

To Educate or to Inflict Wounds? : The Question of Caste Discrimination in Bama's Short Story "Wherever You Look"

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Abstract

Caste discrimination is quite common in India and even educational institutions are not exceptional. It is believed that education is the weapon to eradicate caste oppression in our society, however some Dalit students face caste discrimination at schools. After their education, the discrimination persists even at their workplaces. In Indian society, people of lower caste struggle to attain equality even after many years of Independence. Scheduled castes, who are weaker socially and economically, are considered Dalits and they are treated as untouchables by the upper-class people. Dalits have been facing many struggles and disparities since the Vedic period. This paper critically examines the experiences, struggles, and lives of Dalit students and employees presented in the short story "*Wherever You Look*", written by one of the most famous contemporary Tamil Dalit writers, Bama, who has been acclaimed for her unflinching portrayal of caste-based injustices in Indian society. Her short story "*Wherever You Look*" serves as a microcosm of the deeply entrenched caste hierarchy that continues to shape the lives of marginalized communities

Keywords: caste, oppression, discrimination, education, social exclusion

"*Wherever You Look*" is one of the fifteen stories from the collection of short stories titled "*Just One Word*" by Bama, originally written in Tamil, later translated into English by Malini Seshadri, who is a freelance writer, translator, and editor. These stories are edited by Mini Krishnan and published under Oxford University Press. In this collection seven stories got published in 2003 with Tamil title "*Oruthathavum Erumayum*" (*The Old Man and Buffalo*), the other eight stories were published in 2015 with Tamil title "*Tharitu Kuruvi*" (*The Thavitu Bird*). In this book, themes and settings differ from one story to another. All these stories display societal issues, such as caste discrimination, gender oppression, culture and religion challenges, economical struggles, and self - protection. Though the stories deal with difficult themes, the

similar core theme connects these stories. All the stories share themes of displaying the lives of ordinary people and their societal barriers. The present paper sheds light on the short story “*Wherever You Look*” which reflects caste discrimination and social inequality in school.

Bama projects the caste discrimination and untouchability through the characters like Kuppan and Kanniyamma in the story "Wherever You Look" and highlights the hypocritical behaviour of teachers in the school. This story starts with a female protagonist Prema's agonized thoughts which display her emotional and psychological struggle. Prema is a science teacher in government high school at Vempadu. Every student loves her and is fond of her, this shows her successful journey as a teacher. Despite her successful career, she decides to get transferred of another school. The circumstances that lead her to take such a gave decision to get herself transferred to another school are discussed in this story. Witnessing the discrimination faced by the students and the staff members prompts her to make this decision. The first incident Prema recaps is about a student Kuppan, who is ill-treated and subjected to caste discrimination in a retirement party held by the headmaster of the school. In this party, which is exclusively for the staff members, Kuppan is among the students who are called to serve food and help the teacher. The problem raises when Lakshmi, the in charge of the midday meal, sees Kuppan, son of Mayandi – a lower caste, serving the teacher. She gets furious and abuses Kuppan saying,

"De...de! Why are you serving the food? Leave the vessel here and go. How can we eat food served by your hand? De, Venkatesan, you come and serve the food, da"

(Wherever You Look, J.O.W p. 109)

Kuppan is deeply hurt by the words of the in charge and puts the food vessel down and leaves the room. Here the author wants to highlight how Dalit student Kuppan is humiliated and subjected to untouchability and caste discrimination in schools. Dalit students believe that only education will change them into respectful persons and remove their blatant circumstances in

society. But some students face caste oppression and disparities in educational institutions. These types of situations are the reason for the increased dropout rate of Dalit Students. *"The same story in our village... the same story in school" (Wherever You Look, J.O.W. p. 111).*

Kuppan represents a Dalit child who faces similar caste oppression, prejudice, and inequality in village and inside the school. Caste-based discrimination remains one of the most persistent social evils in India. Despite constitutional safeguards, the Dalit community continues to face systemic exclusion and violence. Bama, uses literature as a form of resistance to articulate the everyday experiences of the oppressed. Her short story *"Wherever You Look"* offers a powerful indictment of casteism, exposing its ubiquitous presence in both rural and urban settings. In many rural areas, Dalit people face social harassment; they are treated as impure and untouchable by the upper class, and are excluded from village wells, temples, and shops. This type of system has also spread to schools and everywhere in villages; all these oppressions made them fall into mental stress and depression. Kuppan faces such atrocious caste discrimination not only in his village but also at school, which made it difficult for him to stay there. He feels like leaving the school many times but decides to stay back because of the teacher, Prema, who may get hurt, if he leaves. In some rural areas, Dalit students face Kuppan-like conditions in schools, but their problems are resolved by the support of empathetic teachers like Prema. Despite facing numerous challenges at school but dedicated educators like prema provide crucial support, helping them rise above the struggles.

Teacher Prema is familiar with the challenges students face, having witnessed similar incidents before. A striking example is the experience of her colleague, Kanniyamma, a PG teacher at the same institute. Kanniyamma was excluded from Kamalavalli's daughter's wedding invitation solely because of her lower caste affiliation, despite being a co-worker. Teacher Prema recalls another incident that left her shaken, involving Kamalavalli's daughter wedding, Kanniyamma attempted to eat from Kamalavalli's plate while she was away. Renuka, a witness,

later confronted Kamalavalli saying, " *No Matter how well you scrub that plate, you can't eat from it*" (*Wherever You Look, J.O.W. p. 113*). Prema, who witnessed this conversation, is appalled. She realizes through this incident why Kamalavalli had excluded Kanniyamma for the wedding and she is deeply troubled by this disturbing caste bias. Her words, "...After all, however high a sparrow tries to fly, it can never become an eagle" (*Wherever You Look, J.O.W. p. 114*) clearly indicate that the caste discrimination will haunt the Dalits though they are educated and employed.

Kamalavalli abuses Kanniyamma badly and gets a new plate where we can see how Kanniyamma faces caste discrimination despite how well educated and in modest position she is. Needless to say, caste discrimination is normal if you face it like a high-ranking Kanniyamma. What the author wants to say here is that even if the lower castes are educated and have a high level of education, they will not be able to achieve equality in this society.

After this incident, Kamalavalli goes to teach the children after lunch. The topic is Subramania Bharathi's poem. In this poem, she explains the condemned caste system, by saying, "My child, here is no such thing as caste; it is a sin to talk of high caste and low caste..." (*Wherever You Look, J.O.W. p.116*).

Kamalavalli explains about hierarchical divisions and teaches the students that it is a sin to treat the people based on caste. The irony here is she herself does not follow what she preaches. Here the writer shows us how some of the teachers only teach about equality but they do not practice it.

All these disgusting incidents disturb Prema's mind; she suffers mentally; Unable to accept the hypocritical and indifferent attitude of the teachers towards the students and fellow-teachers, she decides to leave the school but Bhanumati, Prema's another colleague rightly points out,

"Wherever you go, this is how things will be, prama. Moving to a different school won't solve the problem. Either things must be made to change right here, right now, or you must reconcile yourself to accepting this situation forever." (*Wherever You Look. J.O.W. p.106*).

Through Bhanumathi, Bama poignantly highlights that transferring jobs isn't a solution to caste discrimination. Bhanumathi's words resonate with a harsh reality: wherever you go, prejudice follows. Instead of fleeing, one must confront and challenge these injustices. Bama emphasizes that true change requires proactive efforts to eliminate or, at the very least, navigate and mitigate such situations effectively.

This narrative exploring Bama's perspective critiques the education system. The title itself, "*Wherever You Look*", suggests the inescapable presence of caste. Bama demonstrates that casteism is not confined to villages or backward regions but exists "wherever"—urban settings, government offices, schools, and workplaces. Bama highlights how caste dictates geography—where one can live, walk, or even sit. Dalit characters are spatially segregated, echoing the historical practice of untouchability. Even in urban settings, discrimination persists through housing exclusion and ghettoization. Bama herself faced the same situation and could not get a house for rent though she is well educated and employed as we come across it in her autobiography, *Karukku*.

These stories signify instances of caste-based discrimination, humiliation, and inequality in the education system and highlight caste prejudices in schools and offices, and show us how educated individuals, such as teachers are no exception in following the discrimination of individuals though they are not supposed to do it. In the present society, many changes towards caste-based identity are seen, but we can learn how caste discrimination is still being continued in some villages and backward areas through Bama's writings. Some characters in the story

internalize caste ideology, accepting subordination as natural. However, Bama also shows moments of assertion and defiance—women who speak up, children who question rules, and communities that organize. These moments underscore the potential for change. The writer continues to contribute to the elimination of such vulnerable situations in society through her writings with all her dalit and social consciousness.

“*Wherever You Look*” is not just a story about caste; it is a story of resistance, resilience, and the quest for dignity. Bama refuses to romanticize suffering. Instead, she exposes the harsh realities while also suggesting that transformation is possible through solidarity, awareness, and struggle. In today’s India, where caste discrimination continues in newer forms, Bama’s work remains urgently relevant.

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