

AFFIRMATION AND RESISTANCE IN BAMA'S "CHILLI POWDER"

By

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Abstract

*The paper examines gender and caste difficulties that Dalit women face from a fresh angle by looking at Bama's short story "Chilli Powder," which is taken from the book *The Ichi Tree Monkey*. The current state of Dalit women and the exploitation of them in the Gender and caste names are important research topics. Women are twice as disadvantaged as Dalit men are: first, for being Dalit, and second, just for being female. They fall prey to both internal and external patriarchal societal structures. The current research, however, focuses on Bama's novel interpretation of how Dalit women exhibit the bravery to rebel, assert, and articulate their fight against subjugation.*

Keywords: *caste, gender and class, assertion, resistance, humiliation, subjugation.*

Introduction

Bama is a well-known writer of Tamil Dalits. Her forefathers were agricultural laborers who belonged to the Dalit group. Translated into English by N. Ravi Shanker, *The Ichi Tree Monkey* is a collection of fifteen short stories by Bama that comes from the depths of the state. The book is a colorful, ferocious, and fierce account of Dalit rebellion against caste-based tyranny in Tamil Nadu's rural areas. Bama is a modern Dalit writer who doesn't hesitate to share her

experiences while adding a dash of sardonic humor.

Like many other stories in the book *The Ichi Tree Monkey*, "Chilli Powder" makes you consider the effects of your preconceptions and resonates deeply within your consciousness. Even though Bama's stories are short, they are rich with the depth of her experiences. Bama exposes us to a world of cruel treatment and snide remarks through the narrative of her impoverished Dalit heroine, Panchayamma. These actions are fundamental to the way that

communities create and maintain prejudice.

The pinnacle of outright defiance and declaration against the disgrace of caste discrimination is Panchayamma. Bama has done a good job of capturing the everyday struggles faced by the poor women of Cheri colony as well as their modest forms of self-expression through colorful language and crass humor. Her willpower is indestructible and unbreakable. Even if caste biases are the main topic of discussion, the story maintains its simplicity and groundedness. Although Bama begins the story in a lighthearted manner, she ultimately reveals the exploitative qualities.

Panchayamma, the female lead of Bama, is a humorously bold and outspoken character. She fiercely dislikes upper caste land owners and ladies and never bows her head to injustice. She subtly challenges patriarchy and society's fears by contrasting it with the stereotypically rural feminine traits of fear and submission. In her essay, Uma Chakravarti brought up a few issues about women's situation.

'Conceptualizing Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India Gender, Caste, Class and State', such as marriage law, property rights and rights relating to religious practice, normally viewed as indices of status (163).

She goes on to discuss how women are subjugated in India. In Hindu civilization, women and others from lower castes endure dehumanizing living conditions due to social inequality. The author notes that the brahmanical social order is based on the concepts of caste and gender hierarchy. Despite the tight relationship between these two, there has been no analysis of this relationship by feminist or caste system experts. (qtd Navya 24)

In Hindu civilization, caste and gender play a significant role. The name "dalit" originates from the Indian caste system. Dalits are linked to terms like low born, low caste, untouchable, oppressed, voiceless, marginalized, impoverished, etc. In her essay "Conceptualizing Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India Gender, Caste, Class and State," Uma Chakravarti addressed a number of issues concerning women's status, including

rights to property, marriage law, and religious practice, all of which are typically seen as indicators of social standing. Our grasp of the social processes that shaped men, women, and social institutions in early India is seriously lacking as a result of the narrow focus (56).

She goes on to discuss Indian women's subjugation. Due to social stratification, women and members of lower castes in Hindu society endure dehumanizing living conditions. According to her, the fundamental structuring elements of the brahmanical social order are caste and gender hierarchy. Despite their close ties, neither feminist nor caste system experts have tried to examine how the two relate to one another (72). The most recent pieces by Bama describe the ways in which the Indian literary landscape is evolving and taking shape. One such tale from the anthology is "Chilli Powder," in which Bama plays Panchayamma, a character who rebels.

Panchayamma had no fear of Gangamma, the affluent land lady, despite the fact that everyone else in the colony was terrified of her.

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

She boasted about how she stole mangos from Gangamma's farms and cut a lot of grass. "I must admit...what fruits they were! Dripping with honey! Even as I was enjoying them, Gangamma herself appeared....That woman got so furious she was swaying like an elephant calf gone mad" (37). Even though it was obvious that Panchayamma was embellishing the story, she adamantly maintained that she is not at all afraid of the upper caste land lady. She says: "What can she do, eh? She can't touch a hair on my head. If she runs ten feet, this Panchayamma can run eighteen!" (38).

Two or three days later, Panchayamma returned to Gangamma's land to mow the grass with two other women. After noticing them, Gangamma returned home with a sheet of paper rolled up in red chili powder. She poured the chili powder into Panchayamma's eyes and threatened to kill her for taking from her farms. Panchayamma lost control of her anger. Panchayamma continued to harass and curse Gangamma, whom everyone was terrified of, even after she had left the fields. Some referred to Panchayamma as acting extremely haughtily in this incident.

However, other people felt pity for her. While some of the villagers did concur that Gangamma's act of violence throwing chilli powder in Panchayamma's eyes was extremely inhumane. "But how could be she so crafty? She took the trouble to go home and bring the chilli powder to to throw into Panchayamma's eyes! "What if she had gone blind? If this is what she does just for cutting grass, what will she do if someone touches her harvest? She wouldn't hesitate to kill!" (39).

It appears that the impoverished of lower castes are often exploited since they lack land of their own and work

for meager pay on the fields owned by wealthy landlords. As several of the villagers correctly point out: "And where else can we go and cut grass if not in the fields of landowners? Where else do we go for grass to feed the cattle we survive on?" (39). Everyone called Gangamma "molagappodi," or chili powder, after the incident. After the incident, Panchayamma's spirits were not negatively affected. In actuality, other females started making fun of Gangamma by referring to her as "chilli powder." Panchayamma and other women began making fun of Gangamma one day.

Gangamma became enraged and cursed these women. Gangamma, who belongs to the wealthy upper caste, is not willing to tolerate insults from a lady from a lower caste and frequently makes disparaging remarks about Panchayamma based on her caste and class. "Yendi, stinking whore widow! How dare you talk like this? She's so poor she has next to nothing to wear, but look how the donkey speaks! Brazen bitch!" (40). Panchayamma became extremely angry and threatened to hit Gangamma with her koozh vessel. The other women got involved as well. Gangamma, caught,

did not pause to respond. Hunching over, she started to walk on her heels.

Dalit women must put in a lot of overtime to support their families and make a life. Bama paints a moving portrait of their life. The village women must go about looking for work. The spouse of Panchayamma is a worthless person who lacks motivation for labor. She is the only one who has to work to support herself. After returning home one day without finding employment, Panchayamma and ten or twelve other women began picking cotton pods and didn't think twice about trespassing onto Gangamma's plantation. Gangamma returned with two police officers and a police inspector after observing this. Their own guy, the inspector, had once resided in his brother's home. After being discovered to be thieves, all of the women were loaded into Gangamma's tractor and driven to the police station.

While traveling to the police station, women began to accuse Panchayamma. "We are in this mess because of you. Don't be so shameless" (43). Panchayamma is quite fearless, in contrast to the other women who are afraid because they have been

discovered stealing and are being escorted to the police station. She says: "Are they going to cut our heads off at the station? Take it easy women!" (43). She has learned to cope with her poverty and hardships by being courageous and shameless. Her statements include a startling revelation of the reality.

Ei...what's shameful about this? Are we stealing so we can build tiled houses for ourselves? Are we going to make jewellery for our necks and ears? We steal because that is the only way we will not starve-even though we need only a little bit of kanji. Tell me, with prices so high, can we afford to have our fill of kanji with the wages we get/ We don't have a single coin on us today. Even when there is work and we get paid, we can have only broken rice kanji and rasam. Today I thought I would sell the cotton and buy some dried fish for curry, but that sinner's daughter came and spoiled it all. (43)

For most locals, including her husband, Panchayamma's actions and words may appear foolish, inflated, or pompous, yet beneath it all is a harsh

reality. Perhaps for this reason, other ladies in the village have begun to follow her. Bama uses vivid, accurate, and cutting humor to describe inane instances of Panchayamma's assertion and resistance. The description is just long enough to make a point. Other women agree with her because of what she says. Her remarks gave them confidence, and instead of being terrified or furious, they began joking and smiling.

Panchayamma wanted to urinate on the route to the police station, but she was not permitted to get off the tractor. The cops told them to get down when they arrived at the station. Panchayamma immediately lifted her clothing and urinated while standing up as soon as she did. The other women followed suit. When the policeman saw this, he complained, "Chi, arrogant donkeys! They'll make the whole station sink!"(44).

Panchayamma began to leave the police station after she had finished urinating, and other women began to do the same. The policeman would not let them go and yelled at them. He demanded that they pay a fine of ten rupees each person for taking the

cotton. At this Panchayamma shouted back "What do you mean by shouting ei and oi? Are you our husband to call us "ei"? We picked the cotton with great difficulty, to sell. But this fellow asked us to drop the pods there itself and now you're asking us to pay ten rupees fine? What a joke!...We don't have a single coin to buy even a small packet of snuff and you know that" (45). However, the policeman would not listen to any of their justifications and would not allow them to go until they had paid the fee.

Eventually, police had to let them return home with a warning for later. Panchayamma's fearless fearlessness and her strong demeanor towards the police officers are the only reasons they are all released from the police station. Her spouse has returned from his well-digging job in the meanwhile. He began yelling at Panchayamma as soon as he found out that she had visited the police station. "Aren't you ashamed, going to the station? Your whole family is a pack of thieves!" Panchayamma silenced her husband at once, "Yes, I went to the station and come back. What's wrong with that? Tell me something: has any woman

who worked in the fields arrived at our village in such style, in a vehicle?"(47).

Her spouse refers to her as a bold woman and a robber. "You will end up with just your tongue left, atha. It's right what they say, whether your mouth is stitched up or locked up, you can't help babbling!" (47). Although her spouse and the villagers may label her as outspoken and brash, the real reason she questions social conventions so directly is her unwavering spirit. She declares that she is resisting the injustices meted out to impoverished Dalits like herself in her own modest but determined ways. She emerges as a courageous, strong woman who, in her own unique manner, gives strength to other fearful women. She is unaffected by what people think of her. She responds politely to rumors spread by the villagers. She responds "Seri, I have no time to waste talking to you. What do you know? These days, if we don't speak up, they'll come and fart right in our faces, amma" (47).

Saying this, she made her way to Veluchami's store in the hopes of obtaining some ragi flour on credit

from him so she could prepare some kali. The narrative is conveyed in a way that helps us understand the source of the issue, even though it does not have the typical "happy" finish or resolution. Education has the potential to raise awareness within Dalit colonists and assist them in escaping poverty and suffering. *Karruku* confirms this similar opinion in her memoirs. She composes

Bama's brother advised her study hard if she wants overcome the indignities heaped by caste system on dalits. As he says, because we are born into the Paraiyar jati, we are never given any honor or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that. But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities. So study with care, learn all you can. If you are always ahead in your lessons, people will come to you of their own accord and attach themselves to you. Work hard and learn. (138)

Conclusion

Since the beginning of time, Dalits' rights have been suppressed. A Dalit family has been subjected to exploitation for many years by their

landlord, who they serve through generations. They have gradually come to understand the unfairness of the current system and are rebelling in their own unique ways. The tale "Chilli

Powder" is devoid of any laments of victimization and is full of wit, resolve, and keen humor. Seeing a poor, illiterate Dalit woman serve as the change's messenger is heartening.

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