



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



Dalit Feminist Activist Writes Back: Bama Faustina in Conversation with Jaydeep Sarangi

*Bama (born 1958), also known as Bama Faustina Soosairaj, is a Tamil, [Dalit](#) feminist, teacher and writer. Her autobiographical novel *Karukku* (1992) chronicles the joys and sorrows experienced by Dalit Christian women in [Tamil Nadu](#). She subsequently wrote two more novels, *Sangati* (1994) and *Vanmam* (2002) along with two collections of short stories: *Kusumbukkaran* (1996) and *Oru Tattvum Erumaiyum* (2003).*

Bama was born as Faustina Mary Fatima Rani in a Roman Catholic family from Puthupatti in the then Madras State. Later she adopted 'Bama' as her pen name. Susairaj was her father and Sebasthiamma, her mother. Bama's novels focus on caste and gender discrimination. She propagates Dalit feminism through her writings.

J.S.: Bama, welcome to this discussion. Do you remember your childhood days?

Bama: I was born and brought up in a Dalit Christian family in W. Puthupatty, a small village in South Tamil Nadu. I completed eighth standard in the village school. While I was in my village, I came to know about different castes and experienced a lot of discrimination based on caste, class and gender. I was treated inhumanly and faced a lot of discrimination and rejection. During school holidays I used to accompany my grandmother to work in the landlord's fields. I have seen how my grandmother was ill-treated because of her caste. I grew up in my village experiencing all kinds of atrocities and untouchabilities. After completing eighth standard, I was sent to a nearby town for higher studies.

J.S.: Bama, will you be able to tell us your experiences of caste discrimination during the childhood?

Bama: My grandmother used to work in the upper caste landlord's fields. As a child I used to go with her during school holidays. My grandma used to tell me not to go near that upper caste people and not to touch their things because we are low caste and they are high caste. But I could not understand anything then. The upper caste people also used to chase us away using abusive words whenever they saw us.

After cleaning the cowsheds outside the upper caste people's house the upper caste lady used to pour some stale food in my grandmother's vessel in the cowshed itself. My grandma and I used to stay at a distance to get that food which cannot be eaten. They never allow us to enter into their house and they never had come to our area side for any purpose.

While travelling in the public transport upper caste people never used to sit near Dalits and Dalits had to get up and give their seats to upper caste people and they had to keep standing. While waiting for buses in the bus stop also we were segregated and we had to wait till they board the bus.

There is a school in the upper caste area meant only for upper caste children. Due to caste discrimination Dalit children were not given admission there when I was a child. The school I studied one particular teacher used to ask only Dalit children to remove the shit and dead corpse of birds and animals in the school ground. While we were cleaning the upper caste children used to sit and watch us with sarcastic look and smile on their faces which hurt us terribly.

J.S.: What according to you is Dalit Literature?

Bama: It is the literature of oppressed people, telling about their pains, agonies, disappointments, defeats, humiliations, oppressions and depressions. It also speaks about their vibrant culture, dreams, values, convictions and their struggle for annihilation of caste in order to build a casteless society. It reveals their resistant and rebellious character, their strength and stamina to live amidst all odds and their resilient nature to love life and live it happily. It brings out their inborn tendency to celebrate life and to fight against the caste-ridden society by breaking through this inhuman system without breaking themselves. It liberates them and gives them their identity. It heals them and strengthens them to fight for their rights.

J.S.: Who are the Dalits in India?

Bama: People who are discriminated against and socially excluded on account of their caste and who militantly oppose such a system of discrimination and dehumanisation are Dalits. It also includes people who are marginalised based on class and gender.

J.S.: Would you please share some of your experiences regarding caste stratification in India?

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Bama: I cannot tell about my experience about caste stratification in India – I can share my experience of Tamil Nadu. Here we have a lot of castes in a hierarchical order and the lowest are the Dalits. My experiences here are dehumanising – wherever I go, whatever I do and however I try, I cannot escape from these caste tentacles. Each caste tries to dominate and suppress the other below it. Not only from womb to tomb, but even after one’s death caste follows and segregates – even in the graves. Stratification of caste is faced at every level – education, employment, religion, marriage, everywhere.

J.S.: You are a teacher, a writer, a Dalit Christian, a Tamil woman. How do you look at your identity?

Bama: All these describe my identity. What I value and cherish most is my identity as a human being.

J.S.: Your mother worked as a coolie who didn’t get the privilege of education. How did she contribute to your identity?

Bama: My mother was a hard-working woman and what I am today, I attribute to her. She was a very loving, simple and beautiful woman. She was a philosopher and guide to me. I have inherited a lot of values and convictions from her which enable me now to face the hardships of this caste-ridden male dominated society. She had brought me up as a sensitive human being with love and dignity.

J.S.: How about your father?

Bama: My father was a Lt Colonel in the Indian Army. He appeared to be a harsh and tough man but actually was a very soft hearted and loving person. I had seen him as a man who went out of his way to help others and to fight for social justice and liberation. He also had the capacity to write songs, dramas and stories. He never published his works. I was always scared of him as I somehow had picked up the idea that he didn’t like me as he liked his other children.

J.S.: Who are the writers who inspired you in your formative days?

Bama: In my formative days I had not read many books as there was no possibility of getting books in my village. So I used to read whatever books my elder brother used to bring home from the library. Those days I liked Jeyankanthan’s writings.

J.S.: Who are the leading Dalit writers in your state?

Bama: There are many writers, both men and women, writing in different genres. Poomani, Raj Gowthaman, Imayam, Abimani, Vizhi. Pa. Idhayanventhan, Azhakia Periyavan, Sivakami, Sukirtha Rani are some of them.

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J.S.: Why do you write?

Bama: I write because I think it is the duty and responsibility to write the stories of my people. I also feel that by writing my own wounds are healed and I am liberated and renewed.

J.S.: What is the basic theme of *Karukku*?

Bama: It is the living story of a particular group of Dalit people in a particular village in which the narrator (myself) is a part and parcel of that group. It talks about their style of living, their hard work, their culture, their belief system, their entertainment, their spirituality, their love, their fight, their struggles, their pain and agony, their joys and sorrows, their tears and dreams.

J.S.: Do you like the tag 'Dalit Feminism'?

Bama: Yes. The life of a Dalit woman is totally different from a non-Dalit woman. So, Dalit feminism is a must.

J.S.: What makes Dalit autobiographies so popular among the readers?

Bama: It is because they speak the 'truth'. It is the experience of not only a writer, but also of many Dalits in this country. It makes the reader feel one with the writer and gives identity to the writer. It is kind of an opening to assert and free oneself.

J.S.: What is the main theme of *Sangathi*?

Bama: 'Dalit women' is the main theme of *Sangathi*. It reveals their protest and strategical ways and means of resistance in times of oppression and rejection. It celebrates their resilient nature and builds up hope. It talks about the strength that enables them to swim against the current and live with zeal and zest.

J.S.: Do you consider your writing 'militant'?

Bama: To a certain extent, yes. The language that I use, the content that I write, the characters that I create in my writings and the values and convictions that I advocate through these characters are all of militant nature. I strongly believe that writing itself is a political act and it is one of the weapons that I use to fight against this dehumanising caste practice.

J.S.: Why are the Brahminical forces still at the helm of affairs in this country?

Bama: The Brahminical forces are strongly injected in most areas and in most of the minds of our people. It is strongly rooted in the spiritual soil and has a religious sanction. Our people

who are highly religious accept anything and everything without questioning if it is given in the name of 'God' and religion. Brahmins who had the advantage of getting education and employment unlike the other people stubbornly believe that they are the intelligent people and cling on to power and authority. The nature of Brahminism is such that it easily permeates everywhere and gradually and silently kills everything in order to establish its ideology.

J.S.: Are you satisfied with the critical corpus by the academicians and critics?

Bama: To a certain extent yes. There are some good works.

J.S.: Please mention some of your works of resistance. What do you resist?

Bama: My second novel *Sangathi*, third novel *Vanmam*, fourth novel *Manuci* and most of all my short stories are some of my works of resistance. I resist all kinds of social injustices, oppressions and atrocities in any form that dehumanises and humiliates a person – it may be based on caste, class or gender.

J.S.: If a non-Dalit writer writes about Dalit life, would you consider that as Dalit writing?

Bama: I'll consider that as writing about Dalits and not as 'Dalit writing'.

J.S.: Why do you need a separate term 'Dalit Feminism'? How is it different from feminism in India?

Bama: Feminism in India emphasises the empowerment of women in general in terms of equality in all its dimensions. It is true that all women all over the world suffer because they are women. In India the problems faced by Dalit women are entirely different from that of non-Dalit women. In the Indian context, women suffer a lot in the family because it is man-centred; in the society because it is patriarchal and male-chauvinistic, and religion justifies and legitimises both these unjust institutions and mind-sets favouring men alone. In addition to these, Dalit women face other problems because our society is not only a male-dominated society, but it is an upper-caste male-dominated society. Due to untouchability and caste based violence and atrocities Dalit women are tortured and humiliated even by upper-caste women. So, the term 'feminism' in India is not enough to encompass the liberative perspectives, aspirations, values, convictions and dreams of Dalit women. How can any ideology of emancipation and empowerment that does not include the annihilation of caste in its agenda and is not committed to the task of restoring the self-esteem and self-respect of Dalit women who do not have equal social status like other non-Dalit women, make any sense to us? Therefore I feel we need separate term 'Dalit feminism'.

J.S.: Please cite three examples of Dalit feminism in your works.

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Bama: Firstly, my short story ‘Chilli Powder’. This short story is about some Dalit women who collected some weeds and grass to feed their cattle from a non-Dalit woman’s field and were chased away by that landlady who threw chilli powder on their faces. Pachayamma who was the main character in that story nicknamed that landlady ‘Chilli powder’ and irritated her by calling her by that name very often. She made fun of her whenever and wherever she saw her and terrified her together with her other companions. This rebelling, resisting and fighting tendency helps them to rise above this kind of situation and to rebuild themselves in any situation of inhuman treatment. By making fun of the situations and persons they try to establish themselves and overcome the humiliations and hurts caused by caste and class discriminations.

Secondly, my second novel *Sangathi*. *Sangathi* talks about a variety of Dalit women who try to liberate themselves from caste, class and gender inequalities. They use different tactics, different strategies in words and actions to establish their human dignity and self-respect. These women try their best to breathe freely in spite of the suffocating experiences both in their families and in society, by their brave and humorous attitudes and approaches. They fight verbally and physically to live as human beings with dignity. Their culture strengthens them even though their hard labour breaks them. The feeling of being together with other suffering women and sharing their joys and sorrows freely and without any inhibition, gives them a sense of belonging and enables them to bring in an element of celebration into their dreary lives of every day suffering and violence.

Generally speaking in most of my writings (mainly short stories) I have recorded in depth Dalit women’s relationships, their kinship and fellow feeling and their appreciation of nature. Their culture which is imbued with a deep feeling and sense that they are daughters of this mother earth enables them to embrace nature with a deep sense of oneness and love. It is this that makes them humane, human and alive. Their whole life under the sky is in contact and mixed up with soil, air, water and fire, and this union with nature helps them to live an ecologically harmonious life. They love animals and birds, trees and plants and they talk to them with such tenderness. This intimacy reduces the stress and strain of their daily struggles caused by this caste based and caste oriented society. This frees them and eases their hearts to live their life one day at a time. Their culture of rebellion and provocation keeps them alive and active.

J.S.: Do you subscribe to the term ‘Dalit womanism’?

Bama: Alice Walker who coined the term ‘womanism’ specifically pointed to ‘black womanism’. Yes, I subscribe to this term ‘Dalit womanism.’ I think this term will express the varied nuances of the raw, colourful, revolutionary, earthy and grass root level existence, experiences and ecstasies of Dalit women. For a Dalit woman, her struggle, her priority is to assert and establish her humanity more than her femininity, and it is this that makes her life and expresses her personality. Her rebelling, resisting and resilient nature makes her strong

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and gentle at the same time and so the term ‘Dalit womanism’ is more appropriate than Dalit feminism.

J.S.: What makes you write, ‘We must crush all these institutions that use caste to bully us into submission and demonstrate that among human beings there are none who are high or low?’

Bama: In my life wherever I have lived, I have experienced and am experiencing the pain of caste discrimination which divides and degrades human beings. Even now my neighbour who is an ‘upper caste’ woman lets all the dirty gutter water in front of my house. When I pointed out this to her she stubbornly and angrily refused to stop it. She uses abusive words every day whenever I go out of my house. Now I am really tired of telling that woman and she continues with her inhuman behaviour. Others who witness this daily don’t even oppose this because she is an upper-caste woman. She deliberately does this because I am a Dalit woman. For her Dalits ought to live in a filthy and stinking area, and she is not able to digest the fact that I have built a house and I live a decent life in front of her. If some upper-caste family were to live near her instead of me, she won’t dare to do this. It is a daily struggle for me. Even if we move to an urban area, we are always treated with contempt and cruelty once they come to know our caste.

Not only in the neighbourhood but in all religious and educational institutions beginning from primary schools, in offices, in working places and almost in all walks of life I have seen a lot of injustices done in the name of caste. The dominating and oppressive forces paralyse people constantly and continuously.

In Rohit Vemula’s words, our birth is a fatal accident and from womb to tomb we are compelled to do menial jobs and to live as servants of all. We are segregated by caste which is decided by birth and which follows us even after death. We long for equality of human persons and by all means we want to demonstrate that among human beings there are none who are high or low. We want to annihilate caste which permeates the whole fibre of Indian society. The ‘high’ and ‘low’ status of human being is created mainly by caste which is irreversible, needs to be destroyed in order to promote equality, fraternity and liberty. Here I want to end with Dr Ambedkar’s final words which I deeply cherish:

My final words of advice to you are educate, agitate and organize; have faith in yourself. With justice on our side I do not see how we can lose our battle. The battle to me is matter of joy. The battle is in the fullest sense spiritual. There is nothing material or social in it. For ours is a battle not for wealth or for power. It is a battle for freedom. It is the battle of reclamation of human personality.

J.S.: How about translation of your works into English?

Bama: Most of my works have been translated into English and has been published by Oxford University Press – India. My translators tried their level best to keep the spirit and flavour of my writings. I do appreciate their hard work and I’m happy with them.

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J.S.: How do you pass your idle moments?

Bama: I hardly have any idle moments. As a single woman, teaching full time in a primary school, doing all the household duties myself. As I am connected with outside works, I am tightly engaged. Amidst this hectic schedule, I steal out some time to read and write. Most of my holidays are spent in attending literary meetings and giving talks to students, women and teachers. So no moments to idle away!

J.S.: Any regrets?

Bama: I am happy with what I am and what I have. The only regret is the realisation of my inability to do some concrete actions against caste discrimination and its endless violence in my own village.

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