

Transformation From Aesthetics to Activism: An Analysis of Select Dalit Women Personal Narratives

Contemporary Voice of Dalit
1–14

© 2021 SAGE Publications
India (Pvt) Ltd



Reprints and permissions:
in.sagepub.com/journals-permissions-india
DOI: 10.1177/2455328X211038986
journals.sagepub.com/home/vod



Surya Simon¹

Abstract

Dalit resistance gained prominence in postcolonial India through Dalit literature, with Dalit life writing emerging as a significant way to address ongoing problems and issues faced by Dalit communities. Dalit personal narratives are not mere reflections into the past but lived experiences with a timely and current sociological base. Dalit narratives have become a platform for social and political activism against various hegemonic discourses that otherwise exclude the experiences of the Dalit population. Moreover, Dalit women suffer many layers of oppression and violence, and there is a necessity to understand the intersectionality of Dalit women's realities. Hence this article analyses select personal narratives of two Dalit women writers: P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* ([1989] 2006) and 'Author's Notes: Gowri' ([1999] 2006); and Bama's *Karukku* ([1992] 2005). The 'Author's Notes: Gowri' is a reflection on *The Grip of Change* and the two narratives are collectively referred to as *The Grip of Change*. This article attempts to understand the extent to which Dalit personal narratives transform from aesthetics to activism. This article analyses the narrative technique and form used in the narratives and explores how the narratives expose embodied issues to foster activism in and through the content.

Keywords

Dalit, caste, class, discrimination, trauma, activism, advocacy, aesthetics, *testimonio*, autobiography, biography, collective

Introduction

The 15th Indian Census conducted in 2011 recorded 201 million people belonging to various Dalit communities, making up of 16.6% of the total Indian population of approximately 1.2 billion. Discrimination against the various Dalits communities in India is 'three-thousand-five-hundred' (D'Souza, 2012, p. 1)

¹University of East Anglia (UEA), Cambridge, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Corresponding author:

Surya Simon, University of East Anglia (UEA), Cambridge CBI 3SB, Norwich, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

E-mail: simonile4@gmail.com

years old and is still ongoing. Dalits are discriminated against based on a hierarchical socio-religious Hindu order which is commonly known as the caste system. The caste identity is given at birth and 'is permanent and hereditary' (D'Souza, 2012, p. 13), which could be why Dalits are discriminated against even untouchability was abolished in 1949. The term 'Dalit' is a political term introduced by the 'anti-caste leader Jotirao Phule' (Moon, 2001, p. 181) and was adopted as a way of shedding 'despicable and contemptuous names' (D'Souza, 2012, p. 22) such as 'untouchables', 'outcastes', '*harijans*'¹ and so on, imposed on them by the caste system. 'Dalit' is derived from the Sanskrit word 'dala' which means 'that which has been ground down' (Nayar, 2006, p. 237). The term 'Dalit' refers to the oppressed Dalit individuals and communities, and also to the condition of being oppressed by a dominant Hindu majority in India. 'Dalits face almost 140 forms of work and descent based discrimination driven by the tent of Untouchability' (D'Souza, 2012, p. 27) according to the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR).

Harriet Jacobs once wrote, 'slavery is terrible for men, but it is far more terrible for women' (*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 1861). Jacobs' words point out (to what can be considered as a fact) that in any oppressive situation, the women suffer more violence. Dalit women suffer violence from all sides and corners including their own family. Violence inflicted on Dalit women highlights the 'incongruence between Dalit women's reality and the universal right of women to freedom from any gender-based violence that results in physical, sexual or psychological harm' (Irudayam et al., 2014, p. 3). The atrocities also point to 'both the Indian state and Indian society for failing to respect, protect and fulfil Dalit women's rights' (Irudayam et al., 2014, p. 3). Also, the National Federation of Dalit Women highlighted how women's oppressions in India were generalized, placing Dalit women's issues alongside upper-caste women's issues. In actuality, Dalit women are oppressed by upper-caste men, upper-caste women and Dalit men. Dalit women writers use their personal narratives to portray and protest against this existing oppressive network of relationships.

Dalit writers term their autobiographical narratives as 'self-stories' or 'self-reportings' (Kumar, 2010, p. 150) because they see their writing as 'a movement' (Limbale, 2007, p. 105) with timely sociological, economic and political base. Readers should not approach the works of Dalit writers as exclusively 'literature' because then 'the common ground between the writer and the reader is disturbed' (Limbale, 2007, p. 105). This is because Dalit personal narratives are not a 'discourse of pity' (Limbale, 2007, p. vii) but a medium to affect social change and cultivate activism. In *Writing Caste/ Writing Gender*, Sharmila Rege asserts that 'the intention [of Dalit testimonies] is not one of literariness but of communicating the situation of a group's oppression, imprisonment and struggle' (Rege, 2014, p. 13). Dalit life writing 'situates personal and collective suffering within a larger discourse of human rights' (Nayar, 2006, p. 237). This article attempts to understand how Dalit feminist authors Sivakami and Bama facilitate activism through their narratives.

The article is divided into two sections followed by a conclusion. The following section explores the idea of 'theory in flesh' focusing on the content of the two selected texts. The latter section focuses on the aesthetics of the texts, i.e. the form, style and narrative technique.

Activism in and Through Content

The Oxford English Dictionary defines activism as the 'policy of active participation or engagement in a particular sphere of activity; *spec.* the use of vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change' (OED Online, 2020). Activism is a 'discursively produced term' (Maxey, 1999, p. 200) where there is no fixed idea associated with it, yet it was 'actively constructed within a range of discourses such as those found in the media, grassroots organizations and academia' (Maxey, 1999, p. 200). Activism 'is

a conscious act of being on the side of those who suffer' (Taib, 2006, n.d.) and also is the 'process of reflecting and acting upon' (Maxey, 1999, p. 201) our everyday contributions to the social world. This in a sense means that everybody is an activist (Maxey, 1999, p. 201) because of a collective engagement in 'creating the world' (Maxey, 1999, p. 201). An activist aims to 'raise social consciousness', possess the ability 'to identify and define' the issues, 'diagnose' the problems and attempt to 'offer solutions' (Taib, 2006, n.d.). When certain situations prove to be unjust or discriminatory, individuals stand up against those situations by resorting to various strategies that get their opinions heard by decision-making bodies such as the government or the state.

Similar patterns of activism can be observed in Sivakami and Bama's narratives, where experiences of the exploited sections of society are problematized and shaped into being by the act of 'speaking for oneself' (Singh, 2015, p. 32). Dalit narratives advocate Dalit issues and activism 'involves *advocacy*' (Taib, 2006, n.d.) where advocacy is 'the act of translating private problems into social issues' (Taib, 2006, n.d.). Dalit writers campaign for their basic human rights and demand action through their narratives because the 'ultimate goal of 'Dalit writing' is political action' (Waldrop, 2011, p. 300). Since activism is 'political' in nature' (Taib, 2006, n.d.) and the political is 'profoundly personal' (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983, p. xxi). Sivakami and Bama's personal narratives attempt to empower Dalits and generate activism by addressing their unique-yet-shared *embodied* experiences.

Theory in Flesh

'Theory in flesh' (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983, p. 19), i.e. the idea of '*writing the body*', is believed to be the 'one liberation tool' (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983, p. xxiii) at the disposal of oppressed women such as Dalit women, Indigenous women and women of colour across the globe. 'In Dalit life writing, the body is the center of various kinds of unpleasant discrimination. Insults, for instance, impinge primarily upon the body' (Nayar, 2012, p. 241), and this is evidenced in Bama's *Karukku* where she asserts that each day 'brings new wounds' (Bama, 2012, p. 105). Since the body is the 'principal site of oppression' (Nayar, 2012, p. 240), Dalit women's personal narratives write about the 'abject' (Nayar, 2012, p. 240) identifications associated with the body. Sivakami and Bama's narratives link 'the individual body's suffering with collective trauma' (Nayar, 2012, p. 241) experienced by the Dalit community as a whole. Nayar points out that 'the survivor or traumatized body is located within a social body, where the suffering is not simply inscribed upon the individual but proceeds from a systemic condition and affects the social body of a community' (Nayar, 2012, p. 241).

Thus, 'theory in flesh' becomes an integral part of Dalit personal narratives allowing Dalit women to express their *embodied* suffering and trauma. 'Theory in flesh' is relevant and necessary particularly since there is a shocking rise of violence against Dalit women due to their 'socio-economic vulnerability and lack of political voice' (Irudayam et al., 2014, p. 2) which is 'combined with the dominant risk factors of being Dalit and female' (Irudayam et al., 2014, p. 2). According to the National Crime Records Bureau of India, the rape count of Dalit women was 1,346 in 2009 and increased to 2,233 in 2014. Dalit women are pushed down to a subordinate position within society due to gender-based inequalities that are exacerbated by the caste system. Moreover, activism or any similar social movements develop 'when a feeling of dissatisfaction spreads, and insufficiently flexible institutions are unable to respond' (Porta & Diani, 2006, p. 13); and consequently individuals are forced to use accessible resources and methods to put across their views. Sivakami and Bama's works reflect the idea of 'theory in flesh' and thereby become strong and effective vehicles for activism, facilitating 'a continual process of reflection,

challenge and empowerment' (Maxey, 1999, p. 201). Thus, three aspects of activism that can be observed in the content of the two texts are: witness and reflection, resistance and challenge, and empowerment.

Witness and Reflection

Sivakami and Bama use 'two particular representational strategies: performance and witnessing' (Nayar, 2012, p. 243). An activist arises when she witnesses and identifies the issues by observing or experiencing the problems first-hand. An important part of Sivakami and Bama's activism is their identity as feminists. Since every woman who considers herself a feminist 'draws her feminism from the culture in which she grew' (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983, p. x1iv), there is an 'explicit reliance on "culture" as a mode of understanding the context and causes of the emergence of collective action' (Williams, 2004, p. 92). The Preface to *The Grip of Change* begins with Sivakami admitting to being 'one of the many exploring the inexhaustible mysteries of caste' (Sivakami, 2006, p. vii). For Sivakami, the act of writing becomes a 'process of understanding and sharing' (Sivakami, 2006, p. vii) her identities as a Dalit and a woman, both 'factors decided by birth' (Sivakami, 2006, p. vii). The Dalit character, Gowri in Sivakami's text is quite striking as she is introduced as a 'frightened' (Sivakami, 2006, p. 4) child who then grows up to be an activist and a feminist. It is through Gowri's perspective that one can see the aversion and unjust nature of the treatment of Dalits by non-Dalits and also by some Dalits.

Additionally, most social movements in the United States took a 'cultural turn' (Williams, 2004, p. 93) and were geared towards 'bringing meaning back in' (Williams, 2004, p. 93) by focusing 'on the ways in which movements have used symbols, language, discourse, identity, and other dimensions of culture to recruit, retain, mobilize, and motivate members' (Williams, 2004, p. 93). Similarly, Bama's *Karukku* also uses a cultural symbol, 'karukku', to put across her activism. 'Karukku' means palmyra leaves that have 'serrated edges on both sides' (Introduction to *Karukku*, Bama, 2012) and are 'like double-edged swords' (Introduction to *Karukku*, Bama, 2012).

In March 2016, the United Nations Human Right Council's special rapporteur, Rita Izsák-Ndiaye's report on the caste-based discrimination in India, highlighted various forms of caste and gender-based discriminations such as 'labour stratification, untouchability practices and forced endogamy' (Borker, 2016). Dr Ambedkar² also asserted that *Shastras*³, Caste and Endogamy are the 'three pillars of patriarchy' (Barnwal, 2014, p. 397). Such oppressions faced by Dalit women expose what the Combahee River Collective⁴ explains as a synthesis of various oppressions or 'interlocking oppressions'. These interlocking oppressions highlights the concept of intersectionality in which several forms of discrimination are connected by the 'trickle down' (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983, p. xviii) effect caused by the existing capitalistic and patriarchal culture across the globe. Sivakami and Bama attempt to expose the interlocking oppressions in their respective society. Three predominant issues identified and reflected upon are: caste, class and land rights.

Caste

Dr Ambedkar pointed out, 'Turn in any direction you like, caste is the monster that crosses your path' and Dalits cannot have political and economic reform 'unless you kill this monster' (Ambedkar, 2014, p. 233). In Sivakami's text, *The Grip of Change*, Gowri questions the caste system, the class inequalities, the patriarchy and the misuse of the legal system. For example, Gowri was 'ashamed' (Sivakami, 2006, p. 95) to collect the scholarship application form for Dalits in her college because it singled them out leaving 'their bodies shrinking in humiliation' (Sivakami, 2006, p. 95). Such provisions have 'enshrined the idea of discrimination' (Banyan, 2013), by allocating reservations along caste lines and hence,

reinstating oppressive caste-based identifications. So, there is a tendency ‘to recognise and to remove caste’ (Rao, 2005, p. 278) and this has led to a paradoxical and ‘agonistic terrain of politics where caste identification is expected to lead to the annihilation of caste’ (Rao, 2005, p. 278). In such a scenario, ‘the gap between substantive equality and embodied difference generates a *corporeal politics* of caste’ (Rao, 2005, p. 278). Furthermore, Kathamuthu, Gowri’s father affirms the permanent nature of the caste system by stating that there is no place ‘where caste doesn’t exist’ (Sivakami, 2006, p. 22) and that ‘caste will be around for generations yet to come’ (Sivakami, 2006, p. 22). Thus, affirmation and practice of the caste system comes from both sides: non-Dalits and Dalits.

Bama’s *Karukku* portrays a society divided into various caste groups where ‘the upper-caste communities and the lower-caste communities were separated’ (Bama, 2012, p. 13) into ‘different parts of the village’ (p. 13). The narrator never heard anyone ‘speak openly of untouchability’ (p. 13) but she had ‘already seen, felt, experienced, and been humiliated by what it is’ (p. 13). For instance, the Naicker community was upper caste, and ‘therefore must not touch Parayas’ (p. 15) and if they touched them, the upper caste believed that they would be ‘polluted’ (p. 15). Bama asserts that one of the reasons for the continuation and practice of this despotic caste system is that the caste hierarchies have been passed down ‘from generation to generation’ (p. 17) and so Dalits ‘have reached the stage where they themselves, voluntarily, hold themselves apart’ (p. 28). Once again, there is a tendency to *naturalize* the existence of the caste system by non-Dalit and Dalit communities. Furthermore, Bama sheds light into the caste-based discrimination prevalent in the Christian Catholic society in Tamil Nadu, India. The nuns and the priests, ‘certainly discriminate according to caste’ (p. 27) and Dalit nuns and priests are ‘pushed aside and marginalised’ (p. 80).

Thus, both writers identify and reflect upon casteism which is an imposed ‘wretched lifestyle’ preventing the Dalits from progressing ‘like everyone else’ (Bama, 2012, p. 26).

Class

The Russian Marxist Nikolai Bukharin explained that a class ‘is a category of persons united by a common role in the production process, whereas a social caste is a group of persons united by their common position in the juristic or legal order of society’ (Teltumbde, 2016, p. 35). For example, Bukharin states that landlords can be considered as a class. Dr Ambedkar also asserts that ‘the castes were enclosed classes’ (Teltumbde, 2016, p. 36), the difference being ‘class potentially brings people together’ (Teltumbde, 2016, p. 36) while ‘caste tends to divide them by seeking hierarchy’ (Teltumbde, 2016, p. 36). Class hierarchies were imposed through the exploitation of Dalits for labour by making them do various kinds of jobs and denying them even a minimum wage. Violent atrocities inflicted on Dalit women are related to their ‘poverty levels or economic status, in terms of their landlessness combined with their dependence on dominant castes for their livelihood; that is, with regard to work, wages and loans’ (Irudayam et al., 2014, p. 12). Exploitation of the Dalits’ labour is associated with the exploitation and disregard of their bodies. ‘It was only by toiling’ (Bama, 2012, p. 52) and ‘without taking any account of their bodies as human flesh and blood’ (Bama, 2012, p. 52) that Dalits ‘could even survive’ (Bama, 2012, p. 52).

In Sivakami’s work, ‘issues of class and caste were so deeply intermingled’ (Sivakami, 2006, p. 112) and most of the problems in work spaces ‘often transformed into caste-related problems’ when ‘office bearers were chosen on the basis of caste’ (Sivakami, 2006, p. 112). This shows how caste is the determining factor while allocating work, which in turn affect wages.

In *Karukku*, Bama portrays how Dalits were exploited because they were at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. The lower-caste people were looked down upon and were not even considered ‘as human beings’ (Bama, 2012, p. 25). Bama asserts that Dalits never ‘received a payment that was appropriate

to their labour' (p. 54). What is worse is that even if men and women did the 'same work, men received one wage, women another. They always paid men more' (pp. 54–55). Bama 'could never understand why' (p. 55) this discrimination between Dalit men and Dalit women when upper castes see them collectively as lower castes and untouchables.

While caste and class are conceptually different, 'they have enough commonality to build a single movement to fight oppression' (Teltumbde, 2016, p. 34). Sivakami and Bama point out that the 'struggle against caste could be organically unified with the class struggle' (Teltumbde, 2016, p. 34) and Dalits' activism could 'become an integral part of the proletarian class struggle' (Teltumbde, 2016, p. 38).

Land Rights

Out of the 147 million Dalits currently in India, '36 per cent of them are workers, of which 48 per cent are agricultural labourers' (Shah, 2001, p. 196). Even if some of them own land, 'a vast majority (around 70 per cent) are small and marginal farmers' (Shah, 2001, p. 196) who simultaneously labour on their land. The various laws brought to effect in postcolonial India not only failed to provide sizable and productive land to most Dalits but also paved the way for dispossession of land. Bama's *Karukku* portrays the landlessness of the Dalits where 'they own neither property nor land nor even a decent house to live in' (Bama, 2012, p. 77). Bama states that 'those who labour are the poorest of the poor Dalits. But those who reap the rewards are the wealthy, the upper castes' (Bama, 2012, p. 79). The society has separated those 'unfit to touch, pushed them to one side and marginalised them' (Bama, 2012, p. 79). Like Bama, most Dalit activists believe that rights to land will empower them to a large extent. This is because Dalits see land as 'identity, dignity and livelihood and through gaining land Dalits can reclaim their human dignity as a human being' (NFDLRM, 2017).

In her article, 'The State is a Man: Theresa Spence, Loretta Saunders and the Gender of Settler Sovereignty' (2016), Audra Simpson applies the reapeability of land to the rapeability of Indian women in Canada. Indigenous women's bodies are deemed as 'killable, rapeable, expendable' (Simpson, 2016, p. 6) and have been 'historically' (Simpson, 2016, p. 6) rendered as 'property' (Harris, 1993) because of what they represent—land, that can be owned and used by the casteist and patriarchal society. The same concepts can be applied to 'Indian' women, i.e. Dalit women in India. For example, in Sivakami's narrative, one of the central characters, Thangam who is a widowed Dalit woman is not given access to her late husband's paternal land because she has no children. Even though legally, Thangam has the right to her husband's land, her brother's-in-law 'refused to hand over' (Sivakami, 2006, p. 6) her rightful 'share of land' (Sivakami, 2006, p. 6). Thangam's fertility is equated to her right to land and since 'she didn't have any children' (Sivakami, 2006, p. 6), she is considered infertile and hence has no right to the fertile land.

Moreover, while Thangam is not *reap-able*, she is still *rape-able* and consequently, Thangam is raped by her upper-caste landlord who is also her employer. Dalit women are employed by landlords since they do not have land of their own which makes them an easy prey. Thangam 'remained silent' (Sivakami, 2006, p. 7) when she was 'raped' (p. 7) by the upper-caste man, Paranjothi Udayar, because he was her 'paymaster' (p. 7) and she was a 'childless widow' (p. 7). Even Thangam's dead husband's brothers 'tried to force' (p. 7) themselves on her but she did not give in. Thangam cries out that she was denied her 'husband's land' (p. 7) but they wanted her 'to be a whore for them' (p. 7). So, one of the reasons why Thangam did not resist the rape was because Udayar 'measures' (p. 7) her 'rice' (p. 7) and she feels indebted to him, so much as to let herself be exploited.

Thus, Sivakami portrays the relationship between land and a Dalit woman's body; and how Dalit women are silenced through violence if they even attempt to 'assert their rights to own or utilise

resources' (Irudayam et al., 2014, p. 12). Such unjust acts violate the human rights laws that state, 'everyone (has) the right to own property alone' and 'no one shall be arbitrarily deprived' (*Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Article 17, p. 36) of their property. Hence, the constant denial of rights to land and the violence against Dalit women collectively signify that Dalit women have no right to land and have no right to their bodies.

Therefore, Sivakami and Bama's narratives bore witness to the embodied issues with regards to caste, class and land rights, through which they have exposed and advocated the intersectionality of Dalit women's identities and experiences.

Resistance and Challenge

Dalit writing can be considered 'as a political form of writing' (Navya, 2014, p. 20) that 'records the cultural and social lives of Dalits and ideologically the writing offers a call for resistance' (Navya, 2014, p. 20). Sivakami and Bama's works can be considered as *passive resistance* which 'commonly refers to actions of nonviolent protest or resistance to authority' (Vogele, 2008, p. 166). Passive resistance was widely used by groups 'who lack formal authority or position and has sometimes been called the "weapon of the weak"' (Vogele, 2008, p. 166). However, Sivakami and Bama's works cannot be described as weapons of the weak, but rather a powerful call for collective action. In the book *Social Movements*, Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani state that 'individual actors involved in collective action no longer merely pursue specific goals, but come to regard themselves as elements of much larger and encompassing processes of change or resistance to change' (Porta & Diani, 2006, p. 22). Sivakami and Bama resist through various nonviolent acts of rebellion in their writings such as protest, disapproval, expression of anger, and voicing out opinions because even 'nonviolent actions often also exerted economic and political leverage' (Vogele, 2008, p. 167).

In *The Grip of Change*, Sivakami engages in a 'search for solutions' (Sivakami, 2006, p. 195) and finds one—education. For example, Gowri was particular about studying further but her father declared that their 'donkey' (Gowri) 'will go to college if she passes her exams' (p. 94), otherwise she will be married off. So, Gowri became more 'engrossed' (p. 93) in her books because she 'hated the idea' (p. 93) of marriage and the 'fear' (p. 93) of the same remained. However, Gowri passed her exams, moved away from home and adapted into college. Gowri felt that 'she had crossed over human-made boundaries—her father, her caste, her village—and merged with the ocean of people' (p. 95). But, when Gowri went back to her home for the holidays, 'caste revealed its murderous teeth like an invincible monster' (p. 95). Nevertheless, education empowered Gowri to resist and challenge the dominant system.

In *Karukku*, Bama challenges the norms and rules of the society because 'there cannot be different rules for different castes, only the same rules for everyone' (Bama, 2012, p. 22). This was in response to the government's scheme to provide 'special tuition' (p. 22) for Dalit students. Bama noticed the contempt of the other students and consequently, she was 'filled with sudden rage' (p. 22). She denied the special tuition provision and 'challenged' (p. 22) the authorities because she no longer wanted to 'dance to someone else's tune, even for a serving of rice' (p. 80). Bama also emphasizes that Dalits have learnt that the upper-caste Christians and 'others have never respected them as human beings, but bent the religion to their benefit, to maintain their own falsehoods' (p. 109). Therefore, the passive resistance disseminated in Sivakami and Bama's works challenge the dominant systems and simultaneously advocate for change—social, political and economic.

Empowerment

Passive resistance ‘provides a source of power to those disenfranchised from traditional politics’ and ‘when used as part of broader strategy, it has contributed to powerful movements for social change’ (Vogele, 2008, p. 167). The broader strategy in the two texts is the call for collective action. The authors challenge the dominant system and call for fellow Dalits to unite against the discrimination and atrocities. This call for collective action is a way to empower Dalits, particularly Dalit women to express themselves and voice their experiences. In the Preface to *Karukku*, Bama calls out to ‘all Dalits who have been deprived of their basic rights’ (p. 28) and incites them to ‘unite, think about their rights, and battle for them’ (p. 28). There is an emphasis on demanding basic rights, not just as an Indian citizen but also as a human being. Dalits addressed the UN Minority Forum (United Nations, 2013, n.d.), asking for discrimination to be declared as a crime since it is a violation of the international human rights law. Sivakami and Bama address, educate and demand basic human rights for Dalits in and through their narratives because ‘all are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination’ (*Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Article 7, p. 16). Bama calls her community and her people to take action, which is clearly a message fostering activism:

We must not accept the injustice of our enslavement by telling ourselves it is our fate.... It is we who have to place them where they belong and bring about a changed and just society where all are equal. (Bama, 2012, p. 28)

Here, Bama calls upon her people to fight enslavement as they have been treated as slaves for generations and one of the purposes of Dalit literature is ‘to inform the Dalit society of its slavery’ (Limbale, 2007, p. 19) or continuing colonialism in a postcolonial society. This is important because once again, fighting against slavery is fighting for their basic human rights because legally, ‘no one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms’ (*Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Article 4, p. 10).

Furthermore, Sivakami exposes the ‘cruel face of Dalit patriarchy through feminist eyes’ (Sivakami, 2006, p. 195) and speaks up for and speaks as the voice of the ‘most vulnerable members of the Dalit community-its women’ (p. 194). In ‘Gowri: Author’s notes’, Kathamuthu and Gowri prepare to ‘fight the same enemies’ (Sivakami, 2006, p. 197). Even though Gowri and her father’s ‘separate ways have distinctive drawbacks’ (p. 197), they both ‘envision an end to the atrocities against Dalits’ (p. 197). This is because caste remains ‘an indomitable force, challenging all those who try to break it down’ (p. 151). Both, Gowri and her father have been in anguish because of the caste-based discrimination and ‘revolt is the stage that follows anguish and rejection’ (Limbale, 2007, p. 31). So, they both have come together to promote activism for their community. Moreover, Sivakami states that the leadership during the time at which *The Grip of Change* was written, particularly the ‘leaders of Ambedkar Associations in villages’ (Sivakami, 2006, p. 150) lacked ‘spirit’ and were ‘inadequate’ (p. 151). Thus, Sivakami believed that ‘the combined effort of all oppressed castes’ was significant and ‘necessary’ (Sivakami, 2006, p. 151).

Thus, Sivakami and Bama personal narratives have enabled an empowering of ‘bodies’ (theirs and their community’s) through theory in flesh. By baring their corporeal personal experiences, Sivakami and Bama have enabled a space to advocate activism (from grassroots).

Activism in and Through Form

Dalit literature is ‘distinct’ (Limbale, 2007, p. ix) because ‘Dalit reality is a liminal reality in time and space’ (Limbale, 2007, p. ix) where the ‘content and form of the literature’ (Limbale, 2007, ix) is about

this liminality with 'its own particular features' (Limbale, 2007, p. ix). Dalit writers have rejected 'standard language' because they believe that standard language or traditional methods of using language have 'class' (Limbale, 2007, p. 33) and Dalit writers have 'rejected the class of this standard language' (Limbale, 2007, p. 33). Hence, Dalit reality is portrayed through 'uncouth-impolite language of the Dalits' (Limbale, 2007, p. 33) which 'does not recognise cultivated gestures and grammar' (Limbale, 2007, p. 33). Through the language, narrative technique, tone and style of writing, Dalit personal narratives have moved away from traditional genres of writing yet incorporating certain features of various genres such as autobiography, biography, memoir, testimonies and novels. There is an unconventional and radical usage of narrative techniques involving hybridization of the novel form, self-reflection and self-criticism.

For instance, autobiography is a life story about an individual by the individual itself. Raj Kumar in his *Dalit Personal Narratives* (2010) breaks down the word 'autobiography' into 'Auto' meaning self, 'bio' meaning life and 'graph' meaning writing (Kumar, 2010, p. 2), and autobiography could be said to presuppose 'an autonomous individual subject' (Nayar, 2006, p. 85). However, Bama's *Karukku* goes beyond the autobiographical genre and demands to be looked at as more than an individual's life writing. This is because the narrative mode of autobiography could be insufficient to capture the trauma and intersectional experiences of an entire community. Bama 'understands that her own experience is part of a larger movement among Dalits' (Introduction to *Karukku*, Bama, 2012, p. xvii) and she states that *Karukku* is not her 'story alone' (Bama, 2001) but is a 'depiction of a collective trauma' (Bama, 2001) of her community that cannot be temporally assessed.

Although trauma theoreticians believe that there can be no recreation of the trauma through any form of medium, there is a constant attempt made by the victims to narrate their traumatic experiences through autobiographies. Yet, it will not be an exact replica of the lived experience but a representation. Sometimes, the autobiographical genre proves inadequate for this task and hence, the writers take up creative, bold and unconventional ways to express. This leaves *testimonio* to be the 'closest literary relation' (Nayar, 2006, p. 83), especially since Dalit writings are narratives of 'trauma, pain, resistance, protest and social change' (Nayar, 2006, p. 83). For *testimonio*, trauma and recreation of the traumatic event through writing is an important aspect and 'Dalit life-writing is about the re-construction of the self after the traumatic event' (Nayar, 2006, p. 84). *Testimonio* is the 'voice of one who witnesses for the sake of another, who remains voiceless' (Nayar, 2006, p. 84) and it is a genre 'where the narrator stands in for the whole social group' (Nayar, 2006, p. 85). *Testimonio* narratives are at 'once personal and public, singular and collective, autobiographical and biographical' (Nayar, 2012, p. 237).

Thus, *testimonio* is a 'collective document' (Nayar, 2006, p. 84) and Bama's *Karukku* 'moves from individual to community through a narration of trauma' (Nayar, 2006, p. 84). In *Karukku*, there is a constant use of the first-person collective noun 'we' and 'our'. For example, the opening line of *Karukku* is 'our village is very beautiful' (Bama, 2012, p. 1). She even addressed the people of her community as 'my' people or collectively addresses them as 'we'. This collective identity is significant for an activist who stands up against injustice and for the rights of the people. Hence, Dalit life writing could be understood as a 'personal atrocity memoir that calls attention to oppressive conditions within a community. It folds the atrocity narrative into testimonies and evidentiary statements that are explicitly political' (Nayar, 2012, p. 238).

In *The Grip of Change*, Sivakami uses the narrative technique of a novel with plot, characters, dialogues and setting. Such autobiographical novels become defining styles of Dalit narratives. Sivakami's first book is a novel while the following book is titled *Gowri: The Author's Notes*, where Sivakami reflects on the novel and the novelist through the character of Gowri (from the novel). Sivakami's work follows an auto fictional⁵ narrative pattern because the issue of authenticity, editions

and inability to represent exact details of every experience is the same for any kind of personal narrative. Hermione Lee in her book *Biography* talks about how ‘any biographical narrative is an artificial construct’ (Lee, 2009, p. 122) because the process of selection and edition is unavoidable. This is the same situation with Dalit narratives especially since every single experience cannot be represented by the author. Helen Cixous states in her book, *Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing* that ‘all biographies like all autobiographies like all narratives tell one story in place of another’ (Cixous, 1997, p. 177). This could be the reason why Sivakami reflects on her own work in and through the second book. Gowri questions the novelist’s choice and usage of the novel form and attempts to understand why the novelist presents certain incidents in a specific way. Thus, through Gowri, Sivakami reflects and critiques her own work revealing the tendency of any writer to select, filter and depict subjective understandings of events. Through the character of Gowri, the novelist analyses the society, characters and the incidents in relation to the representation of the same society, characters and incidents in the novel. Gowri points out that ‘the novelist had grown weary of the word games, but she did believe what had been said. She began checking her narrative and her choice of words’ (Sivakami, 2005, p. 152).

Book Two, ‘*Gowri: The Author’s Notes*’, begins with the narrator (Gowri) observing the ‘town mentioned in the novel’ (Sivakami, 2006, p. 131), where the narrator reflects on her memory which ‘had faded’ (p. 131) and that ‘she only remembered in snatches’ (p. 131). The narrator questions the involvement of the novelist’s ‘subconscious mind’ (p. 151). The narrator explains that the ‘expressions’ (p. 151) of the novelist’s ‘conscious, educated, logical mind’ were evident in the novel but questions if the novelist was aware of her subconscious mind and ‘its contrary thoughts’ (p. 151). The narrator states that the novelist’s ‘subconscious is evident in the language’ (p. 151) she employs to write with, inclusive of ‘choice of words’ (p. 151) and ‘construction of... phrases’ (p. 151). She also criticizes the novelist’s hypocrisy of addressing ‘the rich with respect and the poor with disrespect’ (p. 152), which was exposed by the subconscious mind through ‘symbol, metaphors and words’ (p. 152). The narrator accuses the novelist of following the ‘rules of the game’ (pp. 151–152) laid out by the rich and the upper castes. The narrator also criticizes the novelist’s simple division of the society into ‘the upper castes and the lower castes’ (p. 156) when the ‘village caste structure was complex—with various internal hierarchies and a myriad restrictions in the interaction between castes’ (p. 156).

The narrator then goes on to state that ‘what was written in the novel was true’ (p. 132) even though she later ‘dismissed the novel and the writing’ (p. 132). Once again, she asserts that ‘nothing in the novel was untrue’ (p. 150) but also affirms that ‘the novel was false’ (p. 150) because ‘she felt’ (p. 150) so. The narrator states that the ‘characters were mixed up with events not related to them’ (p. 150) and that the novelist wanted to ‘share her experiences’ (p. 150) while protecting ‘her own self and identity’ (p. 150). By doing so, the ‘novelist had been saved’ (p. 150) and not the novel itself. Also, the narrator poses an important question to which Sivakami attempts to find an answer through the *Author’s Notes*, ‘Could a writer avoid subjective conclusions?’ (p. 148).

Additionally, the narrator states that ‘writing about one’s own experience did not constitute literature’ (p. 158) and that ‘falsehood was appreciated not only in poetry but also in fiction’ (p. 158). The narrator gives an example by pointing out that the author of the novel ‘had constructed an effigy of her father and burned him in her novel’ (p. 148) because it was the ‘author’s perspective rather than the whole truth’ (p. 148). The narrator understands that the novelist wanted to ‘prove that there was no such thing as the full and complete truth’ (p. 148). The narrator points out that the ‘novelist had to bend and twist her stories to prescribed endings’ (p. 160). Gowri further reflects upon the act of writing and what inspired Sivakami to write. The narrator puts forth these questions to the novelist:

What is the force that compels the pen forward? Why and how are experiences transmuted in writing? How was the writer to venture in spirit to those places inaccessible to flesh and blood? (Sivakami, 2006, p. 160)

Such reflections on the nature of writing and the process of writing are similar to the reflections seen in Roland Barthes' autobiography, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975). Barthes studies himself and his childhood pictures from a spatial and temporal distance. Barthes' attempt to self-study is close to the idea behind 'Gowri: *The Author's Notes*' where Sivakami analyses her novel as a third person after a decade. This self-reflection is significant because 'in a social movement, 'the activists, and the meanings associated with the movement are the units of analysis, the things to be explored' (Williams, 2004, p. 94). Hence, an analysis of the text itself along with the author and the author's intentions is necessary for self-betterment and self-determination. Sivakami's text cannot be pinned down to one genre as it is a novel, yet it could also be seen as an autobiography with self-reflection and self-criticism, and it could also be a community's biography and/or *testimonio*.

Thus, Sivakami and Bama's texts attempt to break away from conventions and water-tight compartments of genres and traditional writing styles to express their oppressed reality. Sivakami and Bama's unique narratives show a bridge between individual resistance and collective action which is a significant part of activism. This merging of the individual and the collective can be observed in the narrative technique used in Dalit writings. Dalit life writing is a 'collective biography' (Nayar, 2012, p. 248) because the 'experience of untouchability' (Limbale, 2007, p. 35) for the untouchables 'are identical' (Limbale, 2007, p. 35) if not the same. The names of the villages and people may differ, but the 'nature of tyranny against Dalits' (Limbale, 2007, p. 35) could be similar yet different in terms of intersectionality of experiences; and because of these 'commonalities in Dalit writers' thoughts, experiences and emotions, Dalit literature appears to be univocal' (Limbale, 2007, p. 35). So, the act of writing itself is empowering and when Dalit personal narratives act as a biography for the entire community, the written word empowers the Dalit community, individually and collectively.

Therefore, through their intersectional subjective experiences and unconventional use of narrative techniques, Sivakami and Bama attempt to transform the literary space into a platform for Dalit activism.

Conclusion

'A culture of silence' (Irudayam et al., 2014, p. 16) pervades Dalit women's life. Fear of the perpetrators (including the police), fear of dishonour, lack of support from family and community, lack of medical treatments for injuries from violence inflicted on them, ignorance of rights and appropriate laws and lack of money to pursue a case in court contribute to this culture of silence. Sivakami and Bama attempt to break away from this culture of silence by exposing the issues they have witnessed, asking questions, resisting and challenging the unjust discourses and finding solutions through empowerment, collective action and activism. There is an activist in everybody, and this personality takes on a dominant form when 'traditional norms no longer succeed in providing a satisfactory structure for behaviour' (Porta & Diani, 2006, p. 13). Consequently, 'the individual is forced to challenge the social order through various forms of nonconformity' (Porta & Diani, 2006, p. 13). Since 'the genteel expectations of the existing elite literary standards cannot do justice to the quality of the life they know and render in writing' (Kumar, 2010, p. 148), Dalit narratives attempt to 'evolve a new aesthetics' (Kumar, 2010, p. 148) to promote activism.

Through this activism, 'moral and philosophical worldviews and deeply felt convictions are then paralleled by specific attempts by individuals to stop threatening developments, redress instances of injustice, promote alternative options to the managing of social life and economic activity' (Porta & Diani, 2006, p. 3). In such a scenario, 'action is not rational, but reasonable' (Porta & Diani, 2006, p. 11). For instance, the call to act against injustice imposed on the Dalits is reasonable because as Bama states,

‘there are other Dalit hearts like mine, with a passionate desire to create a new society made up of justice, equality and love’ (Preface to *Karukku*, Bama, 2012). Bama further asserts that ‘they, who have been the oppressed, are now themselves like the double-edged karukku, challenging their oppressors’ (Preface to *Karukku*, Bama, 2012). Additionally, Meena Kandasamy emphasizes that embodied ‘literature has reclaimed that lifeline and that dream’ (cited in Sivakami, 2006, p. 197) to fight as a community; thus, ‘one shall live in two’ (cited in Sivakami, 2006, p. 197), i.e. one dream or one struggle that pervades through several bodies. Dalit literature is ‘a mirror image of the lives, sorrow and poverty of Dalit’ (Limbale, 2007, p. 96), and it is written by ‘Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness’ (Limbale, 2007, p. 19). ‘As a negated, invisible figure, the Dalits’ pain is literally unrepresentable; it is the secret that if revealed must also find expression through another kind of language’ (Bhagavan & Feldhaus, 2009, p. 24). Sivakami and Bama attempt to create a ‘counter-culture and a separate identity for Dalits in the society’ (Kumar, 2010, p. 148). Therefore, through embodied content and radical form, Sivakami’s *The Grip of Change* and Bama’s *Karukku* were able to transform from aesthetics (content and form) to activism to a *large extent*.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. ‘Harijans’ is a term used to refer to untouchables and was popularized by Mahatma Gandhi. The term means ‘children of god’ and in this case the god, Hari from the Hindu mythology.
2. Dr B. R. Ambedkar (popularly known as Babasaheb Ambedkar) was a politician, jurist, and one of the chief architects involved in drafting the Constitution of India. Ambedkar was independent India’s first Law Minister and he was posthumously awarded the Bharat Ratna in 1990, India’s highest civilian honour. Ambedkar fought relentlessly for the eradication of untouchability and caste inequalities. His works, strategies and theories are the foundation and guide to Dalit activism, even in the present times.
3. *Shashtra* is a Sanskrit word that means rules or commands.
4. The Combahee River Collective was a Black feminist lesbian organization in Boston, Massachusetts, USA, from 1974 to 1980. The Collective highlighted that feminism was predominantly ‘white’ and did not express the particular oppressions such as racism and heterosexism, and needs of women of colour.
5. The term ‘autofiction’ was officially coined by Serge Doubrovsky in 1977 to describe his novel *Fils* (Threads/Son). Doubrovsky discussed about a genre that merges fiction and autobiography in which the author, protagonist, and narrator share a single identity.

References

- Ambedkar, B. R. (2014). *Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition*. (S. Anand, Ed & Annotated)(PP. 181–333). Verso.
- Bama. (2001, 25 April). Recognition for the language of my people is the biggest award I can win. *Outlook*. <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/recognition-for-the-language-of-my-people-is-the-biggest-award-i-can-win/211431>
- Bama. (2012). *Karukku*. (M. Krishnan, Ed., & L. Holmstrom, Trans.). Oxford University Press.
- Banyan. (2013, 29 June). Affirmative actions: Indian reservations. *The Economist*. <https://www.economist.com/banyan/2013/06/29/indian-reservations>

- Barnwal, B. K. (2014). Dr B. R. Ambedkar's quest for gender equality its relevance in contemporary feminist discourse. *Online International Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, 4(II), 393–400.
- Bhagavan, M. B., & Feldhaus A. (2009). *Claiming Power from Below: Dalits and the Subaltern Question in India*. Oxford India Paperbacks.
- Borker, S. (2016, 12 April). How to be free of caste. *The Hindu*. <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/how-to-be-free-of-caste-in-india/article8467518.ece>
- Cixous, H. (1997). *Rootprints: Memory and life writing*. Routledge.
- D'Souza, O. (2012). *Truth about Dalits: Caste system and untouchability*. London Institute of South Asia.
- Guru, G. (1995). Dalit women talk differently. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30(41/42), 2548–2550.
- Harris, C. I. (1993). Whiteness as property. *Harvard Law Review*, 106(8), 1707–1791.
- Irudayam, J. P., Mangubhai, A., & Lee, J. G. (2014). *Dalit women speak out: Violence against Dalit women in India*. Zubaan.
- Kumar, R. (2010). *Dalit personal narratives: Reading caste, nation and identity*. Orient Black Swan.
- Lee, H. (2009). *Biography: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Limbale, S. (2007). *Towards an aesthetic of Dalit literature: History, controversies and considerations*. (A. Mukherjee, Trans.). Orient Longman.
- Maxey, I. (1999). Beyond boundaries? Activism, academia, reflexivity and research. *Area*, 3(1.3), 199–208.
- Moon, V. (2001). *Growing up Untouchable in India: A Dalit Autobiography* (Gail Omvedt, Trans). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Moraga, C., & Anzaldúa, G. (1983). *This bridge called my back: Writings by radical women of color*. Kitchen Table Press.
- National Commission for Women. (1996). *Women of weaker sections: Socio-economic development of scheduled caste women*.
- National Federation of Dalit Land Rights Movements (NFDLRM). (2017). Property rights: Identity, dignity and opportunity for all. Ashoka Changemakers. <http://www.changemakers.com/property-rights/entries/national-federation-dalit-land-rights-movementsnfdlrm>
- Navya, V. K. (2014). Caste, gender and resistance: A critical study of Bama's *Sangathi*. *SOCRATES*, 2(1), 20–27.
- Nayar, P. K. (2006). Bama's Karukku: Dalit autobiography as testimonio. *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 41(2), 83–100.
- Nayar, P. K. (2012). The poetics of postcolonial atrocity: Dalit life writing. *Testimonio, and Human Rights*, 42(3–4), 237–264.
- OED Online. (2020, September). *Activism*. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/1957?redirectedFrom=activism>
- Porta, D. D., & Diani, M. (2006). *Social movements: An introduction*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Rao, A. (2005). *Gender and caste*. Zed.
- Rege, S. (2014). *Writing caste/writing gender*. Zubaan Books.
- Shah, G. (2001). *Dalit identity and politics: Cultural subordination and the Dalit challenge* (Vol. 2). SAGE Publication.
- Simpson, A. (2016). The state is a man: Theresa Spence, Loretta Saunders and the gender of settler sovereignty. *Theory & Event*, 19(4).
- Singh, T. (2015). Identity politics: Dalit literary and Dalit panther movement. *New Man Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, 2(6), 31–36.
- Sivakami, P. (2006). Preface. *The Grip of Change*. (P. Sivakami, Trans) (pp. vii–viii). Orient BlackSwan.
- Sivakami, P. (2006). *The grip of change*. (P. Sivakami, Trans.). Orient BlackSwan.
- Taib, M. I. M. (2006). (de)Meaning of social activism. *Karyawan Magazine*, 7(1).
- Teltumbde, A. (2016). Dichotomisation of caste and class. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 51(47), 34–38.
- United Nations. (2013, 29 November). *Dalit speaks at UN minority forum*. International Dalit Solidarity Network. <https://idsn.org/dalit-speaks-at-un-minority-event/>
- Vogele, W. B. (2008). Passive resistance. In W. A. Darity Jr. (Ed.), *International encyclopedia of the social sciences* (2nd ed., pp. 166–168). Macmillan Reference USA.

- Waldrop, A. (2004). Dalit politics in India and new meaning of caste. *Forum for Development Studies*, 2, 275–303.
- Williams, R. H. (2004). The cultural contexts of collective action. In D. Snow, S. Soule, & H. Kriesi (Eds.), *The Blackwell companion to social movements* (pp. 91–115). Blackwell Publishing.