



Understanding Others: A Study of Dalit Women Writers in Bakhtinian Light

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Abstract: *Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin was a Russian philosopher, literary critic, semiotician and scholar who worked on literary theory, ethics, and the philosophy of language. His theory of dialogism discusses every level of expression from live conversational dialogue to complex cultural expression in other genres and art works is an ongoing chain or network of statements and responses, repetitions and quotations, in which new statements presuppose earlier statements and anticipate future responses. The dialogic work carries on a continual dialogue with other works of literature and other authors. It does not merely answer, correct, silence, or extend a previous work, but informs and is continually informed by the previous work. Dialogic literature is in communication with multiple works. This is not merely a matter of influence, for the dialogue extends in both directions, and the previous work of literature is as altered by the dialogue as the present one is. Taking this in account I would like to read and strike a dialogue between three texts on and by Dalit women: Sangati and Karuku by Bama and The Grip of Change by P. Sivakami and Savitri by Daxa Damodara.*

Key words: *Dialogism, Semiotician, Dalit women Writings, Future Responses.*

The Study of Verbal art can and must overcome the divorce between an abstract “formal” approach and an equally abstract “ideological” approach. Form and content in discourse are one, once we understand that verbal discourse is a social phenomenon. (*Bakhtin.259*)

Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (November 17, 1895 – March 7, 1975) was a Russian philosopher, literary critic, semiotician and scholar who worked on literary theory, ethics, and the philosophy of language. His writings, on a variety of subjects, inspired scholars working in a number of different traditions (Marxism, semiotics, structuralism, religious criticism) and in disciplines as diverse as literary criticism, history, philosophy, sociology, anthropology and psychology. As a literary theorist, Bakhtin is associated with the Russian Formalists. His primary works include *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, an unfinished portion of a philosophical essay; *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Art*, to which Bakhtin later added a chapter on the concept of carnival and published with the title *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*; *Rabelais and His World*, which explores the openness of the Rabelaisian novel; *The Dialogic Imagination*, whereby the four essays that comprise the work introduce the concepts of dialogism, heteroglossia, and chronotope; and *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, a collection of essays in which Bakhtin concerns himself with method and culture. As a result of the breadth of topics with which he dealt, Bakhtin has influenced such Western schools of theory as Neo-Marxism, Structuralism, and Semiotics. However, his influence on such groups has, somewhat paradoxically, resulted in narrowing the scope of Bakhtin's work. According to Clark and Holquist, rarely do those who incorporate Bakhtin's ideas into theories of their own appreciate his work in its entirety. In the same manner here we would apply his theories such as Dialogism, heteroglossia, chronotope and carnival. Let us first try to understand them in brief and then we will apply them in Dalit women writers' text like Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangathi*, P.Sivakami's *Grip of Change*, Sumitra Bhave's *Pan of Fire* and Daxa Damodara's *Savitri*.

In essence, all thought became, for Bakhtin, a matter of ‘Dialogue’ and ‘Difference’, ‘both/and’ rather ‘either/or’, has been the appeal of the dialogic principle for hundreds of scholars working within Bakhtin. In Bakhtin's view, an expression in a living context of exchange- termed a “word” or “utterance”- is the main unit of meaning and it's formed through speakers' relation to Otherness – other people, others' words and expressions, and the lived cultural world in time and place. A word is therefore always embedded in a history of expressions by others in a chain of on-going cultural and political moments. Here for example if we take a Dalit word it is constantly in the process of meaning making by its interactions with all the hegemonic structures. The more they assert their self, their identity is formed.

The word directed towards its object enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group: and all this may leave a trace in all its semantic layers may complicate its expression and influence its entire stylistic profile (*Bakhtin.276*)

Thus every word, every expression, every thought well expressed will enter into a dialogue with other words, value its meaning and find new and different meaning for the same and this complicates the discourse.



The new culture and creative consciousness lives in an actively polyglot world. The world becomes polyglot, once and for all and irreversibly. The period of national languages, coexisting but closed and deaf to each other, comes to an end. In this world completely new relationships are established between language and its object. Thus we can see over here that Dalit literature has come into existence due to its powerful tool of translation and adaptability of languages. Most of the text taken here are in form of translation. This polyglot world has given rise to polyglossia. A multitude of different languages, cultures and times has become available to us and this has become a very decisive factor in its life and thought. Thus most of the texts taken here are polyphonic in nature because they are translated so that their original language, its tone and context is preserved.

One of the key concepts given by Bakhtin is that of heteroglossia. All the Dalit works express social diversity of speech types and depict differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions. Bakhtin argues that the ideological thrust can only truly be understood by the of the authors manipulation of diverse registers and styles of language for the very reason that they are not neutral relational systems of signifiers and signified, but rather represent distinct worldviews. For Bakhtin, no language system is truly unitary, but “unitary only as an abstract grammatical system of normative forms, taken in isolation, taken in isolation from the concrete, ideological conceptualizations that fill it . . . Actual social life and historical becoming create within an abstractly unitary national language a multitude of concrete worlds, a multitude of bounded verbal-ideological and social belief systems...”(Bakhtin.288) Thus the writer manipulates the languages of his characters in order to bring into the dialogue this multitude of worldviews within a single story.

Significantly, the existence of multiple worldviews within heteroglossic linguistic systems is not characterized by neutrality or equanimity. Rather, Bakhtin points out the way in which social stratification emerges in the practice of speaking itself : “ Social stratification is . . . primarily determined by differences between the forms used to convey meaning and between the expressive planes of various belief systems – that is, stratification expresses itself in typical differences in ways used to conceptualize and accentuate elements of language...”(Bakhtin.290). Bakhtin argues that this stratification makes itself manifest between past and present, as well as among various sociological groups, and is rendered bodily in the wielding of language and speech itself. Dalit literature is of course all about social stratification – revealing its pernicious pervasiveness in post-Ambedkar, post- liberalization India, and attempting to overcome its power by instilling political consciousness in readers – and therefore it is no surprise that for reasons both artistic and ideological Dalit authors would strategically and intentionally employ heteroglossic speech in their narratives. The linguistic stratification operates on several levels: distinguishing urban from rural, modern from traditional, progressive from backward, politically awakened from unconsciousness. The links and interrelations between utterances and language lead to heteroglossia and dialogization. Thus According to Bakhtin:

The novel can be defined as a diversity of speech types.... Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogued) (*Bakhtin. 262-263*)

Exploitation or oppression of weaker by stronger is as old as mankind itself. The Indian history has a long record of conflict and dialectic between two opposite forces like exploiters and exploited, colonizer and colonized, powerful and powerless. In India, according to Hindu Caste System prescribed by Manu, everyman is bound by the caste in which he/she is born. There are basic four castes: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudras. Brahmin constitutes the supreme of all human beings on earth. They have rights to education and religious scriptures and literature of which all the other three castes are devoid of. Sudras are called dalits because they live the lives of the lowest of low. They do all the cleaning and are considered impure. Brahmins or other higher castes would not even touch them, thus they are called untouchables. They face and suffer discrimination at every stage of their lives. They are not allowed to cross their borders and to try and mingle with the higher castes. They are dominated, exploited, discriminated at every stage. Such kind of oppression was carried out since almost ancient times until the Britishers came to India which led to lot of awakening among Dalits. It was not until the last decade of previous century that any kind of literature based on Dalit experience was written. Dalits are an important political and social force in India. Their literary and critical writings constitute a major challenge to, and questioning of, the theorizing about Indian politics, society, culture and literature by intellectuals from the upper caste Hindu and other dominant communities, and by non-Indians. Thus Dalit literature is a form of revolt or in words of Bakhtin Subversive Literature. It seeks to subvert an established order.

“Dalit Women” are characterized differently which is described as a “politics of difference” from mainstream Indian feminism, arguing this “difference” was essential for understanding the specificity of Dalit women’s subjugation, characterized by their experience of two distinct patriarchal structures/situations: a brahminical form of patriarchy that deeply stigmatized Dalit women because of their caste status, as well as the more intimate forms of control by Dalit men over the sexual and economic labour of "their" women has not resolved situations. Thus Bakhtin’s view of Dialogue rather than difference can be opted as a tool for emancipation of oppressed Dalit women.

Here in this structure, social structures, brahminism, patriarchy and male chauvinism is the center, which is hold on even by the oppressed. But for Bakhtin, “Center” is a relative rather than an absolute term, and, as such, one with no claim to absolute privilege. The periphery is always in dialogue with center and thwarts center all the time because of constant change in meaning due to dialogue. Thus the roles played by “self” and “other” are often seen as masked claims for privilege. The self is dialogic with the other as for bakhtin they are dualisms that occur simultaneously and are always concerned with space and time that is chronotope.



In the context of Dalit literature Brahmin and Shudra is a duality which is dialogic and negotiable. But they are different in different context of time and space. As time changes this duality becomes more flexible and open to take on new meanings and the new word can come into being of Dalit women emancipation.

Contemporary Dalit Prose writers are working to manipulate formal tension. They try to focus on the informal oppression in private contexts or in political contexts. For example *Karukku* traces a child's life of spiritual development as a Catholic and realization of herself as a Dalit. Even in that spiritual life, religious rituals, festivals that became part of yearly cycle of crops and seasons, structure the child's life. Later on, she deals with the religious and social life, which detains Dalits as untouchables. The Tamil word *Karukku*, embryo or seed also indicates freshness and newness.

After completing schooling, Bama enrolled herself in college. By now, she had developed an independent spirit. She didn't feel the need of others' help in reaching out to God. To quote Bama's words: "I felt in my heart that I could go and speak directly to God without their intervention. I could no longer believe that God could only be reached, as they had taught us, through prayer learned by rote though. Pious practices, through the novena and the rosary. I came to realize that you could see God through the mind's eye, in nature, and in the ordinary events of every day. So all the rituals that I had followed and believed in so far, suddenly began to seem meaningless and just a sham. The desire to become a nun fell away from me entirely at this time (Bama.102).

As a teacher in a school run by nuns, her experiences were worse. The behavior of the nuns upset her. They ran a boarding school which was nominally for the sake of destitute children but in fact they made those children do every menial task that was needed. They behaved as if they were the queens there, and everybody else was there only to run errands for them. The few nuns who were even slightly humane had a difficult time. And even amongst themselves there were caste divisions between the rich and the poor, and even divisions over the languages that they spoke. . . Besides the usual lessons, they could have educated the Dalit children in many matters, and made them aware of their situation in the world about them. But instead, everything in the manner in which they directed them, suggested that this was the way it was meant to be for Dalits, that there was no possibility of change. . . .(Bama.103).

The desire to be different impelled her to read the scripture with devotion and she saw the futility of formal religion "I learnt that God has always shown the greatest compassion for the oppressed. And Jesus too, associated himself mainly with the poor. Yet nobody had stressed this nor pointed it out. . . . The oppressed are not taught about him, but rather, are taught in an empty and meaningless way about humility, obedience, patience, gentleness" (Bama.104).

Finally she took the plunge; resigned her job and joined the order. But incongruity between the vows of simplicity and poverty and the rather luxurious life of the nuns pricked Bama to the quick. She felt the emptiness of serving the rich to the exclusion of the suffering and the down trodden who were left high and dry by the organized religion. It was not as though she did not try to continue an insider in search of reform. She read the life story of the founder of the order, felt an unshakable desire to be like her. She argued with her peers only to be reminded of her vow of obedience. She was burdened by the dichotomy of saying one thing and doing another. "There is something ugly in saying one thing and doing another. How long can one play—act in this way? Anyway it wasn't possible for me. I could only leave the order and return into the world. And I don't know if they have become so habituated to their play-acting that they can no longer distinguish between the role and reality" (Bama.107).

She decides to leave the convent with a view to liberate the Dalits from the clutches of poverty and serfdom. The vow of obedience and the virtue of humility become subtle tools of intimidation and she found herself caged in that special world of bondage. So one fine day in the year 1992 she leaves the religious order. Bama deals with the larger areas such as education, development of Dalit children, Dalit women and on the whole the liberation of the Dalits. As a result of her humiliating experiences as a Dalit, Bama realises that through the right type of education the whole community of Dalit can be empowered and they can gain human dignity. Bama passes through many emotional encounters and experiences. The whole process is a trail of discovery, which makes her a selfmade woman.

The life as portrayed in *Karukku* throws light on the most agonising and hapless lives of the Dalits. Bama's portrayal needs to be understood as representative of the experience. It is indicative of the unfortunate situation bequeathed in a greater degree of self-awareness and quest for achieving loftier and nobler things in the lives of Dalit women. The journey is tedious, the encounters are painful and the experiences reveal agony. But the process of self-discovery, identification and empowerment has to be necessarily an ordeal. The unpleasant experience and an oppressed soul have to compulsorily undergo a traumatic change. The individual's act of commission or omission is not individual but that of the society or the land in which she has no option but to be born.

Speaking of *Karukku*-her-creation, Bama confesses: "I described myself in *Karukku* as a bird whose wings had been clipped. I now feel like a falcon that treads the air, high in the skies. (xi)Lakshmi Holmstrom, adds, *Karukku* was written out of specific experience, the experience of a Tamil Dalit Christian woman. Yet it has a universality at its core which question all oppression, disturbs all complacencies, and reaching out all those who have suffered different oppressions.

Sangati (1994) encapsulates the author's experience of working within an erogenous and appressed society and the series of several interconnected anecdotes, experiences, news and events as narrated in the book, from an autobiography of a community. Sangati is a portrayal of many trouble witnessing stories as ones writers Paatti said "Once you are born a woman can you go and confront a group of four or five men?" Should you ever do it? (28.)



Bama gives another picture of the community. Although both men and women came after a hard day's work in the field. The men went straight to the bazaar or chavadi to while away their time, coming home only for their meal. But as for the women they return home wash vessels, clean the house, collect water, gather firewood, go to the shops to buy rice and other provision boil some rice, make a kazhambu or a kanji feed husband and children before they eat what is left over and go to bed. (59)

Even they lay down their bodies wracked with pain; they were not allowed to sleep. Whether she dies or survived, she had to finish his business. Women were not allowed to take part on any occasion, the man themselves would dress up and act as women rather than allow us to join in. (32)

The postcolonial thrust of her book is in its huge criticism of Indian church. Bama feministically voices out the grievances of Paraiya women. Characters like vellaiyamma patti and a small girl and the narrator herself, who learns the story from her grandmother which becomes development of the novel. In novel many strong Dalit women had courage to break the shackles of authority.

Through Sangati and *Karukku* Bama holds the mirror up to the heart of Dalit women. She makes an appeal for change and betterment of the life of a Dalit women in the variety of fields, including sex and gender discrimination, equal opportunity in work force, education rights etc. actually gives the narrator a key function and controls all the incidents and events in a proper way. The narrator becomes both omniscient narrator and a controlling agent of their story, who speaks out historical aspects of Dalit community through variety of characters, and it becomes development of novel. Bama is clear that no one is going to help the hopeless women in her community, it is up to the woman themselves to take their lives into their own hands.

Mikhail Bakhtin's work in linguistics which is in opposition to Saussurean proposal of an abstract language theory is useful in understanding Bama's dialectical Tamil. Bakhtin's work was effective in bringing to light the long unrecognized tradition of a defiantly secular, vernacular usage of language that went against the strictures of official discourse. Bakhtin argues that this vernacular language compete with the centralized, official and political language of the state. In *Karukku* and later in Sangati as well Bama lets loose an inventive, local language that illustrates free play with the limits of spoken language. She trusts the dialect to do the personalizing work for her.

The problem with such a dialectical use of language becomes insurmountable when it comes to translation. Lacking a lexicography- a practical model of moving from the usage to a literary semantic version- the translation is forced to summarize into prose what, when translated back, would be into literary Tamil. Thus rather than reading *Karukku* has a Tamil novel translated into English, it would be more accurate to read it as Tamil Dalit novel translated into literary Tamil and then into English. The loss of regional spoken dialect transforms the novel in significant ways. The poignancy of Bama's cries of pain in Tamil at being discriminated against and being punished for being Dalit, in the English *Karukku* becomes the sombre pathos of the chorus. To read *Karukku* as a Dalit Tamil novel is possible only in dialectical Tamil version. It is Bama's ownership and dexterity of a primarily oral tamil language of her childhood in that particular moment in her life when all the institutionally offered promises have collapsed. The English version thus recognizes this antinomy and compensates for it by its repeated, rationally stated claims for justice and pity.

In Sumitra Bhave's Pan on Fire one of the women narrators named Ashoka says:

It must be generally understood and accepted in an ideals community that a woman is not a subordinate or a toy or a sex object, or a useful machine; she too has a body that tires, a heart a mind, her own desires. There must be an awareness of her as person. (Bhave.227)

It is very clear that Dalit women are quite frank about the patriarchal social order that exist in Dalit communities in their writings. They also elaborate facts on both the mental and physical tortures they have to undergo in their day to day lives. But despite all Cultural details are hardly find in Dalit men writings which Dalit women are proud to elaborate.

The novel *The Grip of Change* is narrated through the eyes of a young girl who comments on her community and narrates the significant incidents that happen around her. *Author's Notes: Gowri* redraws our attention to the ideological tensions inherent in caste system and patriarchy. The narrator is a school girl and seems to be observant. Thus the author provides us the hint that the future lies in the hands of young and educated women with a critical bent of mind, which possess the ability to observe their community critically. Unflinchingly critical of the internal hierarchies of sub-castes in her own community, Sivakami is most trenchant about male chauvinism among Dalits. P. Shivakami says about problem of Dalit women:

In the society that is known as mainstream, the problems of Dalit women are considered separatist. They face the worst expressions of the male chauvinistic society- atrocities like raping profiling physical assault and murder. (Thaindian News.1)

In the *Grip of Change* two themes catch our attention. One is dirty politics among the leaders of lower and upper caste communities. The second and most important is treatment of women's body and her sexuality within and outside the caste. Entire novel is written on Thangam's body and her sexual relations. Dalits are indulged in the perennial search for their own identity. The prevalent caste system is, primarily, responsible for the construction of the "Other" and also the hierarchy of power. Sivakami rightly remarks in an interview: "Caste is the real hurdle India has to cross. We need more authentic spaces to discuss caste



because whenever I go to villages to discuss caste with the Dalits, it becomes full of political overtones. The entire country is rooted in caste.” (*Thaindan News.1*)

Shivakami writes: “That is natural for me as a Dalit and woman- factors decided by birth- to write those factors, As thereby I firmly place myself within a circle influencing the politics. I understand that it is the need of the hour and the requirement of the future.” (Preface). Writing on the atrocities committed by humans upon Dalits, Shivakami’s concern is to make things better and clear. As C.S. Lakshmai says: “Shivakami paints minute details on a huge canvas, colouring some part of it dark and drawing on other parts with subtle lines merely indicating a few details, leaving it to the imagination of the readers to follow those lines for a fuller picture” (*Shivakami.199*)

Daxa Damodara’s novel *Savitri* is a Historical novel because it portrays the real lives of Jyotiba Phule and his wife Savitribai Phule. Moreover it is more focused on the life of Savitribai as a wife of Jyotiba Phule and as an activist who fought against brahminical oppression and worked for Dalit women’s education because for her only education is the door to emancipation from this chains of discrimination and oppression. In her path she faced many hurdles. They were excommunicated from their communities due to the pressure on Jyotiba Phule’s father from higher class and castes. They were also to be murdered by men of “Shashtri Mandli”. The narration of all the events is very emotional and it tightly builds upon the married life and bonding of Jyotiba Phule and Savitribai Phule.

In the later stage of their lives Jyotiba says to Savitribai Phule “You are the empress of whole world. An infact at such an age of my life I am feeling that I am just the body.... You are soul I am voice...you are speech. I am eyes and you are vision.. oh Savitri whats happening to me at such an old age...? Why have I become so much involved into you that I don’t feel my own identity.. even in youth I was not so much in love with you..... listening to this two pearl like bead like tears dropped out of savitri’s eyes” (*Savitri.144*)

This is the beauty of relationship shown in *Savitri* giving rise to bonding, acceptance and growth. It shows that the higher and dominant caste has misrepresented them and they too are sensible human beings. *Savitri* and Jyotirao Phule sacrifices everything for the cause of Dalit upliftment to the extent that they did not have their own child instead opened a home for those women who might was to give birth to unwanted pregnancies and leave the child behind. *Savitri* adopts one such child as her son and named him Yashwant. Brought him up with such values that he could continue the task began by his parents and married him to a girl who would complement him just like Savitribai always walked hand in hand with Jyotirao Phule. It is not just the testimony of Jyotirao Phule’s life but it is the testimony of Dalit community, of people who understood the need of liberation and education who sent their children to school even under life threats and educated them.

As far as language is concerned then the author has tried to keep the Marathi language and style and tone intact in it. Thus making it a polyphonic novel and that the way the characters are caricatured so is their manner of speaking created thus it has all the features of heteroglossia in it. The Dialogue between the self-other, dominant-marginalized, oppressed – oppressor is constantly taking place more in a revolutionary manner, thus it is a subversive dialogue moving towards new meaning making.

Bakhtin’s theory of Dialogue involves the recognition of difference not as a way of foreclosing engagement (‘let’s accept our differences and leave it at that’) but of ‘seeing’ and engaging with each other. The etymology itself indicates a negotiation or contestation of the word (‘logue’) between two who are different (‘dia’), and this is the value of dialogue: not that the two become one, but that they create new, shared meaning out of their engagement to which both contribute. Tension and conflict are integral constitutive aspects of dialogue which are encompassed within a commitment to learn from one another, to struggle with, rather than against, the other. Thus by applying Bakhtin’s theory of Dialogue, polyphony and heteroglossia to Dalit literature new shared meanings could be created to break the difference and create understanding and oneness for betterment of society.

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