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Education as an Emancipation of Resistance in Bama's *Just One Word*

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Abstract:
Bama's Short story collection, *Just One Word*, offers a profound examination of education as a complex force within Dalit society. This paper critically analyzes how the educational system and its practitioners, particularly teachers, function as both instruments of casteist and patriarchal oppression and as vital catalysts for self-awareness, agency, and collective resistance among Dalit individuals. Drawing upon textual analysis and the principles of critical pedagogy, especially those articulated by Paulo Freire, this study demonstrates how Bama's narrative voice, frequently channelled through her portrayal of various teacher characters, exposes societal hypocrisy while simultaneously advocating for education as a transformative tool for emancipation and conscientization. The collection reveals that while institutional structures often perpetuate discrimination, the potential for liberation lies in a pedagogy that actively challenges ingrained prejudices and fosters a critical consciousness.

Keywords: Dalit literature, Education, Emancipation, Resistance, Caste discrimination, Critical pedagogy, Social justice, Teachers role, Oppression, Hypocrisy, Agency.

Introduction

Bama: A Dalit Feminist Voice and Educator:

Bama, born Faustina Mary Fatima Rani in 1958, stands as a pivotal figure in contemporary Tamil Dalit literature. Hailing from the Paraiyar community, one of the most marginalized Dalit subcastes in Tamil Nadu, her upbringing and firsthand experiences of systemic discrimination profoundly shaped her literary and pedagogical endeavors (Sarangi). Bama's journey through education, initially constrained by her caste identity, became a crucial pathway for her own resistance

and self-empowerment (Nagraj). Her childhood dream was to become a teacher, viewing educators as significant role models within her Dalit community (Soosairaj). *She says that "fortunate enough to get education", a privilege of upper caste men, and she is fortunate to have become a teacher despite being dalit.* This aspiration led her to a teaching career that spanned from 1979 to 2015 (Soosairaj).

Despite her dedication to shaping young minds, Bama encountered pervasive discrimination throughout her teaching career, experiencing humiliation due to her caste and gender, even within religious institutions such as convents (Kamble). Her disillusionment with the embedded casteism in these spaces eventually led her to leave the nunnery, a decision that profoundly influenced her writing (Rani). Bama's personal trajectory, from an oppressed Dalit girl striving for education, to a teacher actively attempting to instill humanistic values, and ultimately to a writer who wields her craft as a "weapon" against dehumanizing caste practices (Rani), illustrates a profound, lived commitment to education as a transformative force. This progression underscores that for Bama, education is not merely a theoretical concept but an embodied experience that transmutes personal suffering into a collective struggle for justice. Her literary critique, therefore, emerges not only from intellectual engagement but also from deep, lived experience.

Just One Word in the Canon of Dalit Literature:

Bama's notable works include *Karukku* (1992), *Sangati* (2000), *Vanmam* (2002). Bama's influence extends globally, with translations of her works into languages such as English, French, Malayalam, Telugu, and more. In the realm of English translations, Bama's Short story collections have gained recognition. *Harum-Scarum Saar* (2006), translated by Mr. N. Ravi Shanker, and *Just One Word* (2018), translated by Ms. Malini Sheshadri, exhibits the depth of her storytelling. The most recent collection, *The Ichi Tree Monkey* (2021), also translated by Mr. N. Ravi Shanker, presents a blend of both old and new short stories.

In *Just One Word*, Bama meticulously documents the evolving influences on people's lives and consciousness, often revealing internalized caste and patriarchal sentiments with a touch of ironic humor (Bama). The collection introduces fundamental social issues such as pervasive caste discrimination, societal hypocrisy, and the shortcomings of the educational system, with "discrimination" serving as a recurrent and central theme across all stories (Kamble). Bama's deliberate choice to employ "ironic humour" and a "subtle manner" in addressing deeply entrenched social issues

like caste discrimination represents a sophisticated narrative strategy. This approach enables her to expose uncomfortable truths without alienating readers, thereby broadening the reach of her emancipatory message. Consequently, the text itself becomes a powerful act of resistance against societal complacency, fostering critical reflection rather than immediate confrontation.

Theoretical Framework: Education as Emancipation of Resistance:

Dalit literature emerged as a revolutionary movement, a powerful counter-narrative against the systemic exploitation and humiliation faced by Dalits in India. Its core tenets advocate for equality, justice, and freedom, which have historically been denied to this community (Kamble). This literary movement serves as a vital platform for the silenced and oppressed, vividly depicting their lived experiences of caste-based discrimination, profound humiliation, and their relentless struggle for dignity (Raut). Historically, formal education was largely inaccessible to Dalits, a deliberate denial that severely hindered their empowerment and social mobility (Nagraj). Bama unequivocally asserts the transformative power of education, stating that "only education can eradicate the label of untouchability and bring the status to Dalits" (Ghosal Mondal). Dalit writers, including Bama, strategically utilize literature as a potent tool for social transformation, actively challenging entrenched caste hierarchies and offering incisive critiques of the oppressive social system (Raut). The very act of Dalits gaining literacy and subsequently writing their own stories, particularly in a language like English that offers a global reach, fundamentally transforms education from a denied privilege into a "weapon" (Rani) and a "tool of emancipation" (Raut). This empowerment allows them to reclaim their narratives and assert their rights (Kumar), directly countering the historical erasure and misrepresentation perpetuated by dominant narratives. This progression from denial to self-expression highlights the inherent liberatory potential embedded within educational attainment for marginalized communities.

Critical Pedagogy: Paulo Freire and the Dalit Context:

Paulo Freire's seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, provides a crucial theoretical lens through which to understand education's role in social transformation. Freire posits that education is not a neutral endeavor but is inherently political, interventionist, and performative (Raut). He critiques what he terms the "banking model of education," where knowledge is passively deposited into students, who are treated as "empty vessels" (Sharma and Sharma). This model, Freire argues, is intrinsically linked to oppression as it discourages questioning, critical thinking, and

genuine humanization (Sharma and Sharma). In contrast, he advocates for the "problem-posing model," which fosters dialogue, critical inquiry, and the co-creation of knowledge between teachers and students, deeming it essential for liberation (Sharma and Sharma).

Freire's concepts resonate deeply within the Dalit context. The oppressed, according to Freire, must first comprehend the nature of their oppression and then engage in dialogue to achieve liberation (Raut). Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's critique of "false charity," exemplified by Mahatma Gandhi's use of the term "Harijan" for Dalits, aligns with Freire's caution against oppressors who attempt to "help" the oppressed without truly dismantling the underlying oppressive structures or experiencing the oppression themselves (Sharma and Sharma). Furthermore, Ambedkar's theory of graded inequality within the caste system, where hierarchies exist even among the oppressed, finds a parallel in Freire's concept of "sub-oppressors" within the oppressed hierarchy, where those slightly higher in the subjugated group may perpetuate oppression against those below them (Sharma and Sharma).

Bama's own pedagogical approach, both in her teaching career and through her literary works, can be seen as "Freirean." Her teaching is characterized as "humane, caste sensitive, personalized and remedial" (Rani). She actively sought to "annihilate the caste system" in her classroom, using academic subjects and creative methods like skits, songs, and storytelling to inculcate humanistic values and challenge caste differences (Soosairaj). Bama's classroom practices, which consciously reorganize around the "specificity of everyday Dalit oppression," embody a "pedagogy of contestation" (Rani). This approach reveals the classroom not as an isolated, neutral space, but as a politicized microcosm where societal caste and gender hierarchies are reproduced, challenged, and potentially dismantled. This suggests that true educational reform for Dalits necessitates not merely curriculum adjustments but a fundamental shift in pedagogical philosophy and teacher attitudes that actively confronts and deconstructs internalized prejudices, transforming the educational environment into a dynamic site for social justice.

Bama's Voice Through Teacher Characters: Perpetuators and Catalysts

Bama's *Just One Word* intricately weaves narratives that expose the dual role of teachers and the educational system in perpetuating and resisting caste-based discrimination. The characters within this collection serve as vivid illustrations of

how individual attitudes and institutional practices shape the experiences of Dalit students and professionals.

1. **Seeds of Discrimination: *The Verdict* and *Just One Word***

In the Short story "*The Verdict*," Bama lays bare the insidious origins of discrimination within the very fabric of the school system (Kamble). The narrative illustrates how upper-caste children are explicitly "taught to not mix with the Dalit children in the school," and are actively "restricted from mixing up with them" (Kamble). This portrayal is particularly damning as it reveals the complicity of authority figures; the headmaster of the school, a figure of moral and educational authority, "does not find anything wrong in spreading the teaching of untouchability in the school" (Kamble). This passive acceptance and active perpetuation of untouchability by the headmaster underscores institutional complicity in reinforcing caste hierarchies.

On the other hand, Mary Teacher represents the conscientious educator grappling with the deep-seated nature of caste prejudice. She is "stunned" and "very angry and upset" upon discovering that caste discrimination is being practiced by children as young as Mahalakshmi and Vijayalakshmi, who refuse to drink water from a "cheri street" tap (Just One Word 15). Mary Teacher directly confronts Vijayalakshmi, questioning the inherent wrongness of such caste-based restrictions: "But that's wrong, isn't it?" (JOW 15). Her internal monologue reveals a profound disillusionment: "We've been teaching these things here for years, and it's all been a waste of time. I taught this same Vijayalakshmi last year in class four. In the Tamil lesson there was that Bharathiyar song... that drum song. I remember how I explained over and over again that all human beings are equal. I talked myself hoarse about it—all a waste. No use at all. It's not what is taught in school but what is taught at home that seems to be learnt quicker by these children" (JOW 16).

Mary Teacher's genuine outrage and her attempt to reason with Vijayalakshmi underscore her commitment to egalitarian principles. However, her realization that "It's not what is taught in school but what is taught at home that seems to be learnt quicker by these children" highlights a significant challenge for emancipatory education. This suggests that school-based interventions, while crucial for introducing progressive ideas, often struggle against the deeply ingrained and continuously reinforced caste prejudices learned within the family and community. Her frustration reflects the immense societal inertia that even dedicated teachers face,

raising critical questions about the limits of school-based education without broader social and familial transformation.

Similarly in the Short story *Just One Word*, Bama exposes the insidious nature of caste discrimination from a child's earliest experiences within the educational system. During an annual school inspection, Maadasamy, a student in class four, is publicly humiliated by his teacher. As the Education Officer requests students to read aloud, Maadasamy's teacher interjects, "Sir... Sir, that boy can't read," immediately following this with the discriminatory explanation, "He is an SC boy, Sir" (JOW 68). This act is a profound denial of Maadasamy's agency and potential, a stark illustration of how some educators "annihilate Dalit students through their words, attitudes, approach and inhuman behaviour" (Kamble). The boy, despite his desire to read, "was afraid" to challenge this prejudiced assertion (JOW 68).

The Education Officer's response, while seemingly a rebuke, reveals a deeper institutional complicity rather than genuine condemnation. He advises the teacher, "Don't ever talk like this outside. You could get into trouble. Try to teach these fellows also some reading. It's not like the old days...times are changing" (JOW 68). This reaction is not a moral indictment of discrimination but a pragmatic warning about external scrutiny and changing social norms. The primary concern appears to be avoiding "trouble" and maintaining a façade of progress, rather than genuinely dismantling the underlying prejudice. This suggests that institutional reforms or external pressures, such as inspections, often lead to superficial changes in rhetoric without addressing the deeply ingrained discriminatory attitudes that continue to operate internally. The system prioritizes its image over genuine equality, thereby becoming complicit in perpetuating oppression by not actively challenging the core discriminatory beliefs. The lasting impact of such early experiences is profoundly felt by Maadasamy, who later reflects on how his "SC" identity was "shoved in my face... not just in one or two places or on one or two occasions" throughout his life (Bama, *Just One Word*).

2. Sarada Teacher as a Beacon of hope and the Concept of Freedom: *The Yellow Butterfly*

"*The Yellow Butterfly*" story introduces Sarada Teacher, a character who embodies the transformative potential of education. Sarada Teacher employs an innovative pedagogical method, utilizing a butterfly experiment to convey abstract philosophical concepts to her young students (Kamble). Through this experiential learning, she teaches them that "binding and freedom are two ways of living" (Kamble). Sarada

Teacher emerges as a beacon of hope and a model for critical pedagogy within Bama's collection. Her use of a concrete, relatable experiment to teach abstract ideas of freedom and constraint demonstrates how education can foster critical thinking and self-awareness, thereby laying the groundwork for students to critically examine and question their own "binding" societal structures. This approach aligns with Bama's belief that committed teachers possess the capacity to "do wonders if they really commit themselves to shape the future generation" (Soosairaj).

3. Raju's Teacher and the Conflict of Truth: *Worldly Wisdom*

"*Worldly Wisdom*" explores the profound moral confusion experienced by the innocent boy Raju. His teacher instills in him the virtue of always speaking the truth (Sharma and Sharma). However, when Raju attempts to apply this teaching in his daily life, "telling the truth brings the wrath of his mother and villagers upon him" (Sharma and Sharma). This stark contradiction creates "Raju's confusion between the teachers' teaching and worldly wisdom," leading to significant "turmoil of the little boy" (Sharma and Sharma). Raju's poignant question, "My teacher is so educated. How can she be wrong?" (Sharma and Sharma), highlights his disillusionment upon realizing that "the teacher lies and steals but asks them not to do so" (Sharma and Sharma). This narrative powerfully illustrates how societal hypocrisy can undermine the moral authority of education. The conflict between the teacher's ideal instruction and the harsh realities of "worldly wisdom" (Kamble) leads to a deep moral disorientation in the child. This suggests that education, when detached from lived experience and societal practice, can inadvertently foster cynicism rather than genuine moral development and the capacity for resistance, as it demonstrates that adherence to ethical principles can be detrimental in a corrupt world (Kamble).

4. Hypocrisy and Internalized Casteism: *Wherever You Look*

In "*Wherever You Look*," Bama meticulously exposes the pervasive nature of caste discrimination, even among those entrusted with education. Kamalavalli Teacher, despite teaching lessons on "equality in the class," fundamentally "believes in the caste discrimination" and actively practices it (Kamble). Her hypocrisy is starkly evident when she "humiliates her colleague Kanniyamma for using her plate in her absence" (Kamble). Furthermore, Kamalavalli excludes Kanniyamma from her daughter's marriage, deeming the presence of a Dalit woman inauspicious (Kamble). This action stands in ironic contrast to Kamalavalli later teaching Subramania Bharathi's poem, which advocates for the absence of caste (Kamble).

Similarly, Lakshmi, who is in charge of the midday meal, demonstrates overt caste discrimination by preventing a Dalit boy named Kuppan from serving her food. This incident is used by Bama to illustrate the concept of "pollution and purity" that underpins the caste system, depicting how caste and occupation are religiously governed and intertwined with social hierarchy (Kamble). Prema Teacher, a newly appointed science teacher, observes the subtle yet pervasive "hierarchal domination" within the school, noting how teachers differentiate themselves "on the basis of caste" (Ghosal Mondal). Sakunthala, another teacher, explicitly advises Prema about these existing power dynamics (Ghosal Mondal).

'A teacher is considered as a reformer of the society, however, we often come across some teachers who not only believe in the discrimination but they become barriers in the development of a healthy society. Bama's short story The Verdict speaks about how the seeds of hatred for the lower caste children are rooted in the school. (Kamble 91). This story powerfully reveals how the educational sphere, through the actions of figures like Kamalavalli and Lakshmi, actively reinforces "brahminical patriarchy" (Kamble) and caste stratification. The hypocrisy of teaching equality while practicing discrimination exposes education as a performative facade that legitimizes existing power structures rather than genuinely challenging them, thereby hindering true social justice and emancipation (Kamble).

5. Durga's Teacher as a Nurturing Pedagogy- *Durga*

In the Short story "*Durga*," Durga's teacher, embodies a nurturing pedagogy that serves as a crucial buffer against trauma and a foundation for resilience. The teacher develops a deep, empathetic bond with Durga, a connection intensified by her own unresolved grief over the death of her daughter, Sadhana, who reminds her of Durga (Bama, *Just One Word*). This personal empathy allows her to connect with Durga on a profound human level. The teacher's commitment extends beyond the classroom; she actively advocates for Durga's continued education, visiting her home and persuading her father to send her back to school when domestic violence disrupts her attendance (Bama, *Just One Word*). She celebrates Durga's small academic achievements and provides essential emotional support, particularly when Durga bravely reveals the traumatic story of how she lost her front teeth due to her father's violence (Bama, *Just One Word*).

Durga's teacher's empathy, stemming from her own experience of loss, enables her to offer a "nurturing pedagogy" (Bama, *Just One Word*) that recognizes the intricate link

between a child's educational well-being and their social and emotional environment. By providing a consistent, safe, and supportive presence, she acts as a critical "buffer" against the trauma of domestic violence, fostering Durga's inherent resilience and her ability to find joy and purpose despite adversity. This narrative powerfully illustrates that for marginalized children, education as emancipation often begins with a teacher who provides unconditional care and actively works to remove external barriers to learning, effectively becoming a lifeline for their self-development and overall well-being.

Conclusion:

Education as a Catalyst for Agency and Self-Respect

Bama's works consistently articulate her profound conviction that education serves as a fundamental means of resistance and self-empowerment for Dalits (Kumar). Her narratives demonstrate how education equips Dalit women, in particular, to defy restrictive societal expectations, pursue financial independence, and break the intergenerational cycles of ignorance and marginalization (Ghosal Mondal). Bama's own teaching philosophy was rooted in empowering her students to "find their strengths, weaknesses, to celebrate their self-identity and self- worth" (Soosairaj), directly aligning with the goal of fostering individual and collective agency. Her stories consistently "celebrate the inner strength of the subaltern woman" (Bama), portraying them not as passive victims but as resilient agents of change.

The portrayal of education in Bama's works reveals a significant paradox: while gaining access to education is presented as a privilege (Bama herself acknowledges feeling "fortunate enough to get education" (Soosairaj)), the very act of pursuing and utilizing this privilege transforms into an act of protest against systemic denial. This pathway leads to self-affirmation and collective resistance. This inherent contradiction highlights the deeply political nature of education within a caste-ridden society. What might be considered an individual fortune in an unequal system becomes a powerful tool for challenging that very inequality, thereby converting personal advancement into a broader movement for collective liberation.

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