



**Inscribing Identity in History: A Study of Dalit and Afro-American Women
Writings in Context of Bama's *Karukku* and Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New
Spelling of My Name***

PRIYANKA JINDAL

University of Delhi

Abstract

The issue of identity has been a contested category from the very beginning, especially for the people existing on the peripheries. This paper would try to explicate how Audre Lorde and Bama reconstruct the concept of margin in context of identity formation. Bama and Lorde seek to break away from structural ideologies built around the work of a Dalit and Black author and overturn these institutionally created barriers.

The paper will also focus upon the concept of history formation within the context of existence of multiple margins and further explore Bama's *Karukku* and Audre Lorde's *Zami* in the same line of thought. The most thought-provoking facet of comprehending these authors is that their identity is a potpourri of different yet very strong traits. The grandiloquent narratives which have been constructed and carved in the consciousness of the masses needed to be dismantled and reformulated. Studying the personal narratives of these women confers an insight into their lives encased in the culture of their respective community. By using the same, it tries to analyze the workings of the autobiographical tradition which both these authors enumerate and represent. It further liberates the confinements of patterns and structures imposed upon these subaltern voices. It tries to chart the narratives of the life of these two authors and explain how they attempt to emerge out of the compartmentalization which they are subjected to. There is also a keen study of the disappearing accounts of tales from below and the reworking of the concept that 'history is fiction'. The research also focuses upon the application of the idea of difference which post-modern theory encapsulates and sees their narratives and identity formation process; not on the note of lamentation or enchantment with the past but as a beacon for the future generations, emancipating them from any kind of structural fixation.

Key words: Bama, Dalit, Afro-American Women, Identity, Black.

Bama becomes one of the most eminent figures in the Dalit women writing tradition and her book becomes a literary narrative which concretizes its position in the history of Dalit as well as Indian literature. Her works expound many issues which makes the readers rethink about the conservative cultural social and literary practices in Indian literary scene. Interwoven in the

personal narrative presented in her book, are the narratives which revamp and displace the face of religious heads, the patricentric discourses, and also the conformist feminist discourses.

Bama is a pen name of 'Bathima'. She was born in 1958 in a small village named W. Puthupatti in the southern district of Tamil Nadu. She has written novels such as *Karukku* (1992), *Sangathi* (1998) and a series of short stories. *Karukku* belongs to the genre of autobiographical writings. A post-modern perspective endows the author, the liberty to absorb or forego a horde of identities (making his/her 'self') and map the culture that the author has been a product of. Another thing which the text manages to accomplish is that it gives the interpreter the freedom and opportunity to study the culture of numerous communities, examine identities, and embrace the existence of dissimilarity.

Patricentric histories have gone hitherto uncontested, foreshadowing women's alternative accounts of history. So women take upon the charge to fill up the gaps and fissures left out by the overriding historical accounts ultimately amending the univocal, monolithic versions of history. While going through the narrative of the author what comes into forefront is that there are histories intermeshed in histories and histories revising histories, histories clashing with other histories. Bama's 'Christian' identity clashes with her 'Dalit' identity and forms a unique history in itself. It delineates the corrupt history enveloped in the structure of the church which itself is caste based. Her 'gender' clashes with her being a 'Dalit', for the oppression she faces is caste based as well as from the Dalit men.

Reading Bama, then, brings in this new perspective of looking at politics of identity, power structures, religion, quest for a legitimate history, questions about the legitimacy of history, and whether literature constitutes history. Moreover, it helps one to gaze at things in a postmodern

context where we need to gaze at things as fluid, multiple, revolving and cross questioning each other as well as co-existing. Recounting her experiences in *Karukku*, she comes to an insight that the promises which this new religion delivered in the garb of colonialism and independence thereafter, to their community, were just baseless and false claims. Her tryst with the shallow workings of the institution left her disillusioned by all what she read about Christianity. The Christian missionaries hunted for people to convert them to their religion in the colonies and Dalits searched for a meta-narrative or structure which would subsume them and provide them a respectable space in society. In the hope for a better life, Dalits converted to Christianity for they thought that it was their 'prospect for a worthy future'. Bama unveils all these sordid truths about her community which went unnoticed in the wake of Indian independence. The independence was for selected few for the Dalits suffered the same fate as before. They lived under the similar shadow of untouchability. Bama worked in a convent where the Tamil nuns were treated differently and the Tamil-Dalit nuns were considered lowest of the low. An institution which is sacrosanct turns out to be something which is actually profane. At one point she says in the text "I lamented inwardly that there was no place that was free of caste. And so at last I became a nun and was sent to a convent elsewhere" (22). She uncovers the corrupt psychology of the religious heads and the nuns working in the order who would express their scorn for the Dalits and treat them with prejudice. As Lancy Lobo also records in her essay "Visions, Illusions and Dilemmas: Dalit Christians in India" that the proportion of Christian-Dalit priest in Tamil Nadu is 3 %. It clearly depicts the biases practiced against the Christian-Dalits. She recounts "I was shocked when I saw this convent and the school attached to it...and this convent too was not without its caste divisions' . . . people of my community were looking after all the jobs like sweeping the premises, swabbing and washing the classrooms. . . " (22). This aspect of history was always

sidelined by the overarching and glorious history of the nation when the history of communities of Dalits went missing. The Dalit movements tried to unearth these concealed truths. The literature which was written in the beginning was predominantly the Marathi literature and mostly by men. Authors such as Bama provide a window to different facets of Dalit literature and her autobiographical work *Karukku* is a testament of this new literary history. She dismantles the old and conventional views about history, identity, religion amongst other things and relieves us out of the illusionary aspect of the truth claims which the documented history commands. The marginalized status which she had witnessed and experienced had changed the course of her attitude to life. She respectfully chooses a life to educate the underprivileged children and women.

Another thing which is fore grounded is the dialectical relationship which this story of an individual (woman) and the community shares. The role of the society and community as explicated earlier curbed the growth of the individual who is in some ways accorded a 'thrice' marginalized position. The Dalit woman or the young girl had to fight to be educated or struggle for it just because of the fear that she would not find a suitable match if well educated. While on one hand education was distinctively considered normative for boys, the girls were kept at bay from it. Bama seems to suffer from same pangs of worries and anxieties in her own life regarding this issue. Education turns out to be a window for the uneducated underprivileged women to achieve some sort of equality and this was exactly what they were denied. Hence she chooses to become an educator. She recapitulates the words of her Annan who speaks about the importance of education leaving an imprint on her mind. Bama also explicates the concerns about the marital status which a woman faces in her community. She delineates how a single woman in her community is pried upon as "all sorts of men gather towards her showing their teeth" (102).

Vidyut Bhagwat in “Dalit Women in India: Issues and Perspectives” (1995), delineates “dalit” additionally as signifying “change and revolution”, with protest against exploitation and oppression comprising the core of Dalit consciousness, could offer critical new proportions as well as energy to both the Dalit movement and the women’s movement. Dalit women played an active role and formed a secular space for themselves in the contemporary scenario. The National Federation of Dalit Women hurried in August 1995. The key schemas of this forum were to assist Dalit women to forge an identity of their own and address their needs. One of the most noteworthy aspects of this forum was that it was not a separatist platform but addressed the concerns pertaining to Dalit movement, women’s movement, and Dalit women’s movement in a common fight/struggle against the structures curbing their socio-economic-political empowerment. All these revolutionary aspects which the Dalit women have undertaken to liberate their voice depict how the margins hold the center together and how the margins have the power to move the center.

The title of Bama’s book connotes rather symbolizes what it literally stands for. The ‘karukku’ which is a double edged leaf also refers to the double edged sword, much like the Dalit woman who undercuts the discourse of the caste and patriarchy and emerges on her own with a peculiar identity. It is in her second novel *Sangathi* that Bama focuses upon the history of the Dalit women oppressed by both the Dalit men and upper caste men. She witnesses a lot of repression and violence hailed against the Dalit women of her community and even her own household.

Autobiographical genre becomes one of the most employed literary-genre by the Dalit woman authors for it best explicates what they want to write about. The act of writing is not just something which is merely literary for them but becomes like a double edged tool which has a personal social agenda attached to it. Her works lay bare that the tales from the margins are much

more deep and significant in perceiving world, perceiving the structures as whole. Along with it they help in redefining our perceptions of the center and rethink about the conventional set ideologies and narratives which we grow upon. It is the self-narrations in form of literature which lead to a better understanding of the lives on the other side. While Bama was a pioneer in Dalit women writings in Tamil Nadu, South India, Lorde was also a torch bearer in Afro-American women's writing tradition.

Audre Lorde's life-writings is linguistic outlines of her own hybrid identity. In her biomythography *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), in her records of her experience with breast cancer "The Cancer Journals" (1980) and "A Burst of Light" (1988), in her essays in "Sister Outsider", and in many of her poems Lorde explores the issue of her position in society or politics of location. In her work *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, the title signifies what the writer purports to do in her work. The act of writing gives her the power to rename and reshape the identity which has been carved out for her. She renames herself in an entirely dissimilar discourse, a language which probably a white western discourse will not be able to comprehend.

Lorde in her work fashions an enchanting history of her past and her ancestors. Her focal point is to narrate the experiences of herself and the incredible women around her in a new spectrum. These women were circumscribed by many conventional patterns of living and 'controlled' and Lorde tries to dismantle these fictional claims about the black women and their history. This charting the historical becomes her way of mapping the old lost parts of her identity she assimilated through the oral literatures in the form of stories told by her mother primarily.

Lorde writes about spatial locations which went missing on the geographical maps constructed by the western discourse. Geography becomes a crucial aspect of Lorde's concerns. She constantly talks about past homelands which she and her ancestors left behind. She moves across

spaces inside her head and take voyages like a nomad to find a sense of belongingness and ease. This de-familiarity was prevalent in the story books she reads. The books, as she said, were ‘all about the people who were very different from us’. At one point she says that “no body wrote stories for us” (18). This dilemma of understanding the world in terms of black and white shaped the consciousness of the young author. She goes on to describe the place where her mother was born with many a references, like:

Carriacou, a magic name like cinnamon, nutmeg, mace, the delectable little squares of guava jelly each lovingly wrapped in tiny bits of crazy-quilt wax paper cut precisely from bread wrappers, the long sticks of dried vanilla and the sweet-smelling tonka bean, chalky brown nuggets of pressed chocolate for cocoa-tea, all set on a bed of wild bay laurel leaves, arriving every Christmas time in a well wrapped tea tin. (14)

This remembering of the past in an aesthetically alluring way depicts the literary capabilities which she encapsulated. The act of writing is always entwined with the political. The politics is an integral part of the historical construction because of its claims to certain sense of accurate, events which it promises to represent. The history which goes missing or unnoticed is the real history and it resides in the culture best epitomized and spoken about by the ordinary people. It is the little incidents in the novel which leads to recreation of history on her part. At all points in the text this is the history which Lorde intends to uncover and unleash at the white dominant discourse. This redefining of the peripheries is something which is remarkable in the field of the Afro-American women writings and Dalit women writings. Her book becomes a memoir, commemorating the presence and absence of all the women she encountered in her life; both black and white. She constructs the versions of history extremely deep and personal, the version which existed in the hushed voices of her community.

A post-modern stance gives her work a multidimensional perspective/connotation to the concept of documentation. As many have talked about; her work is a bio-mytho-graphy i.e. a composition of biography, history, and mythology. History especially in the postcolonial era came to be known as a process of selective truth telling. She explicates her history in a poem she writes in *Zami* which goes like;

I was the story of a phantom people

I was a hope of lives never lived

I was a thought-product of the emptiness of space (118)

Zami descends from the African American slave narrative and the lesbian coming out story – rallying it not as a marginal text, but rather a text that endorses a tradition of American literature. Both traditions turn suggestively on the trope of ‘home’, of finding a home where one belongs. In finding the "home" that she is seeking not, ultimately, geographically, but, rather, generically in the very text she is writing, Lorde's life story connotes the resemblance of these two disparate forms: the slave narrative and the coming out story, suggesting a common narrative trajectory of marginal American identities in the tradition of American life-writing. Regeina Gagnier in her essay “Feminist Autobiography in the 1980s” talks about Lorde being one of the earliest black woman writers who embody “postmodern-feminism . . . the theory of diverse components of complex modern identities” (140). In her essay "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" (1984), Lorde described herself as "a forty-nine-year-old Black lesbian feminist socialist mother of two, including one boy, and a member of an inter-racial couple."(114). In applying feminist postmodernism to a work , no part of such a complex identity can be sacrificed to any other: one will not be feminist at the stake of being a racist, nor socialist at the cost of

being antifeminist. This aspect of post-modernism liberates the individual of being gazed at as a single entity. She is a multitude of old identities but the identity formation never ends.

In an essay named “Becoming Afrekete: The Trickster in the Work of Audre Lorde” Kara Provost and Audre Lorde talks about the trickster figure and the transgressive capabilities it inhabits. This transgressive capability of the trickster figure employed in her book leads Lorde to reclaim the earlier repressed power. From the passive observer she becomes the active force who not only takes action but inspires and energizes other women around her to reclaim their identities and future. The erotic becomes the language in her case. The work is beautifully encased in the aesthetic of sexuality. The expressive power was initiated through the experience of the body. Barbara Smith in her essay “Towards a Black Feminist Criticism” talks about the minimal amount of writings which existed in the realm of the lesbian studies and especially black lesbian woman. The black lesbian was someone who was living on the peripheries of periphery. The kind of marginalization faced by them was insurmountable. The disarray of the voice of a heterosexual phallogocentric society was hardly going to subsume the figure of a black lesbian woman in a western space especially. Audre Lorde has been quite outspoken about her sexuality in her public life and in her writings and otherwise. She writes and speaks about this aspect of her personality candidly and has an attitude of high pride attached with it. In *Zami*, she has given us a narrative about her sexuality as much as about her other identities. From the beginning there she refers to the realm of erotic as a powerful medium which channels her life in a particular direction. In her essay “Use of The Erotic: The Erotic as Power”(1981), she (Lorde) says: “Within the celebration of the erotic in all our endeavors, my work becomes a conscious decision- a longed- for bed which I enter gratefully and from which I rise empowered” (286).

Erasure and silencing are the techniques which the dominant history/literature had been deploying from the beginning of time. It is the voice within the gaps, within the culture which gives the real picture of the past and the people. Studying the culture from the inside accurately is something which the works of Dalit and Afro-American amplify best in comparison to the hundreds and thousands pages of recorded history. The work of both the authors dismantle the idea of truth claims and compartmentalized identity formations as well as emasculates the logocentric way of perceiving the world and recording it too.

Bama and Lorde attempted to recapture the souls and narratives of voices which were left unheard, which were deliberately left out and suppressed. Both of them write in the same tradition of 'narrating self' through literature, creating their own aesthetic space within the canonical literary tradition. They create a presence in the absent space they had been accorded. They create a narrative out of the absence. They construct versions of their identity which they were told to garb and were denied any access to. Their identity is plural and fluid; they do not fix it or label it and they revel in this pluralistic identity. It is the writing traditions of women like Lorde and Bama which gives multiple interpretations to the study of postcoloniality and identity formation for women writers writing from the margins. These multifarious aspects of their identity make their study a complex tapestry which needed to be unraveled with great precision. Through the thorough recounting and remapping of territories omitted by the great historians, the post in postcolonial and the her(story) in history gains weight and the identities which were blurred, misconstrued were represented and carved in history through literary discourses.

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