Listening to all this, his mother Rakkamma intervenes: "Don't say that son! We cannot change our customs. What will the landlord feel? They are people who have tasted good things, so they should eat them. When have we ever tasted them? We should stick to the old way...."(3) The older generation of Dalits believed that it was their moral duty to pay respect and offer gifts to the upper caste landlords as they had accepted to the system of inequality as their destiny. But Esakkimuthu again resists: "For a small measure of *pongal* and a towel worth just ten rupees, are we so wretched that we have to give them a bird worth seventy-eighty rupees, a huge pumpkin, sugar-cane worth ten rupees, a whole bunch of bananas and four measures of rice? *Ei*, if we ourselves cooked and consumed all this, wouldn't it be enough for us for four or five days?"(4) Regarding this Bama has further described the struggles of Dalits for their dignity. Bama has given examples of the inequalities of the past and shows how the younger generation revolts defiantly. In the story "Those Days" Masaman Thatha remarks: "Those days, if landlords came upon us street fellows while we were smoking, we would quickly hide the beedis and stand up respectfully. But now? Today's fellows light up their beedis only when landlords approach! And after lighting up, they hold their heads high and blow out the smoke, puff after puff."(51) He further offers another example: "All our fellows used to toil for upper caste people only. If cattle died in their street, our fellows had to carry dead bodies and bury them. If someone died in their homes, our fellows went from village to village informing them of the death. We also had to beat the drum in those houses where someone had died. And we had to carry the dead bodies and cremate it." Those days if they beat the drums for one whole day, they would get one rupee for it. But now? They are so obstinate they will not beat the drums anymore. Would we allow anyone to cheat us the way they did in those days? We will not, *le?*" (52) Some of the Dalits resisted passively. This passive resistance and rebellion has been brought out by Bama in her story titled "Freedom". In this story, Bama has remarked how two Dalits Arayi and Subramani were tortured and exploited by their landlady Amma. She was very cruel to all the servants of the house. They were not allowed to talk to one another. Subramani was twelve years old and Arayi had been working since her childhood here. Amma always found fault with Arayi and Subramani. Sometimes he was beaten by Amma even for a slight mistake. One day both Amma and Ayya went to meet the doctor and returned in the evening. This was the freedom day for both Arayi and Subramani. He expressed his helpless anger by urinating on the plant whose leaves Amma used for cooking: "Subramani unbuttoned his shorts and peed on the curry-leaf plant. While peeing he said, patti, Amma plucks leaves from this plant for cooking. Let her do that now!"....She makes me suffer so much, let her cook with my pee and eat."(85) He also expressed his freedom by 'kicking the water cistern' and 'sending the water splashing in all directions'."(86) When they were both together Amma saw and shouted at Subramani again: "You! Why are you following around like her tail? Bring the spade and clear the grass here?"(89) Subramani took the spade and cleared the grass. Arayi was pounding rice. When they both finished their work, Amma summoned them and gave them coffee to drink but 'as soon as she was out of sight both of them threw the coffee away.'(89) This shows that both Arayi and Subramani wanted to take revenge and they express their suppressed anger by throwing the coffee away. This shows their passive resistance and silent protest. The next morning when Amma called Arayi and Subramani, she didn't receive any reply. Both Arayi and

Subramani had fled from the house. So the story ends with a note of freedom for both Arayi and Subramani.

This is similar to her next story titled “An Old Man and Buffalo”, where Bama depicts how Malandi Thatha revolts against his upper caste master in an indirect manner. Malandi told Kadasami an incident of the past when his father grazed the cattle. He said whenever any upper caste abused his father, he would ride on the buffalo of that upper caste. Out of rage Malandi named one of the cows as Kovaalan, after the name of an upper caste landlord. Malandi remarks: “When my father grazed the village cattle the landlord’s cattle would also be there, le? So, whoever had abused my father or me, I would ride only that fellow’s cattle. There used to be a landlord named Kovaalan then, I named his cow Kovaalan and rode only that cow! Elay, Kovaala, go east, da! Come here, da! Go there, da!”(102) Malandi’s father didn’t say a word when an upper caste man humiliated and exploited him, but Malandi didn’t tolerate all this. He said that ‘I will even shit on the landlord’s cattle.’ (103) When the upper castes didn’t allow Dalits to enter their houses, Malandi threw cow dung at their doors in anger: “...for some reason, I had to go with my father to the landlord’s houses. They wouldn’t let us enter. Do you know what I did? I threw cow-dung at their doors!”(103) He again told that when once the cattle of Komaravel Naiker ran away, Komaravel Naiker beat his father. Seeing all this Malandi became furious. He expressed his anger by grabbing his father’s grazing stick and let the cow have it: “You know that Komaravel Naiker? He beat up my father once. Beat him, saying the cattle didn’t return home. But his cow had wandered away somewhere and returned much later. Anger straight to my head. You know what I did? I grabbed my father’s grazing-stick and just let that cow have it.”(103) In olden days, the old generation submitted meekly to their exploiters because they were not educated and aware of their human rights. But in free India, with opportunity of education and awareness, the new generation revolts for their rights. It is all because of education and awareness.

Dalits were considered less than animals in the past. In free India it is said that everybody has the right to freedom but it is irony of fate that Dalits are always in chains. They are not equally respected like the upper castes. Although they may attain high positions, yet their dalitness remains the same. They are brutalized because of their caste. They are just treated as commodities. But after attaining education and jobs, the condition of Dalits has improved economically. Now they are the speaking subjects. They fight and resist for their right and social equality with the upper castes. They actively show their resentment. They have been tortured by upper castes only because of their caste. Bama has illustrated examples of active resistance in her stories. This active resistance by Dalits against upper castes has been very meticulously brought out by Bama in her story “Annachi”. When one day a Dalit boy Ammasi went to Nettiyakallu in search of some work, he boarded the bus and got the seat with much difficulty. An upper caste man named Chandrasekhar also boarded the same bus under whom his father worked. Ammasi was asked by Chandrasekhar, had he recognised him (Chandrasekhar)? He remarks: “*Elai...Are you not the son of that Madasami?*” “Sure, I am the son of Madasami.” “*Elai...Haven’t you recognised me?*” “I have, I know you very well. Are you not Chandrasekhar?” (9) Listening to all this Chandrasekhar says: “Still sitting, even after recognising me? Get up, let me sit.” “It was with great difficulty that I had squeezed through the crowd and managed to grab this seat and sit down. I said, I will get down at Nettiyakallu and I will keep sitting till then. You can sit after that.” “*Elai...Nettiyakallu is right here, okay? Get up da, and stand aside. While your Ayya is standing, is it right for you to keep sitting, not paying him due respect?*” Ammasi retaliates: “My Ayya is ploughing your field at this very moment. When did you become my Ayya? I will not get up even if you stand on your head!”(10) The upper caste fellow recollected the bygone days when the dalits didn’t have the courage to sit before them. But now they had become aware of their rights and had started thinking about their self-respect and dignity. The upper caste landlord Chandrasekhar says: “When the landlord comes, all the *palla* and *paraya* people stand up in respect. You youngsters don’t seem to know all this.”(10) But the older generation can’t understand this resistance and feel it is against the established order which they cannot even think of defying.

In the end, it can be said that Bama has given various examples of caste and gender in her stories. She has also described the resistance and resentment by Dalits against the ill-treatment of upper castes. The characters like Ponnuthayi, Annachi, Arulayi, and Subramani are the paragon of courage. These short stories of Bama are a fine critique of caste-ridden Hindu society and weapon for Dalits helping them to change their attitude. They also make upper castes aware about the ground realities of Dalits' exploitation and suppression. These stories deal not only with the pangs of Dalits but also their sufferings and exploitation and their strength and courage. These stories also celebrate their strong desire to fight against the injustice and inequalities imposed by upper castes.

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