



Dalit women life-narratives and literature as experience

Cielo Griselda Festino

Universidade Paulista, Rua Apeninos, 267, São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil. E-mail: cielofestino@gmail.com

ABSTRACT. Jacques Ranciere (2011, p. 53) observes that rather than create works of art, contemporary artists want to get out of the museum “[...] and induce alterations in the space of everyday life, generating new forms of relations”. In this context, the aim of this paper is to discuss the power of literature to turn experience into life-narratives that will eventually give rise to a differentiated kind of social experience (SMITH; WATSON, 2010), through the reading of the novel *Sangati* (1994) by the Indian Dalit writer Bama. In order to make visible the experiences of the Dalit women, Bama rewrites the genre *autobiography*, as understood in the West, since in her narrative the voice of the community imposes itself upon the voice of the individual. In so doing, she changes the quality and style of canonical narratives considered as literary so that they will accommodate the stories of silenced people articulated through a differentiated kind of aesthetics.

Keywords: Dalit, life-narratives, aesthetics.

As Narrativas de vida das mulheres Dalit: a literatura como experiência

RESUMO. Jacques Rancière observa que mais do que criar obras de arte, os artistas contemporâneos desejam sair do museu e ‘introduzir’ mudanças no espaço do dia a dia, gerando novas formas de relacionamentos. Nesse contexto, o objetivo deste artigo é discutir, por meio da leitura do romance *Sangati* (1994) da escritora indiana Dalit, Bama, o poder da literatura de transformar a experiência em narrativas de vida que, eventualmente, possam produzir uma forma diferenciada de experiência social (SMITH; WATSON, 2010). Para dar visibilidade à experiência das mulheres Dalit, Bama reescreve o gênero autobiografia, conforme entendido no Ocidente, uma vez que na sua narrativa a voz da comunidade impõe-se sobre a voz do indivíduo. Assim, ela muda a qualidade e o estilo das narrativas canônicas, consideradas como literárias, e dá voz às narrativas de comunidades silenciadas, articuladas através de um diferente tipo de estética.

Palavras-chave: Dalit, narrativas de vida, estética.

The weak, they say, have the purest sense of history because they know anything can happen. (MENON, 2004)

Introduction

Jacques Ranciere (2011, p. 53) observes that rather than create works of art, contemporary artists want to get out of the museum “[...] and induce alterations in the space of everyday life, generating new forms of relations”. If this is true of most forms of contemporary art, it is even more so in the case of the artistic expressions of communities that have been historically subjected to all kinds of painful experiences due to political, social or cultural reasons, such as the literature of the Indian Dalit women, the lowest rung in the hierarchy of the Hindu caste system. Narratives for them are spaces in which they can become “[...] both the observing subject and the object of investigation, remembrance and contemplation” (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 1), crossing the border between life and art,

aesthetic detachment and everyday life events so that their stories contribute to raising an awareness that, eventually, will be foremost to improve their living conditions.

In this context, the aim of this paper is to discuss the power of narratives to turn experience into narratives and, eventually into a differentiated kind of experience (SMITH; WATSON, 2010), through the reading of the novel *Sangati. Events* (BAMA, 1996) by the Indian Dalit writer, Bama, based on autobiographical material and real life stories. Bama is her pen-name. She comes from a Roman Catholic family in Tamil Nadu.

In *Sangati. Events*, the sequel to her autobiographical novel, *Karukku* (BAMA, 1992), she focuses the narrative on the women of the Dalit Christian community in Tamil Nadu, in the South of the Indian subcontinent, to tell about their plight

as they are economically exploited and sexually oppressed not only by the men of the higher castes, but also by the men of their own community (TOMAR, 2013). Her idea is that her narratives will instigate “Dalit women who read them to rise up with fervour and walk towards victory as they begin their struggle as pioneers of a new society” (BAMA, 1996, p. IX). On the one hand, the narrator, who is simultaneously inside and outside the community since she is younger and had the privilege of an education, shows how the experience of suffering, shared by all the women of the community, transforms the literary narrative into a social document. Thus, their pain is turned into words and the words into a thrust for action and change. On the other hand, these women are also recreated as deconstructing the stereotype of the victim as is revealed by their liveliness and the myriad ways they resist the yoke imposed upon them by both, the people of the higher castes and Dalit men. In her novel, Bama not only helps make visible the experiences of the Dalit women but also rewrites the genre *autobiography*, as understood in the West, when the voice of the community imposes itself upon the voice of the individual. In so doing, she changes the quality of canonical narratives considered as literary so that they will accommodate the stories of silenced people.

The power of narratives

Literary narratives, like all kinds of narratives, are deeply intertwined with the life of the community where they originate. In the same way that there are no communities without a language, there are no communities that do not tell their stories in some way or another. Because these stories are either told or silenced, they reveal all: what the community does or refuses to do; what it believes in or considers a prejudice; its virtues and also its deep injustices. And this epistemological relationship between the narratives and the community is an everlasting, dynamic process that changes through time. If considered in this way, as Felski (2008) explains, literary narratives are not only ‘objects’ of knowledge but ‘sources’ of knowledge in the sense that they offer themselves for study because they structure the beliefs of the community. Besides, as she also argues, works of art “[...] arise from and move back into the social” (FELSKI, 2008, p. 12). In this process, they do not remain the same since they are subjected to multiple interpretations that help envision the social experience from which they emerged in a differentiated manner. From this perspective, literary narratives are not considered as

being enigmatic constructions that hide meanings and, therefore, belong in the realm of the sacred; rather, they are seen as highlighting their deep connectedness to the social.

Many approaches to literary narratives have been criticized for being reductionist, either because they are solely considered from an aesthetic perspective that sees them as works of art that try to fix into words some elusive or ineffable quality, or as having some powerful social agency that can bring about profound changes in society (FELSKI, 2008). In both cases the aesthetic and the political appear as being dissociated. Perhaps, an alternative way to view them is by considering the literary metaphor as a powerful means to articulate the social and thus provoke a reflection on the quality of the life of a community. As for the direct action they might have on the community, it might be argued that narratives do not have the power to change society, for good or bad, entirely by themselves. However, because they recreate human beings in society through suggestive metaphors that emphasize certain meanings, they relate the affective to the rational and thus help create a profound level of awareness among the readership that can contribute to establishing a firm bond with the political. In turn, the political translates itself into an appeal for recognition, for inclusion, for justice, for change. In other words, the epistemological articulated in the narrative becomes ethical when the narrative produces what Ranciere (2011) calls a rupture in the way of seeing and understanding the values and beliefs of any society. This process, as Ranciere (2011) also explains, is not simple or straightforward or is accomplished by some magic. Rather, narratives lead us to reflection because they help us cope with the chaos of existence and face what otherwise is intolerable. Baldwin (1993, p. 112) quotes Tony de Mello who says that the “[...] most entrancing words a language holds are ‘Once upon a time’ because it is common to oppose a truth but it is impossible to resist a story”. I fully agree and understand that this is due to the power of narratives to turn words into images that allow us to visualize even the unknown, holding the attention of the most skeptical readership.

One of the elements of narratives that makes them so appealing to the reader is the fact that they are organized in plots, sequences of actions that involve the revelation of individuals amidst familiar and unfamiliar circumstances (MORRIS, 1996). Though the cultural context might be profoundly different from ours, literature presents the plights of the characters in an everyday life context that allows

us, consciously or unconsciously, to establish links with our own experiences. In this sense, the discourse of literature differentiates itself from that of philosophy or science that function in the realm of abstract ideas. Besides, as plots are sequences of actions that recreate the unfolding of lives, they imply change. As Morris (1996) argues, suffering is not a state, but an action occasioned by some past or present event that might eventually imply some kind of future action furthered by the narrative. Because, if narratives help us visualize the problems that afflict us, they can also help us reinvent new narratives that might appear as possible solutions to our problems. And here resides one of the many forms of the power of narratives.

For Morris (1996, p. 31), narratives make two significant contributions to the discourse of suffering. First, they reach the interior of a character's experience and bring him back to life. Hence, if suffering renders people speechless, literature not only gives them back their voices, but may also contribute to changing their status. Second, the literary metaphor infuses the character's plight with such power that we are compelled to listen to it and pay attention not only to the story being told but also to the causes, values and beliefs that provoked it. They thus shorten the distance with what Morris (1996, p. 31) calls "[...] the otherness of suffering". As literature humanizes the Other, we tend to sympathize with their suffering even if it has to do with situations that many times are alien to our own experience or even refer to causes that go against our interests or beliefs.

When literary narratives are understood in this way, a bond is established between the intensified forms of experience they depict and the events of everyday life they recreate, turning the telling into a new kind of experience based on the dialogic relationship established between the reader and the text, the reader's context and sensibility and the character's cultural context and sufferings. Thus, though it is highly unlikely to know the pain of others in its entirety, because the Otherness of suffering might be insurmountable, when it is addressed through metaphors of empathy, it is possible to acknowledge its existence. This reveals, as Morris (1996) points out, that rather than solely describing suffering, writers might also reinvent suffering and in the process promote social action. This approach to literature already shows how deeply ingrained morality and aesthetics can be.

However, if narratives have the power to articulate all kinds of social injustices: discrimination due to gender, class, caste differences, famine,

unemployment, wars, etc., paraphrasing Morris (1996, p. 25), I would say that "[...] not all narratives count as literature" because, sadly, "[...] not all sufferings matter". In the same way that we acknowledge suffering within our own communities by turning characters into heroes or martyrs, we defamiliarize the suffering of those outside our own moral community at two levels, by not acknowledging their suffering and by not recognizing their narratives as literature (MORRIS, 1996). This comes to show that if narratives make us aware of people's plights, what is institutionalized as literature decides whose predicament really matters: the narratives produced by certain communities both within and without the national borders are not always recognized as having literary value. In other words, literature has the power, as Morris (1996) adds, to validate or invalidate human suffering, by recognizing 'literariness' in some narratives and denying it to others.

Nevertheless, if literature expresses the values of the community within which the narrative exists, subjugated communities can also challenge established modes of literature by creating their own aesthetics and narrative traditions. Morris (1996) explains that this actually happens when what is considered as having 'literary value' is reinvented in order to give visibility to what counts as other forms of suffering.

To the sensory world, that is already part of the social and literary establishment, the dissensual community opposes a new aesthetic code in order to give voice and political power to the subjugated members of its community. According to Ranciere (2011, p. 82),

[...] film, video art, photography, installation and all forms of art can rework the frame of our perceptions and the dynamism of our affects. As such, they can open up new passages towards new forms of political subjectivation.

And this is the moment when suffering is translated into words through new modes of resistance narratives.

Dalit literature

One instance of such kind of writing that attests in a very straight-forward manner the plight of a marginalized community are the narratives of the Indian Dalit who, through the writing of their literature, aim at freeing themselves from the cultural and aesthetic manacles imposed by their caste. As Limbale (2004, p. 1) observes, Dalit literature goes back to Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar

(1891-1956), who is considered the founder of the Dalit movement. He was born in the caste of the Untouchables, of which he became its leader during the English Raj. His revolutionary ideas imbued Dalits with self respect, and this awareness of their own condition became the main dominant of their literary narratives. The word 'Dalit' was first used by him in preference to his own earlier term 'Scheduled Castes'. His choice of the term Dalit contributed to the formation and visibility of the Dalit identity.

According to Mangalam (2014), after Ambedkar, the Dalit Movement split. Two Dalit writer activists Namder Dhasal and J. V. Pawar formed the Dalit Panthers Movement in Bombay in 1972, adding new meaning to the term Dalit. Ghose (2003) points out that today Untouchables prefer the use of the term Dalit in order to assert their identity. Unfortunately, as he goes on to add, the idea of the

[...] polluted bonded servant is so entwined in the subcontinental mind that the dalit remains at the bottom of the intellectual and emotional landscape of contemporary India, however far he may advance in a public career and agitate for change (GHOSE, 2003, p. 86).

Nevertheless, the fight for self-assertion is still today the main dominant of the Dalit: in fighting against all forms of discrimination they not only seek to affirm Dalit identity but also introduce substantial changes in Indian social foundation.

Ambedkar's ideas imbued Dalits with self respect, and this awareness of their own condition became the main dominant of their literary narratives. With this end in mind, Dalit writers appropriated for themselves, in Ranciere's words (2011, p. 71), their "[...] place of work and exploitation [...]" to exercise their "[...] sensory equipment" and go beyond their allocated place in society. Ranciere (2011, p. 56) explains this process as one of "[...] seizing and rending [...]" that highlights the performative quality of narratives: 'seizing' experience and 'rending' it into some new kind of experience that might help mitigate suffering and turn it into some sort of positive action for the betterment of society.

The term *Dalit* already points to the desire of this community to problematize their condition of oppression. Although in Marathi it means 'oppressed or ground down', this meaning has been superseded by its reference to the "[...] militancy of the Dalit Panthers and their solidarity with all oppressed groups that have been exploited politically and economically in the name of religion" (HOLMSTRÖM, 2005, p. XI).

In turn, the Dalit movement was not one but many and took roots in different parts of the subcontinent. As Mangalam (2014, p. 150) explains,

The most important of the early Dalit movements were the Ad-Dharm movement in the Punjab (organized 1926); the movement under Ambedkar in Maharastra, mainly based among Mahars which had its organizational beginnings in 1924; the Namashudra movement in Bengal; the Adi-Dravida movement in Tamil Nadu; the Adi-Karnataka movement; the Adi-Hindu movement mainly centered around Kanpur in U.P; and the organizing of the Pulayas and Cherumans in Kerala.

The writer that concerns us in this paper, Bama, is from Tamil Nadu. In this region, as we have seen, the Adi-Dravida movement stood out and it was foremost in the construction of the Dalit identity. Mangalam (2014) points out that it was E. V. Rama Swamy (1879-1973), popularly known as Periyar, who led the self-respect movement in Tamil Nadu; it criticized the dominance of the Brahminical religion and "[...] its social dimension of buttressing up social iniquity and in humanity" (PERIYAR apud MANGALAM, 2014, p. 154); its main aim was to both unify the people of the country and boost their self-respect. Another prominent figure in Tamil Nadu, as Mangalam (2014) observes, was Jyothee Thassay whose main aim was to fight for social emancipation through education for the Untouchables and an egalitarian Dravidian identity.

Likewise, the term Dalit has been used to refer to the many social evils endured by the community, among them, the condition of Dalit women. Mangalam (2014) explains that Ambedkar fought for women's rights and education. He says that

[...] while Manusmruthi enslaved women, Ambedkar awakened their mind, ignited their heart, strengthened their energies and resurrected them as powerful human beings. He fought against the state and society to realize justice for women (MANGALAM, 2014, p. 162).

Inspired in these movements, Dalit literature should be understood as the writings produced to communicate to society, both within and beyond the Indian subcontinent, the sufferings of the people who live within the lower rank of the Hindu caste hierarchy. These people have historically been oppressed by the people of the higher strata whose aim is to perpetuate the caste system. Through their writings, the Dalits have started a quiet revolution that aims at giving voice to its silenced members so that they will not pass unnoticed, and thus change their status from objects of pity to that of agents of their own lives.

In the same way as, in the Western literary canon, people from marginalized social classes or ethnic groups have been historically relegated to the borders of canonical narratives, Dalits in India have been portrayed as minor figures that watch from the edge of life and literature. Mukherjee (LIMBALE, 2004) acutely observes that both Dalit literature and Dalit literary criticism constitute themselves as an answer to Gayatri Spivak's famous question 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' They actually do so when they, firstly deconstruct their inferior position as High Caste Hindu's Other by rewriting Classical Indian Literature, sanctioned by religion purity. Dalits were not allowed to learn Sanskrit, so as not to pollute the language or this canonical literary tradition. Therefore, they created a new literary canon in the local languages. Second, Dalits also address Spivak's question when they contest Westernized Indian Literature in English committed to the needs of the individual. As they have historically been stigmatized as a community of Untouchables, for the Dalits the community stands above the needs of the individual.

What has emerged is a literary tradition that in its desire to restore the dignity of its community poses a challenge to mainstream Indian literature both in content and in form. Its main genre is that of life narratives (SMITH; WATSON, 2010), in the form of autobiographies and fictional autobiographies that offer themselves as metaphors of visibility. As for the content, these life narratives break away from both traditional autobiography and bourgeois Indian literature since they look at the Indian social hierarchy from below, rather, than above and instead of depicting the plight of any individual in particular, they depict the life of the community as a whole because for the Dalit, the individual's predicament can only be defined in relation to its community. In other words, they are stories that rather than depict the exploits of an individual, they narrate the conflicts of a community.

In terms of form, also in consonance with life narratives that defy established generic forms of autobiography, these narratives go beyond the limits of Hindu propriety as they use a style of language that is sometimes considered as being coarse or crude and, therefore, a challenge to canonical Indian literature. The idea is that if Dalit narratives constitute a literature of dissensus, they should reject Upper Caste standards not only through the subject matter addressed but also through the language employed, which should be truthful to the Dalit reality. Hence, as Mukherjee (LIMBALE, 2004) argues, these narratives do not depict otherworldly concerns, as Indian canonical writing

might do, or involves itself with the insecurities or desires of the individual. Rather, they portray the life of their community in all its harshness and complexity.

Also, unlike the representation of Dalit characters even by well-meaning canonical writers, such as Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004) who reduce Dalits to a discourse marked by "[...] sympathy and compassion [...]" (LIMBALE, 2004, p. 10), the men and women who populate the pages of Dalit narratives might not have happy or easy lives, but at no point are they constructed as being martyrs due to their circumstances. Instead, they are presented as people who are not afraid to put up a fight in order to preserve what belongs to them. Through its body of narratives, then, Dalit literature tries to counteract the discourse of the caste system by offering a corrective view of how the Dalit subject's identity has been constituted by its condition of existence. What emerges is a literature of commitment and resistance that in making room for a people who have been traditionally overlooked aims at changing both the mindset of the Dalit community about themselves and also the way in which they have been traditionally considered as being inferior to the rest of the Indian community. In turn, this new ethics, communicated through literary narratives, in particular life narratives, relates Dalits to all subjugated communities around the world.

Within the Dalit literary tradition, the narratives by the women writers of the community stand out since their alienation is twofold as it is caused by both Brahminical and patriarchal values. Traditionally, Dalit women have been excluded and subjugated by the men and women of the higher castes as well as by the men of their own caste and their own family. Their vulnerability is due to sexual oppression, economic exploitation and social discrimination. In order to survive, they have to fight for the basic needs such as food and water. Though relegated to minor tasks that people from the higher castes and even Dalit men refuse to do, many times these women are the sole providers of their family.

However, as Tomar (2013) observes, the fact of being excluded even from the Indian Feminist Movement has turned them into fighters rather than victims. They have thus founded Dalit Feminism or better, Dalit Womanism, in order to define their conditions of experience. The term 'womanism', Tomar (2013) explains, was coined by Alice Walker; it is much more appropriate to the condition of Dalit women than the more restricted term Feminism because it refers to racial, cultural, sexual, national, economic and political conflicts.

One of the ways through which Dalit women have been able to produce a rupture in this paradigm of oppression due to gender, caste and class is through the writing of autobiographical pieces or life narratives that as Tomar (2013) points out, can be considered as testimonies of their own condition. These writings that intertwine the fictional and the nonfictional, literature and experience defy the established hierarchy of Dalit and non-Dalit women by investing the latter with knowledge and power. These narratives study the caste, social, economic and political specificities that have constructed Dalit women as such in order to rescue them from this position of inferiority. However, if in canonical literature by progressive men writers, Dalit women are depicted sympathetically but always as victims of violence or rape, Dalit women writers portray themselves and the women of their communities as subjects who resist and fight back “[...] like any other victim of social oppression to guard their dignity” (TOMAR, 2013, p. 3).

The Dalit women’s marginalization within the tradition of Dalit literature is evident at several levels. The number of literate Dalit women is lower than that of Dalit men; few of them have had the chance to write their life narratives; their narratives are written in the regional languages and have seldom been translated into English to reach a wider audience (TOMAR, 2013). Their narratives, though, are a significant contribution to the condition of the Dalit women since writing allows them not only to voice their pain and humiliation but also to make visible their quest for improvement in their family lives, jobs and salaries. In other words, their literature goes beyond a portrayal of the condition of the Dalit women as objects of pity to become a serious critique of the caste system encouraged by Hindu society that has historically subjugated them. As already pointed out, one such writer is Bama from Tamil Nadu, author of two autobiographical novels, *Karukku* (1992) and *Sangati* (1994). Both books have been written in Tamil and translated into English by Lakshmi Holmström.

Morris (1996, p. 33) argues that “[...] speech genres depend on the existence of specific discourse communities”. In other words, some textual genres make more sense within one community than in another. Precisely, life narratives are essentials to communities that, as noticed before, are trying hard to change their own condition within the national and international scenarios. This is so because, as Morris (1996, p. 33) adds, “[...] speech genres, do more than assure that there is a voice speaking. They help to shape the substance of what is being said”. Thus, the autobiographies by Dalit writers, both

men and women, first and foremost are a realm through which they try to better understand their own condition; then, these narratives become a discourse through which they can make their predicament heard and, finally, they are turned into a call for action.

According to Tharu and Lalita (1991), the genre autobiography is of great relevance within the Indian literary tradition. It is a genre that was introduced in the subcontinent by the English and marks a new tradition of writing by women. It shows the passage from poetry, the most important genre in Indian precolonial literature, to prose after the English colonization, and already announces the novel. Following the European tradition, these early autobiographies in India focus on the lives of individual women, who, even though belonging to upper caste families, narrate their own stories in very adverse circumstances, after learning to read and write almost by themselves or with the help of their more illuminated husbands, but always in hiding, without the knowledge of the traditional women of the family.

In the hands of the Dalit women writers, autobiography becomes a new genre that, after Caplan’s (1998) reference to autobiographies by Afro-American women, could be called “[...] community autobiography [...]” (CAPLAN, 1998, p. 209), because it goes beyond the realm of the self to the realm of the community precisely as its intention is not to depict the life of one individual, as in Western literature, but the predicament of a whole community. A new genre for a new cultural substance that shows that what matters about community autobiography, as in the case of any other genre

[...] is the social action that it is used to accomplish [because] a rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the ‘action’ it is used to accomplish (MILLER, 1984, p. 151, our underlines).

In other words, the corrective action it can promote within any society to do away with its evils. In the case of Dalit life narratives, they are translated into social action when they show both the “[...] warmth and physicality” among its members but also, “[...] sexism, violence, internal rivalry, and conflict, competition for survival, drunkenness and death” (LIMBALE, 2004, p. 10), promoted by the wretched living conditions to which they have been reduced. Miller (1984, p. 152) goes on to add that

[...] if genre represents action, it must involve situation and motive, because human action, whether symbolic or otherwise, is interpretable only

against a context of situation and through the attributing of motives.

And this is why Dalit autobiographies are so central to the Dalit literary tradition: they explain motive, expose context and call for social action.

More recently, Smith and Watson (2010) have problematized the term 'autobiography' because, as it

[...] privileges the autonomous individual and the universalizing life story as the definitive achievement of life writing, it has been vigorously challenged in the wake of post-modern and postcolonial critiques of the Enlightenment subject (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 3).

Alternatively, as the authors go on to add, life writing refers to narratives that many times have been considered as

[...] [having] lesser value and [not being] true autobiographies—the slave narrative, narratives of women's domestic lives, coming-of-age and travel narratives, among others (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 3).

In this context, rather than using the term 'autobiography', these authors prefer to use the term 'life narrative' because it is 'more inclusive of the heterogeneity of self-referential practices' (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 4). Precisely, the narratives by Bama would enter into this second category because as she says in the Preface to *Karukku*, "[her autobiography] stands as a means of strength to the multitudes whose identities have been destroyed and denied" (BAMA, 1992, p. x), thus blending the fate of the narrative self with that of her community. Although the term autobiography has gained currency in Dalit Literary Criticism, as Laskshmi Holström's use of the word in the Introduction to *Karukku* attests, I will take the liberty to call it 'life narrative' in order to highlight the marginal quality of the lives it recreates as well as the type of literature it represents.

In *Karukku*, Bama, a Christian Dalit, talks about her own experience of growing up within the Dalit community in Tamil Nadu, being educated by nuns and then deciding to give up the teaching profession to become a writer. Dalits were converted to Christianity with the promise that they would be rescued from their condition of untouchables. However, many times they were doubly discriminated: for being Dalits and for being Christians. Also, as Bama discusses, within the Indian Christian community they were still discriminated due to their condition of Dalits.

Hence, if it is a narrative of deprivation, it is also a narrative in which the fact of being educated offers

to the woman protagonist the possibility of making certain choices and introducing changes into her own life, as she attests in both narratives. As Bama herself says in the Preface to *Karukku*, if her autobiography is the outcome of a "[...] wounded self", "[...] it has been a means of relieving the pain of others who were wounded" (BAMA, 1992, p. X).

This new identity is already implied in the name of the narrative, *Karukku*. In Tamil, this word refers to the *palmyra leaves* with serrated edges on both sides, just like a sword, calling attention to the idea that Bama's fight against the Dalit's condition is done through her pen, her weapon of resistance, sharper than a sword. This characteristic of the palmyra leaf also points to the acute quality of Bama's text as it addresses the conflicts of her upbringing, both at home and in the convent, in a direct manner, relating experience and narrative as she acknowledges in the Preface to the novel:

There are many congruities between the saw-edged palmyrakarukku and my own life. Not only did I pick up the scattered palmyrakarukku in the days when I was sent out to gather firewood [...] but later they also became the embryo and symbol that grew into this book (BAMA, 1992, p. xxiii).

Also, as Holmström (2011, p. XV) explains, the word 'karukku' in Tamil contains the word 'karu' that means 'embryo' or 'seed' and also implies 'freshness', 'newness', already referring to both a new kind of literary genre, the actual autobiographies rewritten by Dalit women as cultural autobiographies, and the possibility of a new kind of experience as implied in these narratives.

It is this educated self, who has been able to analyze her own condition in a reflective and critical manner, that now feels empowered to look beyond herself in order to make room for the women of her own community in her second novel *Sangati*, word that in English translates as 'news' or 'events'. Again, the name of the narrative is meaningful because the plot of this fictional life narrative is not linear, but organized around a chain of interconnected stories, anecdotes and memories of personal experience told by the many women of the community. In this sense, it is a plural or communal narrative. What gives unity to it is that all these stories deal with women's experiences both from the present and the past as the novel deals with several generations. While in the first chapter, the narrator presents herself as a girl of twelve, in the last chapters she is already a young woman. This allows her to position herself simultaneously inside the community, as a girl growing up in its midst, and outside the community, as an educated woman who left her

family to attend college, and then instead of pursuing her own welfare, came back to denounce the condition of her people, a characteristic that, by itself, ranks her story within the scope of life narratives.

These stories, which take place in the outside villages to which Dalits are relegated, already commenting on their physical segregation from Hindu society, are organized in a series of narrative circles. The stories of the first or inner circle comprise the first person narratives of the different women of the community who tell the narrator about their everyday life events, their suffering, but also their moments of happiness and the sisterhood among women. Bearing the marks of the oral tradition, these stories and memories “[...] tell stories of self, family or community that illuminate the legacies of larger historical formations [...]” (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 29), in this case, the injustices of the caste system.

The narratives of the second or middle circle structure themselves through the conversations between the narrator, her grandmother, Paatti, and her mother encompassing what Smith and Watson (2010, p. 29) call “[...] a multigenerational family history”. They explain to the narrator why things are the way they are, thus reconstructing their history of pain and suffering: “One day Paatti was grooming my hair. [...] And while she was at it, she’d give me all the gossip of the village. On that day, a boy called Kaatturaasa went past us [...]” (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 5).

The narratives of the third or outer circle read like essayistic vignettes because they deal with the reflections the narrator makes on the quality of the stories received, imbuing them with a new significance that transcends the limit of the narrative and thrusts them back into the life of the community. She is the one who can question the experience of the Dalit community because she realizes, as Scott (1991) observes, that experience is not solely personal but is socially produced; therefore, she is the one who can “[...] bridge experience and analysis [...]” (HOLMSTRÖM, 2005, p. XVI) and, therefore, relate the life of the Dalit individual, to the life of the community and, in turn, to the life of the nation. Taking into account her own experience as well as the experiences depicted in the life stories by the women of her community, the narrator can question “Why they are who they are?”:

All the same, because of our caste and because of our poverty, every fellow treats us with contempt. If ever there is a problem or a disturbance, everyone,

starting with the police, chooses to blame and humiliate the women of our community. The government does not seem prepared to do anything to redress this. So we must take up the challenge ourselves (BAMA, 1996 p. 66).

In bringing together the voices of all the women of the community, the narrator presents their testimonies as an appeal for direct action. In Friedman’s (1998, p. 76) words: “[...] women as a group can develop an alternative way of seeing themselves by constructing a group identity based on their historical experience”. This attitude shows that the suffering of Dalits and the Dalit women in India is not a changeless condition, but a situation that can and must be altered. In this sense, as Holmström (2005) points out, Bama’s narrative contributes directly not only to the life quality of the Dalit community but also to the Women’s Movement within this community since the Dalit struggle has often forgotten a gender perspective. As the narrator asks of her grandmother, Paatti, “Why can’t we be the same as boys? [...] Even when our stomachs are screaming with hunger, we mustn’t eat first [...] What, Paatti, aren’t we also human beings?” (BAMA, 1996, p. 29).

The narrator’s questioning and reflection reaches a higher level when she dares doubt even the sacred books of the culture, and ask for alternative ways of conduct that might rewrite the manner in which they have been traditionally put down. One such case is her re-reading of Tiruvalluvar’s writings. He was a celebrated Tamil poet and philosopher, who is thought to have lived in Tamil Nadu between the first century B. C and the eighth century AD. His main contribution to Tamil literature was a work on ethics called *Thirukkural*. There are several famous anecdotes on the relationship between the poet and his wife, Vaasuki, who devoted her life to serving him. One of them is related by Bama through her narrator:

Paatti asked me in her turn, ‘Do you think it’s been like this just yesterday or today? Hasn’t all this been written about in books as well, haven’t you read about it?

‘What’s in the books? You talk as if you’ve read it all yourself’.

[...] Oh yes, it is about the wife of someone called Tiruvalluvar, you know’. Seems she would sit next to her husband, pick up the grains of cooked rice that scattered from his leaf with a needle, and rinse them out. Must have been a very finicky lady. Look, why couldn’t she have picked them up with her fingers? Anyway, the point is that even in those days, the women ate after the men.’ So, what would be so wrong if we changed and the women ate first? (BAMA, 1996, p. 29-30).

While Paatti tries to show to her granddaughter that customs have been like this forever because they are contained in the books of the culture, passed down from one generation to the next, her granddaughter doubts the truthfulness of such teachings to which the community has only had access through hearsay because most of its members, like Paatti herself, cannot even read or write. The narrator's perspective not only cancels the sacredness of such narratives, but also the quality of their experience by proposing a new kind of action, something as simple as women eating first.

As the passages above show, like the narratives by oppressed women around the world, Dalit women's narratives are written not only for introspective or aesthetic ends, (GAGNIER, 1998) but also and equally important for communicative ends. Their narratives help Dalit women realize that their suffering does not depend solely on their own particular actions, but on the fate of their community dictated by a society organized in castes. In other words, as Scott (1991, p. 27) observes, "[...] experience is a process by which subjectivity is constructed [...]" and as experience is embedded in language, through the denial of the narratives of the culture and the writing of their own narratives, Dalit women can recognize themselves as such and also struggle to change their condition. This is what has to be communicated both to the people of their own circle and beyond to achieve solidarity.

Bama's narrative also offers itself as an example of Friedman's reflection (BAMA, 1996, p. 76) that when women are given the "[...] power of words and representation [...]" the identity they project is not purely individualistic or purely collective but one that merges "[...] the shared and the unique". This sense of community, she goes on to add, is a source of "[...] strength and transformation [...]" because when several narratives on the same topic are united they reach the level of social document: the cultural representation of women that arises from genres such as autobiography have the potential to develop a new 'consciousness or self' since they help them move beyond their condition of silenced and alienated beings.

The different anecdotes that make up the first or inner circle thus tell about women's past and present lives, to warn future generations and to show the world what they have to put up with. First, they tell of the discrimination girls suffer from the moment of birth,

As Paatti said, it is quite true that the women in our street led hard lives. That's how it is from the time they are very little. If a boy baby cries, he is instantly

picked and given milk. It is not so with the girls [...]
(BAMA, 1996, p. 7).

Then, as Dalit women's lives do not follow the pattern of the higher castes or middle class society, the telling that structures their narratives is also differentiated. Rather than starting with anecdotes or memories of childhood, that usually comprise games and education, common among middle class introspective autobiographical narratives, from the beginning, Dalit community life narratives tell about the hardships young girls have to endure since an early age when, though still children, they start to work:

In our street girls hardly ever enjoy a period of childhood. Before they can sprout three tender leaves, so to speak, they are required to behave like young women, looking after the household, taking care of babies, going out to work for daily wages (BAMA, 1996, p. 75).

For all their suffering, these women's narratives reveal an attitude that shows not a diminished but a superior being from very early in life: "Yet, in spite of all their suffering and pain one cannot but be delighted by the sparkling words, their firm tread, and their bubbling laughter" (BAMA, 1996, p. 75).

The stories then go on to tell about the violence inflicted upon them by caste and gender oppression at the hand of their landlords or their own husbands within their own houses. Women working in the fields are actually harassed or raped by men from upper castes. However, the blame is always put upon them. On top of that, after a day of hard labour, they are subjected to their husband's sexual demands:

The position of women is both pitiful and humiliating, really. In the fields they have to escape from upper-caste men's molestations. At church they must lick the priest's shoes and be his slaves while he threatens them with tales of God, Heaven and Hell. Even when they go to their own homes, before they have a chance to cook some kanji or lie down and rest a little, they have to submit themselves to a husband's torments (BAMA, 1996, p. 35).

Nevertheless, women's testimonies go beyond the portrayal of the victimized female to the explanation of the cultural and historical conditions that produce such violence within the community, as brought about by the narrator in the third or outer circle of her narrative:

Nowadays, when I reflect on how the men in our streets went about drinking and beating their wives, I wonder whether all that violence was because there

was nowhere else for them to exert their male pride or to show off their authority. All that suppressed anger was evented when they came home and beat up their wives to a pulp.

Even though they are male, because they are Dalits, they have to be like dogs with their tails rolled up when they are in the fields, and dealing with their landlords. There is no way they can show their strength in those circumstances. So they show it at home on their wives and children. But then, is it the fate of our women to be tormented both outside their houses and within? (BAMA, 1996, p. 65)

This circle of the narrative is of utmost importance because as Scott (1991) points out, for the documentation of experience through literature to be successful it is necessary not only to make visible the plight of a community (because it might have the opposite effect of only reproducing the ideology that gave rise to it), but more importantly it is necessary to attend.

[...] to the historical processes that through discourse position subjects and produce their experiences. It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience (SCOTT, 1991, p. 30).

In other words, the narrator's reflections reveal that the Dalit's experience is a construct and not something given and, as such, it can be changed.

Also, to emphasize the Dalits' humanity and capacity for change, they are portrayed in the stories and anecdotes of the inner circle sharing a good laugh as when a woman from the community takes a hen to the priest as an offer for Christmas:

Bhakkiyam came up to the altar railing, took out the hen that she had kept under her sari, and handed it to the samiyar. The hen flapped its wings and raised a cry that must have reached seven villages away. The entire congregation began to laugh (BAMA, 1996, p. 34).

In the same light, the stories also tell about women's sisterhood and the rituals that brighten their day revealing them from an angle that rather than emphasize the brutality produced by poverty and violence, shows their beauty and modesty as when girls come of age:

In our street, when a young girl came of age, they made a little hutlike room inside the house, with palmyra fronds, and got her to sit there for sixteen days [...] (BAMA, 1996, 15).

These rituals are accompanied by singing even when the families go without food indirectly revealing their power of endurance:

On Friday morning, at day-break
She came of age, the people said.

Her mother was delighted, her father too—
Her uncles, arrived, all in a row (BAMA, 1996, p. 15).

Instead of presenting a disfunctional society, the song depicts a family in which female and male relatives are in harmony united in the celebration of rites of passage which are of relevance to their community. Also, wedding ceremonies are shown in all their simplicity and beauty:

There usually were pipes and horns as well as drums, with cow's membrane stretched tightly across them. Inside the church hall, all five bridegrooms were getting ready in their wedding vetis, shirts, and gold-edged shoulder clothes. Besides the church, under a big tree, the five brides were being dressed and made up. All the women and children were gathered there" (BAMA, 1996, p. 83).

The stories also tell how girls dress their saris in a particular manner to indicate whether they are single or married:

Usually, when they went to work in the fields, the women wore their saris with the pleats at the back. But the brides wore their pleats in front, like modern educated girls (BAMA, 1996, p. 83).

The custom already reveals a refinement and modesty that goes against received notions of the Dalit women as being coarse viragoes. Like all women from marginalized communities around the world, Dalit women are breadwinners by force. It is this demand from an early age that turns them into harsh women when they grow up because they will have to fend for themselves.

To illustrate this point, the narrator tells the story of Maikanni, a young girl who while collecting twigs is harassed by a man of the community, only to conclude that the girl is not an ordinary victim. Sadly this girl, who makes a living for her family by working in a match-stick factory, is endowed with a common sense and acuteness that goes beyond her tender age and shows that maturity has come to her early in life. At the same time, this quality, instead of turning her into a new martyr, will transform her into a hard skinned, shrewd woman that, when seen from the outside, might be taken for a virago:

Reflecting on all that had happened to this child, at such a young age, I was filled with pain on the one hand, and wonder on the other. If she was required to work far harder than her years demanded, she also behaved with a commonsense far beyond her years (BAMA, 1996, p. 75).

At a different level, these examples show that life narratives as Gagnier (1998) explains, are a discursive arena that empowers women because they are able to represent themselves, to tell their suffering from their own perspectives, showing not

only the consequences of their actions that many times appear to the outsider as unreasonable violence, but also the historical and social causes that provoke them. In so doing, these narratives become, in the words of Gagnier (1998, p. 266), a realm of “[...] subjective disempowerment by the subjecting discourse of others”.

Another such instance of simultaneous empowerment and disempowerment is when the narrator explains women’s use of obscene language, full of sexual connotations, as well as the fights that took place daily, in the street where she lived, between husbands and wives. They were both loud and aggressive and rather than behaving meekly or submitting to the husband’s beating, women fought back showing the same aggression and violence that men exercised against them. Again, the narrator offers an explanation for this behaviour that might seem uncomely to people from higher castes who use them to justify their discrimination against the Dalit:

At first, when I saw what Raakkamma [a woman neighbour] did, I too was disgusted, and thought to myself, ‘Chi, how can she expose herself like that?’ But later, I realized that it was only after she screamed and shouted and behaved like that that he let her go. I realized that she acted in that way because it was her only means of escape (BAMA, 1996, p. 62).

All these events from *Sangati* have been enumerated to show that all these life narratives are powerful because they claim to be true; they are created out of cultural and political conflicts. Through them, Bama is proposing a new kind of feminine identity that goes beyond received notions of innocence, modesty, shyness to encourage courage, fearlessness, independence and self-esteem among women (HOLMSTRÖM, 2005), as the only qualities that will actually be useful in the tough life that awaits them. At the same time, they are also profoundly emotive and creative showing that Dalit life narratives have not only political or social but also artistic value.

Also they reveal the performatic quality of literature, the fact that by articulating experience through the written word, it can be turned into a differentiated kind of experience. In so doing these narratives disrupt not only mainstream literature but also directly attack cultural beliefs that relegate people to the margins. As such, they instigate Dalit women to resist any kind of superstition or tradition that tells them that there is no alternative for them because fate, as a kind of insurmountable experience, has already decided their destiny. As the narrator asserts:

I decided then that it is up to us to be aware of our situation, and not fool ourselves that ‘we’ have been possessed by ‘peys’ [spirits]. ‘We’ must be strong. ‘We’ must show by our own resolute lives that ‘we’ believe ardently in our independence. I told myself that ‘we’ must never allow our minds to be worn out, damaged, and broken in the belief that this is our fate. Just as ‘we’ work hard so long as there is strength in our bodies, so too, must ‘we’ strengthen our hearts and minds in order to survive (BAMA, 1996, p. 59, our underlines).

The passage from *Sangati* reveals the moment of transition when the first person singular, ‘I’, becomes a first person plural, ‘we’, revealing in an explicit way the interdependence between the individual and the community. It is highly meaningful because it shows how the narrator infuses the women of the community with her strength, through her calling for action and independence, at the time that she herself learns from their experience. This is the actual moment of transition when the autobiographical narrative becomes a life narrative, encompassing the community that show that genres are not fixed but dynamic and can only be explained when related to cultural or historical contingences. More than that, as I have tried to show, rather than being considered as a form, genres, and the literary narratives articulated through them, can be understood as social action (MILLER, 1984) because they can actually contribute to promote social change.

Conclusion

As narratives shorten distances, with whatever is different from us, they lead us to think ethically and pay attention, as Baldwin (1993, p. 114) remarks, not only to “[...] the content but to the values embedded within the stories”. And this is why they are so important to make people aware of other cultural contexts and, eventually, help mitigate their suffering because if narratives highlight communities’ values and beliefs they also reveal their injustices. Rather than only recreate what is beautiful in our own or other people’s community in order to educate through aesthetic contemplation, narratives also present us with what is ugly to raise our consciousness.

And this is no mere play on words but a strategy for cultural survival among people who fight for a dignified life. As Gagnier (1998, p. 265) points out

[...] such functionalist uses of the literary contrast markedly with the aesthetic of detached individualism represented by literature in general and by the autobiographical canon in particular.

Dalit life narratives are thus a differentiated kind of literature that breaks many of elite literatures' laws because they call for a new kind of experience: they are openly political and communal because they pressure the boundaries of what is considered as being 'literary' in order to fight against unfair and degrading social customs.

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