



JOURNAL OF EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES AND INNOVATIVE RESEARCH (JETIR)

An International Scholarly Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Resistance and Assertion: A Study of Bama's Short Story "Chilli Powder"

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Abstract

The paper titled *Resistance and Assertion: A Study of Bama's Short Story "Chilli Powder"* discusses caste and gender issues faced by Dalit women in a new perspective by examining Bama's story "Chilli Powder" taken from the storybook *The Ichi Tree Monkey*. The existing situation of Dalit women and their exploitation in the name of caste and gender is a significant study. Compared to Dalit men, women are double disadvantaged, first, for being a Dalit and second, for being a woman. They become victims of the patriarchal social order in their families and outside. But the present paper focuses on Bama's fresh take on how Dalit women display the courage to rebel, assert and voice their resistance against subjugation.

Key Words: Humiliation, Subjugation, Caste, Gender and Class, Assertion, Resistance.

Bama is a renowned Tamil Dalit writer. Her ancestors were from the Dalit community and worked as agricultural labourers. Famous for her autobiographical novel *Karukku* (1992), Bama subsequently wrote two more novels, *Sangati* (1994) and *Vanmam* (2002) along with two collections of short stories: *Kusumbukkaran* (1996) and *Oru Tattvum Erumaiyum* (2003). In addition to this she has written twenty short stories.

In the words of *The Hindu* "[Bama has] has painted the Tamil-Indian village from the perspective of the Cheri (Dalit Colony), thus turning the socio-cultural geography upside down.' Originating from the deep interiors of Tamil Nadu Bama's collection of fifteen short stories *The Ichi Tree Monkey* has been translated into English by **N. Ravi Shanker**. The book is a vivid, fiery and feisty documentation of everyday acts of Dalit resistance against caste-based oppression in rural Tamil Nadu. Bama a contemporary Dalit writer doesn't hold back from putting her experiences into words, with a touch of ironic humour.

The story "Chilli Powder" like many other stories in the book *The Ichi Tree Monkey* reverberates deep within your consciousness, making you think about the consequences of your prejudices. Bama's stories by themselves are simple but they carry the weight of her experiences. Through the story of protagonist Panchayamma, a poor Dalit woman Bama shows us a world of sarcastic comments and unkind treatment which are central to how communities build and sustain prejudice.

Panchayamma is the epitome of sheer resistance and assertion against the ignominy of caste oppression. Bama has been successful in portraying the daily life of poor women of Cheri colony and the small ways of assertion uttered through vibrant language and coarse humour. Her determination can not to be crushed and extinguished.

Although the focus is majorly on caste biases yet the narration sticks to the simplicity and realities. Bama starts the story in a lighter vein but the ends up with bringing out the exploitative traits.

Bama's female protagonist Panchayamma is hilariously fearless and unabashed. She never bends her head to oppression, starkly detests upper caste land lords and ladies. She in her own blatant way questions the qualms of the society as well as patriarchy juxtaposing the labeled rural feminine quirks of fear and subservience.

Uma Chakravarti raised some questions about status of women in her essay 'Conceptualizing Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India Gender, Caste, Class and State', such as marriage law, property rights and rights relating to religious practice, normally viewed as indices of status (Deshapande 2017). She further talks about the subordination of women in India. In Hindu society for the social stratification women and lower caste have been subjected to humiliating conditions of existence. As she writes, Caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy are the organizing principles of the brahmanical social order and despite their close interconnections neither scholars of the caste system nor feminist scholars have attempted to analyze the relationship between the two. (qtd. Navya, 2014)

Caste and gender are the central part of the Hindu society. Dalit is a term which is the result of Indian caste system. The terminology like low born, low caste, untouchable, oppressed, voiceless, marginalized, poor etc, are associated with dalits. Uma Chakravarti raised some questions about status of women in her essay 'Conceptualizing Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India Gender, Caste, Class and State', such as marriage law, property rights and rights relating to religious practice, normally viewed as indices of status. The limited focus has left a major lacuna in our understanding of social processes which have shaped men, women and social institution in early India (Deshapande, 2017). She further talks about the subordination of women in India. In Hindu society for the social stratification women and lower caste have been subjected to humiliating conditions of existence. As she writes, Caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy are the organizing principles of the brahmanical social order and despite their close interconnections neither scholars of the caste system nor feminist scholars have attempted to analyze the relationship between the two (Deshapande, 2017).

Bama in her autobiography *Kurruku* presents an appalling picture of the female subaltern and the marginalized. They work hard both outside and inside. They become real animals and work restlessly. Bama (2000) empathises with fellow Dalit women and explains:

The position of women is both pitiful and humiliating, really. In the fields they have to escape from upper caste men's molestations. At church they must lick the priest's shoes and be his slaves while he threatens them with the tales of God, Heaven, and Hell. Even when they go to their own homes, before they have had a chance to cook some kanji or lie down and rest a little, they have to submit themselves to their husband's torment.

Bama's latest stories tell about how the contemporary Indian literary scene is changing and shaping up. One such story from the collection is "Chilli Powder" in which Bama portrays a rebellious character in the form of Panchayamma. Everyone in the colony was scared of Gangamma the rich and wealthy land lady but Panchayamma wasn't afraid of her at all. While the people of the village were terrified of her looks only, Panchayamma wasn't the least bit in awe of her. Bama (2021) narrates:

She was so brazen that she would cut grass only in Gangamma's fields. Since no one else dared to go over there, it was good hunting for her. She would cut the thick grass, bundle it up and carry it away without a trace of fear. That wasn't all. As if she hadn't already done the unthinkable, she then went around the streets bragging about what she had done. (37)

She bragged about how she cut a lot of grass and stole mangos from Gangamma's fields. "I must admit...what fruits they were! Dripping with honey! Even as I was enjoying them, Gangamma herself appeared....That woman got so furious she was swaying like an elephant calf gone mad (37)." Everyone knew that Panchayamma was exaggerating the account but Panchayamma insisted that she is not scared of the upper

caste land lady at all. She says: “What can she do, eh? She can’t touch a hair on my head. If she runs ten feet, this Panchayamma can run eighteen!” (38)

After two or three days later Panchayamma along with two other women, went to Gangamma’s field again to cut grass. Gangamma noticed them and went back to her home bringing back red chilli powder rolled in a sheet of paper. Showering all kinds of abuses on Panchayamma for stealing from her fields she threw the chilli powder into Panchayamma’s eyes. Panchayamma went wild with rage. She began to shout while wiping her burning eyes with her munuthanai, “Chi, can you be called a woman? Throwing chilli powder in my eyes just for cutting grass that grows on its own? Is there such a harvest of fruits and vegetables here that we will come and steal them?” (38)

Even after Panchayamma left the fields she kept haranguing and showering curses on Gangamma who everyone was dead scared of. For this incidence some called Panchayamma to be quite arrogant in her actions. But there were some who sympathized with her. Some of the villagers did agree that it was quite an inhuman act of violence on the part of Gangamma to throw chilli powder in Panchayamma’s eyes.

But how could be she so crafty? She took the trouble to go home and bring the chilli powder to to throw into Panchayamma’s eyes! “What if she had gone blind? If this is what she does just for cutting grass, what will she do if someone touches her harvest? She wouldn’t hesitate to kill! (39)

Since lower caste poor people have no land of their own and earn their living by working on the fields of rich landlords for minimal wages it seems a systematic exploitation of the poor. Some of the villagers say it rightly: “And where else can we go and cut grass if not in the fields of landowners? Where else do we go for grass to feed the cattle we survive on?” (39)

After the incidence everyone referred to Gangamma as molagappodi meaning chilli powder. There was no off-putting effect on the spirits of Panchayamma after the episode. In fact other women also joined in teasing Gangamma by calling her chilli powder. One day Panchayamma along with other women started teasing Gangamma. Furious Gangamma yelled and cursed these women. Belonging to opulent upper caste Gangamma is not ready to take insults from some lower caste woman and showers all kinds of caste and class biased remarks on Panchayamma. “Yendi, stinking whore widow! How dare you talk like this? She’s so poor she has next to nothing to wear, but look how the donkey speaks! Brazen bitch! (40)” On this Panchayamma’s anger exploded and she made as if to strike Gangamma with her vessel of koozh. The other women also joined in. Trapped, Gangamma did not stop to reply. She took to her heels, huffing and puffing all the way. (41)

Dalit women have to work tirelessly to earn a living and bring up the children. Bama presents a poignant picture of their lives. The women of village have to roam around to find work. Panchayamma voices her agony: “No work, no wages! Don’t know what I’m going to cook a meal with today. What kind of life is this! You get kanji only if you work! Otherwise, you just drink some water and go to sleep.”(41)

Panchayamma’s husband is a useless fellow with no heart for work. It’s only her who has to earn for a living. One day while coming home without finding any work Panchayamma along with ten or twelve women started plucking cotton pods and didn’t hesitate to lay hands on Gangamma’s plantation too. Gangamma on seeing thing this came back with a police inspector and two policemen. The inspector was their own man who used to live in his brother’s house. All the women were caught stealing and loaded onto Gangamma’s tractor to be taken to the police station.

On the way to police station women started blaming Panchayamma. “We are in this mess because of you. Don’t be so shameless. (43)” While all other women are terrified on the fact that they have been caught stealing and being taken to police station Panchayamma is quite fearless. She says: “Are they going to cut our heads off at the station? Take it easy women! (43)” Her fearlessness and shamelessness is her adaptation to the poverty and hardships she has to go through. There is stark revelation of truth in her words:

Ei...what’s shameful about this? Are we stealing so we can build tiled houses for ourselves? Are we going to make jewellery for our necks and ears? We steal because that is the only way we will not starve-

even though we need only a little bit of kanji. Tell me, with prices so high, can we afford to have our fill of kanji with the wages we get/ We don't have a single coin on us today. Even when there is work and we get paid, we can have only broken rice kanji and rasam. Today I thought I would sell the cotton and buy some dried fish for curry, but that sinner's daughter came and spoiled it all. (43)

Panchayamma's sayings and doings might seem stupid, exaggerated, boastful for the most of the villagers including her husband; but there is a stark truth underlying. May be this is the reason that other women of village start following her. Bama's description of trivial incidences of resistance and assertion by Panchayamma have biting humour which is vivid and precise, spanning just long enough to drive home a point. Her words make other women agree with her. Her words gave them courage and rather than being angry or scared now they started laughing and making jokes.

On the way to police station Panchayamma wanted to pee but was not allowed to get down from the tractor. When they reached the station, the policemen ordered them to get down. As soon as she did, Panchayamma quickly lifted her clothes and peed right there, standing up. The other women too did the same. Seeing this the policeman grumbled, "Chi, arrogant donkeys! They'll make the whole station sink! (44)"

After finishing peeing Panchayamma started walking away from police station and other women started following her lead. The policeman shouted at them and refused to let them go. He asked them to pay ten rupees fine per head for stealing the cotton. At this Panchayamma shouted back: "What do you mean by shouting ei and oi? Are you our husband to call us "ei"? We picked the cotton with great difficulty, to sell. But this fellow asked us to drop the pods there itself and now you're asking us to pay ten rupees fine? What a joke!...We don't have a single coin to buy even a small packet of snuff and you know that. (45)"

But policeman was not interested in listening to any of their excuses and won't let them leave until they pay the fine. She retorts angrily: "This is too much...What will we pay the fine with? Seri, if you don't want us to leave, we won't. We will all stay here, you give us food for the night. In the morning we will go to work, come back in the evening and pay the fine. Ei, come on, women, we'll just sit here. (45)" All other women sat down with her.

Policemen finally had to let them go home with a warning for future. It's just because of Panchayamma's daunting bravery and facing the policemen assertively that they all get released from the police station. Meanwhile her husband has returned from the well digging work he was gone for. When he heard that Panchayamma had been at the police station he started yelling at her. "Aren't you ashamed, going to the station? Your whole family is a pack of thieves!" Panchayamma silenced her husband at once, "Yes, I went to the station and come back. What's wrong with that? Tell me something: has any woman who worked in the fields arrived at our village in such style, in a vehicle?"(47)

Her husband calls her a thief and brazen woman. "You will end up with just your tongue left, atha. It's right what they say, whether your mouth is stitched up or locked up, you can't help babbling! (47)"

Village people along with her husband may call her talkative and brazen but the truth is it's her indomitable spirit which makes her question the norms so bluntly. She affirms her resistance in her own small but firm ways against the indignities which are thrown on the poor Dalits like herself. She comes out as a strong woman who asserts fearlessly and also gives courage to other timid women in her own way. She does not care what people say about her. She has an upright answer to villager's gossips. She retorts: "Seri, I have no time to waste talking to you. What do you know? These days, if we don't speak up, they'll come and fart right in our faces, amma (47)".

Saying this she walked towards Veluchami's shop, hoping to get some ragi flour from him on credit to cook some kali. The story does not have a "happy" ending or conclusion as might be expected but they're told in a way that makes us see the root of the problem. Education can surely spread more awareness among Dalit colonies and help them come out of their poverty and misery. In her autobiography *Kurruku* Bama (2000) affirms the similar viewpoint. She writes:

Bama's brother advised her study hard if she wants overcome the indignities heaped by caste system on dalits. As he says, because we are born into the Paraiyar jati, we are never given any honor or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that. But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities. So study with care, learn all you can. If you are always ahead in your lessons, people will come to you of their own accord and attach themselves to you. Work hard and learn.

Dalits have been suppressed of their rights since time immemorial. Generations of a Dalit family serve a landlord for years and years subjugating to the exploitation. With the evolving times, they slowly have realized the injustice of the scheme of things and rebel in their own ways. The stories "Chilli Powder" is filled with sharp humor, wit and determination and is devoid of any wails of victimhood. It's elevating to see a poor uneducated Dalit woman to be the harbinger of such a change.

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