



**Laughter as Protest in Bama's *Harum-Scarum*
*Saar and Other Stories***

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Abstract

It is through the narratives of violence, rage, bewilderment and anguish that the Dalit protagonist is seen negotiating the inequities and inequalities of the world around her. In the works of the Tamil writer Bama however this anger is often turned into sarcasm, and bewilderment turned into mischief. In her collection of short stories, *Harum Scarum Saar and Other Stories* (2006) Bama creates characters, who are not diminished by caste oppression or poverty. They deal with oppressive caste structures with wit, mischief and laughter. In doing so she creates Dalit men and women, who are never just “poor” and “oppressed” passive victims waiting to be emancipated. They understand not only their own historical oppression but also the oppressor’s machinations. They outrightly reject and ridicule the hegemonic culture of the upper caste through their subversive wit and bodily gestures. This imaginary is both a technology of the self and a means of political and cultural intervention.

Keywords: Dissent, Laughter, Dalit, Self, Sarcasm, Wit, Irreverence.

Introduction

The essential question is what is this ‘self’ that gets constructed through Bama’s stories? How does it negotiate its space in the caste-ridden power structures of Independent India? Not that independent India is an entity set off from its past in a clean break. Past has never been past in India. It is too much of the present and therefore never really past in the sense of being relegated to an archaic history. This

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is not to say however that archaic history does not have its uses. The founding parents of Independent India were oriented in the right direction and offered to course correct historical wrongs against the Dalit community through constitutional mechanisms. However, the task of building up a 'confident-self' for a community that was forced to live as untouchables was never going to be easy and constitutional mechanisms could only do so much. The remaining task was to fall upon the community itself to build its 'self' through resistance and in opposition to the dominant order of the caste hierarchy and in solidarity with its own fraternity. This was a task that was to be accomplished through social, political and cultural means. Literature was to play an important role in this reshaping of Dalit identity. B.R. Ambedkar said: "Transform the light of your pen so that the darkness of villages is removed . . . Get to know intimately their pain and sorrow, and try through your literature to bring progress in their lives." (Ambedkar 8)

Most Dalit scholars see this call of Ambedkar as setting the stage for the emergence of Dalit literature in the first Dalit literary conference held in 1958. Through 1950s to the present, Dalit literature has tried to convey what Arjun Dangle calls its "differentness" through stories, autobiographies, poems and now films. This differentness is based on Dalit thinkers, writers' assertion that "the language, experiences and heroes of Dalit literature are totally different" (Dangle xiii). Carrying this thesis forward Sharan Kumar Limbale in his book *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* says (2005):

The singular identity of Dalit literature is revealed through its rebellious, collective character; the Dalit writer's distinct experience, their use of folk language, their commitment to human liberation; and the influence of Ambedkar's thought. (37)

"Suffering and revolt" have long been the cornerstones of this new literature. This however is by no means the only definition of Dalit literature. Others like D.R. Nagraj have argued for the creation of an identity and literature based on not just anguish, rejection and revolts alone but of generating polyphonic "enigmas of irreducible

difference” (Nagraj 185). For Nagraj, anger, rage, bewilderment are not enough to contain the creative energies of the Dalit community, these need to be supplanted with cultural, spiritual, philosophical memories of the past as indeed a retrieval of other discourses of revolts against orthodoxy.

As can be seen, this picture of the emerging Dalit “self” is not a seamless one. On the one hand is the pull of the fiery and revolutionary Ambedkarite ideology, which wishes to submerge and erase its cultural past and on the other is the desire to reclaim one’s cultural and spiritual memory. Whatever their differences, the desire in both the thinkers is to construct a self that defies caste oppression to liberate the individual. It would be a mistake to see the two as binaries of one another. So, if modernity, as has been argued by philosophers, sociologists and political thinkers as Charles Taylor, Anthony Giddens, Sudipta Kaviraj and others, “imposes on individuals and communities an historical requirement of self-reflection” (380) and the “crystallization of an idea of the self which did not exist earlier” (Kaviraj 380). In the stories of Dalit writers this construction of the self is an ongoing process of becoming and is predicated on the primary condition of creating a fraternity. This is also a safeguard Ambedkar proposes against breeches of liberty and equality. His Biographer Dhananjay Keer says, “He did not believe that law can be a guarantee for breaches of liberty or equality. He gave the highest place to fraternity as the only real safeguard” (459).

The Dalit ‘self’ as imagined by the Dalit writer is a self in opposition to the caste system of Hinduism: in all its manifestations of heredity, marriage restrictions, dietary rules, hierarchy, choice of occupation, all foster inequality and are used to exploit or humiliate the Dalits. This systematic denial of humanity and respect to the Dalit community was to be wrested back and to that extent dissent and defiance become vital in Dalit writings. Bama herself says so in an article “Dalit Literature” published in *Indian literature*:

The primary motive of Dalit literature is the liberation of Dalits in particular and the liberation of the oppressed in general. It is fundamentally a cultural activity coming under the broad movements of Dalit

political liberation. It is cultural politics. It takes the form of protest. (97)

Harum Scarum Saar and Other Stories: Constructing an Irreverent Self. If Dalit writing is as Limable says a “lofty image of grief” (30) then Bama’s characters in *Harum Scarum Saar* provide a certain comic relief. Laughter, and humour have not been used as much in the fight against the oppression of upper castes in Dalit literature. Bama is perhaps the first to turn anger into laughter and bewilderment into mischief in her fiction. She creates characters, who are not diminished by caste oppression or poverty. They engage with oppressive caste structures through wit, mischief and laughter. In doing so she creates an image of confident, self-assured Dalit men and women who are never just “poor” and “oppressed” passive victims waiting to be emancipated. *Harum Scarum Saar and Other Stories* first published as *Kisumbukkaran* (1996) in Tamil translates as rebellious pranksters. The Tamil title as opposed to the English title is a clear indication of the spirit of the collection, which is rebellion through pranks, speech, gestures, and small acts of defiance.

For Bama Dalit literature is a means of political and cultural intervention leading to the creation of a ‘collective-self’ as opposed to the “wretched of the earth” kind of representation in mainstream literature. It would be instructive to look at what Bama herself has to say on this topic. She says:

Dalit literature should not be viewed as a mere story of the individual's tragedy. Instead, it should be the story of the Dalit struggle and its relationship with Authority. It produces a political reaction. It is provocative and unpalatable to the champions of the oppressive caste and class system. It should bring about chaos into the hierarchical relationships between the dominant and the dominated. It is singular in concept but plural in practice. (98)

The stories in *Harum, Sacruam, Saar* play precisely this role, they provoke, they challenge, they make you cry, they make you laugh

and they disturb the hierarchical order of caste. There are ten stories in *Harum Scarum, Saar* and within it are three sets of stories:

1. Immensely sad, tragic tales of cruelty and indifference that have parallels only in stories of slavery, stories as “Rich Girl,” “Half Sari” and “Freedom.” These are stories of devastating dominance of the upper caste in the village. The protagonists in these stories are children, who do not understand their conditions of slavery and die either unable to cope with the inhuman treatment meted out to them, or see a parent die as a result of the systemic abuse of the dominant castes; or they just run away from the houses of landlords, where they are house servants.
2. The second set of stories as “Pongal,” “Ponnuthayi,” are stories of outright defiance. Defiance here is not just against caste practices tied to the rural economy, but also within the community. Women characters, having suffered the harsh embrace of patriarchal practices and values attempt to escape it and, in the process, find a kind of freedom that allows them some relief from everyday brutality and torture.
3. It is the third set of stories as “Annachi,” “Harum-Scarum Saar,” “Chilli Powder” and “Old Man and a Buffalo” where the full range of the weapons of dissent, wit, laughter, defiance and mischief come into play. It is these stories that will be dealt with in some detail in this paper.

However, before undertaking the above analysis, a few words about the structure of the book: there are ten independent stories in the book. They are independent only in the sense that we meet a different set of characters from different villages as Kupayapatti, Nattiyakallu and Chinnakaruvelampatti in these stories. The physical geography of the place, its caste composition, language, physical labor that people engage in give the impression of the entire action taking place in one single space. All the villages named earlier and those that are not named are situated on the banks of the river Kamma. All action takes place around the Kamma, whether it is bathing, shitting, swimming, washing clothes, grazing the cattle, catching fish, or playing games. The villages and the river Kamma are a fictional construct reminding one of RK Narayan’s Malgudi

Days. The only difference being that the term ‘fictional’ only extends as far as the name of the village and the river go there is nothing illusory about caste atrocities. They are a daily occurrence. Incidentally, Kamma is a dominant caste in Tamil Nadu and in Andhra Pradesh. The word Kamma apparently has origins in both Pali and Sanskrit meaning *karma*.

The two castes that dominate the stories are those of the Parayas and the Naickers, where Parayas are the lower caste employed in the fields and houses of the upper caste landowners, the Naickers. In Bama’s stories all action takes place outside, in clashes between the lower caste workers and upper caste landlords. There is no inner psychological world of the characters. There is rumination and reflection on one’s condition, but it is not an individual’s suffering, it is the suffering of the collective that is at the centre of all these stories. To that extent these stories are stories of a collective self.

Annachi and Chilli powder: Antipodal Culture. In the two stories, *Annachi* and *Chilli Powder*, I wish to look at, following are the tools of laughter/humour employed to subvert the dominance of the upper caste landowners: 1. derisive wit, 2. mischief, 3. sarcasm, 4. irreverence, and 5 native humour, use of rustic language In the story “Annachi” for example, the protagonist Ammasi is a twenty-year old, good-looking man with dark moustache and a good physique. When he smiles as Bama says his” teeth glittered like a Kenda fish thrashing about in the sun.” Bama creates these fresh images rooted in the local dialect to describe the beauty of a young man. It is almost as if a new vocabulary is required to talk about the beauty of the youth belonging to the Paraya community. The boy himself has a highly developed sense of personal grooming and he dresses up in spotless white clothes ironed diligently to remove all wrinkles even as he goes to the field of the upper caste landlord, to divert water.

Following is the exchange that takes place between the landlord and Ammasi:

“Do you look like someone who has come to work? You look like you are going to some office! Dolt! Didn’t that idiot find someone else, did he have to send you?”

“What is it to you? You only want to divert water, don’t you? What do you care about how I’m dressed?”

Elai, do you know what time it is? Look at this fellow showing up now, like some big shot going somewhere far away!”

Annachi, only you have a wristwatch, I don’t. Only you can tell the time Annachi. I will try and buy a watch soon Annachi, after that I will be able to tell the time.” (12)

As can be seen Amaasi reverses the order of things by wearing spotless white, ironed clothes for a work that requires getting dirty in the mud and threatens to even buy a wristwatch to get even with the landlord. Also, clearly visible in the above discursive encounter is the unease of the upper caste landlord on seeing the lower caste person dressing up in clean clothes and talking to him as an equal. The landlord’s immediate impulse is to dismiss him on that pretext. Clean clothes and impertinence destabilise the upper caste landlord’s entrenched sense of caste superiority for he only understands and feels comfortable with servitude and patronage.

The flashpoint in the story however is Ammasi calling the landlord ‘annachi’ or elder brother. This results in the landlord calling a panchayat (a village council) to discipline the youngster. However, even here Ammasi scores a victory over the landlord by saying:

I only called him annachi politely, respectfully and you raise hell? ...you ask me why I called a Naicker, annachi? It’s just what the old woman Poovathi, says, when a donkey shits is there a difference between what it shits first and what it shits last? Shit is shit. All men are just men.” So saying Ammasi walked away. And everyone watched him leave, awestruck? (14)

Ammasi is echoing Ambedkar's call for equality of all men. His genius lies in claiming his dignity by wearing spotless white clothes, aspiring for a wristwatch and claiming equality even as he disparages the Landlord by calling him a donkey and shit. The last line, "And everyone watched him leave, awestruck" is a coming together of impertinence and defiance leading to a liberating act. Hence, when Ammanshi does the seemingly impossible it is only natural that it should be awe-inspiring for the people of his community as well as for others. He does this with a flair that generates humour and fun at the expense of the oppressor and at the level of the text generates an aesthetic response to the systemic violence and oppression of caste structures. At the same time, it serves as an "improvisational counterpoint to laughing to keep from crying" (Hintze 5).

In fact, this fierce and free attitude of the protagonist is really the plot of the story. Not only does it set in action the movement of the story but also at the level of the theme it sets the tone for an aspiration to a life of dignity and equality. His rejection of the dominant-servile order by insisting on speaking on equal terms, his refusal to debase himself by wearing dirty and worn out clothes, to reject the language of politeness and deference, his rebellion against order and obedience these are all political acts of disobedience and constitute what has been described as 'Dalit protest culture' by Tamil scholars as Raj Gauthaman in his essay, "Dalit protest culture: The first stage"(263) published in *The Oxford India Anthology of Tamil Dalit Writing* (2012). A Dalit, he says is considered arrogant and disrespectful if he/she does not demean or debase himself/herself (236). Gauthaman remarks pertinently that:

When the Dalit talks back, the direct and opposite identities, the self and other get subverted, the Dalit gets relief from mental restrictions that bind him while the upper caste is indignant that his direct identities are lost. No dominant person would like to lose his identity. (268)

Bama is emphasising precisely this "antipodal culture" of protest through speech, body -language, gesture and the defiant attitude of her protagonists. Similarly, in another story "Chilli Powder" a feisty

fearless woman Pachayamma from the Paraya community makes it a habit to cut wild grass from the fields and orchards of a rich landowner, a woman called Gangamma, who is a much hated and reviled figure in the colony of the Parayas. Gangamma is portrayed as mean and cruel woman with a massive figure, moving like a malevolent elephant through the fields. The sight of her makes people run for life. One day as Pachayamma and two other women are cutting wild grass on the sly in the fields of Gangamma, she sneaks upon them and throws chili powder into their eyes. Not that the chili-throwing incident stops Pachayamma from cutting grass and thieving other items from Gangamma's fields. But Gangamma gets a nickname henceforth-molagappodi or chili powder, a name that infuriates Gangamma no end. One day as Pachayamma and four other women are returning after working in the fields they see Gangamma approaching from the other side. Seeing her Pachayamma provocatively calls out to her friends:

Heard that a chili powder machine has come to our village too. The wife of that teacher who lives in the street below isn't grinding chili paste anymore –she's using chili powder, just like the landowners.

. . . must be so convenient to store chili powder like that. We can use to cook and also throw into people's eyes. (33)

Hearing this Gangamma starts yelling furiously but runs for her life seeing that she is surrounded by five angry women and that no one from her household or community is nearby to take her side. Bama builds up the story with these details of daily skirmishes between the lower and higher caste. The high point in the story comes just like that suddenly and the revenge exacted by the wronged lower caste person isn't grand, but in the form of ridicule or embarrassment to unsettle the order of things. In the story Gangamma through her social and political connections gets the police to arrest Pachayamma and other women, who have been stealing cotton pods from her field. On their way to the police station in Gangamma's tractor a woman starts feeling embarrassed on being caught. She blames Pachayamma for this and calls her shameless. To which Pachayamma replies:

What's shameless about this? Are we stealing so we can build tiled houses for ourselves? Are we going to make some jewelry 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 a curry but that sinner's daughter came and spoiled it all. Pachayamma turned her attention to the policeman. "ayya just let me get down for a second. I'll pee and come running back. (37)

Poverty, rage, and humiliation does not cause Pachayamma to lose sight of her location in the caste/class structure of the society. She understands that the creation of wealth of the upper castes is no less a thieving of poor people's labour. She is not ashamed of her poverty. She is only trying to make ends meet to survive. Her impudence and sharp retort are her weapons against figures of authority. In the story the women laugh, taunt and mimic each other on their way to the police station even as the movement of the tractor makes it impossible for the women to control their bladder. The policemen in their viciousness refuse to let them get down to urinate. So, as soon as they reach the station:

Pachayamma quickly lifted her clothes and peed right there, standing up. The other women too did the same.

Pachayamma adds with a flourish after this act:

Ayya, one can hold back one's anger but not one's piss. That's why we asked you to let us down on the way. It is you who said we could pee only after reaching the station. (38)

The women refuse to pay the fine of ten rupees that is levied upon them and propose to stay back at the police station and ask for food to be arranged for the night. In the meanwhile, an inspector comes to

the police station seeing him the two policemen stand up in attention drawing up further rebuke from the old women Aarayi, “When an officer shows up they all hang on to their balls” (39). Eventually the women are allowed to go home with a stern warning.

The act of urinating in public in the police station is a political act of resistance and may be described as an act of “affirmative sabotage” a term coined by Gayatri Spivak and used by Sudhadeep Mukherjee in the article, “Women of the Dalit Unrest: Rewriting Bodies, Reinforcing Resistance.” She uses this term to highlight the resistance inscribed in Bama’s earlier work like *Sangati* (1994). Here too, there are characters like Sammuga Kizavi, who on seeing a little boy from her community being thrashed for simply touching the water pot of an upper caste man, silently urinates in the same pot, as an act of protest. Mukherjee says that “her act of urinating in the upper caste’s pot can be understood as being revolutionary when read in conjunction to the methodical and persistent infliction of violence on the Dalit woman and her body” (Mukherjee 13). This is not “mere anarchy loosed upon the world” as W. B Yeats would say, rather it is rebellion, a form of protest against the hegemonic culture of the upper castes. To quote Mukherjee again:

The Dalits, as is evident from *Sangati*, sabotage those very same markers by literally *using* them in/for their everyday survival, and thus rewrite the Dalit historiography from the vantage of resistance. (Mukherjee 13-14)

The body and its gestures become the site of rebellion against the oppressive Hindu code for the lower castes as “standing up when someone comes, wrapping the stole around the waist, touching the feet and prostrating as the bodily gestures that symbolize slave status and lowly position” (Gauthaman 269). Bama’s characters go much beyond defying this code of conduct they spit, they urinate, they bathe, they wear clean clothes and retort back when abused.

Conclusion

In focusing on derisive wit, mischief, sarcasm, irreverence, humour

and laughter in the above stories Bama creates a site for a new form of subjectivity that is located in the spontaneous quality of a collective laughter, thereby giving expression to the assertion of the self and a possibility of mediation between the personal and the public. This also allows Bama to reclaim for her protagonists even in dire circumstances a perspective on the absurdity of caste inequality and injustice. She herself identifies with the liberation literature of “black literature, the feminist literature and the communist-socialist (Bama 98). She harnesses laughter and mischief not merely as a defence mechanism against caste atrocities but as a political tool to create a shared “Dalit public sphere” that has “issues in common with Black and feminist movements” (Gauthaman 263). Thereby generating a space of resistance and the bold assertion of the ‘Dalit-self, Dalit-body’ but also making a common cause with the global fraternity of the oppressed as blacks and other marginalised figures of society. More so, the humour and laughter generated in the stories at the experience of the upper caste is an attempt by Bama to develop a change in the aesthetic experience of Dalit literature. By making wit and mischief as central embodied experiences of Dalit protagonists in her fiction she makes laughter an intentional weapon aimed at combating caste hierarchy.

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