



Philomela Speaks! Indian Dalit and Australian Aboriginal Women Writers Destabilizing the ‘Center(s)’

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Abstract

This paper begins by unearthing the complex nexus between various institutions including family, religion, caste/race/ ethnicity, and law that are controlled by those in power and have worked in tandem to create a silenced minority, namely that of Aboriginal women in Australia, and Dalit women in India, that have been incessantly hurled on the margins of literary, feminist, social, racial/caste, religious, and political discourse. Facing the brunt of “multiple jeopardy” these women suffered due to their race/caste, sex, and class to begin with. Although I am conscious of the differences in the condition of Aboriginal Australian women, who were turned into inferior ‘outcastes’ in their own country by the white invaders, and that of Dalit women in India, who were literally and metaphorically pushed out of the village as ‘polluted’ untouchables by members of their own religion and nation, I wish to trace a similarity in the aim, methodology and consequences of their victimization as what lies at the heart of varied conceptualizations of the margins is the discourse of powerlessness, hegemonic control and exploitation. Deploying the lens feminist studies, the second part of the paper studies autobiographical narratives of women writers such as Bama’s *Karukku* and Sally Morgan’s *My Place* in order to analyze how these voices from the margins have re-conceptualized this space as not being defined by exclusion, but as one that is a characterized by fluidity, change and dialogue as they bring the oft ignored concerns like exploitation, poverty, motherhood, loss of culture and identity, and relationship with the body to the fore. Redefining centre and countering “postcolonial subalternization”, their works pose a challenge not only to the traditional Eurocentric male canon, but also to discourses like Feminism which are now being re-conceptualized as ‘Feminisms.

Keywords

Bama, Sally Morgan, Dalit Studies, Aboriginal Studies, margins

Global studies, emerging out of the womb of globalization, stress the interconnectedness among societies and individuals. It encourages one to unearth the links between social, political, economic, cultural, and legal aspects of existence that ostensibly seem to be diverse and unrelated. In addition to being trans-national, global studies also accord significance to the local traits and hues. Using the notion of interconnectedness in relation to the framework of the human, civil and cultural rights that have emerged in recent discourse of global and transnational studies, this paper seeks understand the lives of Indian Dalit and Australian Aboriginal women who have been marginalized by the dominant socio-political economic set up. I wish to study the structures of oppression and resistance and the manner in which they unfold in the case of these two oppressed groups.

This paper intends to deploy Athenian princess Philomela's tale¹ that deals with violence against women, strangulation of voice, efforts on the part of the victim to resist oppression and ultimate metamorphosis as the framework for this paper that intends to read works of Indian Dalit and Australian Aboriginal women writers, such as Bama Faustina Soosairaj (1958-) and Sally Morgan (1951-), as writings from the margins. The paper seeks to bring to the fore multiple ways in which the location of the margins can function. One needs to take into account the shifting nature of both centre and margins in order to grasp the manner in which margins can represent not only 'exclusion' but can also enable construction of an inimitable identity and agency.

The first part of the paper intends to unearth the complex nexus between various institutions including race/caste, religion, law and family, that are controlled by those in power and have worked in tandem to create a silenced minority, namely that of Dalit and Aboriginal women that have been incessantly hurled on the margins of racial/caste, social, religious, political, feminist and literary discourse(s). The paper proceeds to explore how identity, which is usually described as a "distinguishing characteristic of a person" is a much slippery and convoluted concept.² It seeks to uncover the 'female patterns' of identity construction by taking into account the multiple selves and multi layered nature of one's identity and consciousness. The paper begins by exploring how a particular identity has been constructed for Dalit and Aboriginal women by the dominant hegemonic discourse while the second half proceeds to trace the manner in which they attempt to fashion another identity for themselves and reclaim the 'voice' that has been hitherto denied to them. The paper underscores the spiritual transformation as a significant aspect of this metamorphosis. Offering resistance to exploitation and marginalization, their works, aimed at social and political transformations, are highly polemical in nature. I, further, wish to analyze the manner in which these writers deploy the genre of the autobiography, folklores and myths as tools of resistance, which often relate not only the author's life, but are created out of suppressed communal memory.

¹ Roman poet Ovid in his *Metamorphosis* narrates the rape of Athenian princess, Philomela by her brother-in-law, Tereus. In order to hide this, Tereus cuts off Philomela's tongue. Philomela, however, exposes Tereus to her sister by weaving a tapestry detailing the heinous crimes committed against her by Tereus.

² This definition has been taken from Merriam Webster Dictionary.

Introduced by religious and /or legal text Manusmriti, caste is still considered to be one the defining feature of the twenty-first century Indian society that prides itself on being the ‘largest’ democratic state in the world, thereby, promising equality, fraternity and liberty to all the citizens irrespective of their sex, caste, creed or religion. Dalits, however, seem to be those who have been denied the status of the citizens, if not in theory then certainly in practise. Struggle for resources and issue of labour, it seems to me, were central to the conception of caste as caste created a concept of hierarchy and purity that was intrinsically linked with the concerns of class. It restricted the kinds of occupation and educational opportunities that were available to the members of a particular caste group. Denounced as impure inferiors, Dalits were/are denied access to learning, well-paying jobs, and other essential resources including clean drinking water and houses. Apart from instances of rape and abuse of Dalit women, these restrictions could be symbolically seen as a way in which their voice and opportunities of growth were strangled.

The paper examines the gendered nature of this oppression as like Dalit men, Dalit women suffered social, political and economic oppression on account of their caste, but, unlike the male members, they suffered the brunt of ‘double patriarchy.’³ Facing the brunt of “multiple jeopardies” (Deborah King’s term) simultaneously, Dalit women defined themselves as the ‘Other’ of ‘Other’ as neither Dalit men, who controlled anti-caste movements of the 1970s, nor mainstream Indian Feminists, who were primarily educated women hailing from upper or middle class non-Dalit backgrounds paid attention to their plight. Thus, in addition to denouncing the dominant oppressive Brahminical male discourse, Dalit women castigated Dalit patriarchy and critiqued mainstream Indian feminism for its neglect of the intersection of caste, gender and violence as experienced by Dalit women, on account of their focus on the issues of class and gender only.

Although I am conscious of the differences in the condition of Dalit women in India, who were pushed out of the village as ‘polluted’ untouchables by members of their own religion and nation, and that of Aboriginal Australian women, who were turned into inferior ‘outcastes’ in their own country by the white invaders, I wish to trace a similarity in the aim, methodology and consequences of their victimization as what lies at the heart of varied conceptualizations of the margins is the discourse of hegemonic control and exploitation. Australian Aboriginals were both literally and metaphorically turned invisible by Colonial invaders such as Captain Cook, who defined the land as being ‘uninhabited.’⁴ Denied citizenship, as late as 1967,⁵ in their own country, these people

³ Double Patriarchy” implies that Dalit women were exploited by both upper caste men and male members of their own caste and community.

⁴ Maria Nugent in *Captain Cook Was Here*, explains that “*Captain Cook was here* became a shorthand way of saying that the territory belonged to the British” (x). Critiquing Cook’s act of claiming the “entire east coast for his king in England,” Nugent quotes the dairy entry that Captain Cook made on 23rd August, 1770: “I now once more hoisted English Coulers and in the Name of His Majesty King George the Third *took possession* of the whole Eastern coast” (my emphasis qtd in Nugent 35). This popularized the notion of “terra nullis” meaning that Australia was uninhabited before the whites “discovered” it. This, however, was challenged and overruled in 1992 in Eddie Mabo case that led to the formation of *Native Title Act* in 1996.

were legally deprived of their land, resources, and liberty.⁶ In the process of colonization they lost their native languages,⁷ religion, indigenous culture and families. Like Dalit women, Aboriginal women also suffered physical and sexual abuse hurled by ‘double patriarchy’ and also attacked dominant Feminism for donning the mantle of the oppressor: “...White racial imperialist ideology allowed all white women, however victimized by sexist oppression, to assume the role of oppressor in relation to Black men and Black women”(Huggins 14). However, unlike Dalit women, children born to Aboriginal women (especially by white men) were snatched away to be raised in government reserves, dormitories and missions.⁸ Forced to sever ties with parents and indigenous roots, the question of motherhood and identity becomes more complicated in case of these “half caste” women. Also, in addition to the actual episodes of rape of Aboriginal women, there was immense censorship of sorts in the manner in which they were represented by the dominant groups and the way in which ‘truth’ about their oppression was never allowed to be spoken or revealed to the larger world.

Ovid’s Philomela suffers sexual and physical violence at the hands of her brother in law, Tereus, as he cuts off her tongue in an attempt to suppress her voice after raping her twice and incarcerates her in the woods. Despite the attempt of the oppressive patriarchal ruler to strangle her voice, Philomela decides to act and change her situation by voicing her oppression. She does so by tapping her creative energies by weaving a tapestry that depicts her tale of abuse and conveys her condition to her sister, Procne. Procne in turn acts further and takes revenge from her husband for his gory actions. The text ends with the sisters’ metamorphosis into birds. Though many thinkers argue that “the metamorphosis takes away their personality and hereby their humanity and reduces them to fluttering birds” (Steenhoudt 29), I would like to focus on the aspects of liberty and freedom that is signified by their transformation into birds as a result of divine intervention. Elizabeth Marder also observes that “the abandon of human shape has another benefit for Procne and Philomela; as they leave behind their humanity; they also abandon their gender and the subsequent submissive role” (162). Like Philomela, Bama and Morgan decide not to be passive sufferers and be active agents of change. Furthermore, Bama and Morgan too attain metamorphosis from being oppressed women into powerful writing subjects. Like Philomela’s needle, they summon the power of the pen in order to weave their stories of abuse, marginalization and subsequent resistance, action and change.

⁵ The Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act 1900 played a crucial role in propagating discrimination against Aboriginal population. Section 127 of the Constitution states: “In reckoning the numbers of the people of the Commonwealth ...*aboriginal natives shall not be counted*” (qtd in Sonoda 160).

⁶ Historian Henry Reynolds claimed in 1981 that the British were “people who talked of British justice and yet unleashed a reign of terror and behaved like ill-disciplined army of occupation once the invasion was effected” (Read 54).

⁷ Arthur, a “half caste,” in *My Place* is separated from his family on account of possessing white blood and lighter skin. Arthur tells Sally how he was forbidden to talk in his native language and was made to learn “white man’s ways and table manners” in Swan Native and Half Caste Mission (277).

⁸ “A. O. Neville, Chief Protector of Natives, Western Australia (1915-1940) is widely credited as a principal advocate and force behind an active policy of miscegenation....The legal removal of ‘half-caste’ Aboriginal children from their mother was part of this policy”(Morgan 265).

Many Dalit and Aboriginal thinkers resist homogenization. Aboriginal writer, Lillian Holt rejects the assumption that one narrative could be considered as representative. She writes: “No, I am not speaking on behalf of all Aboriginal people, or all Aboriginal women. We are not a homogenous group” (175). She makes one sensitive as to how people who are now lumped together as ‘Aboriginals,’ actually existed as various groups and tribes with their unique indigenous cultures and languages. Similarly, Bama in an interview expressed her inability to talk about the experience of “caste stratification in India.” She stresses that based on her experience she can speak as a Tamil Dalit Christian woman only (2). Furthermore, in her autobiography, *Karukku* (2000), she is deeply critical of conflicts between the people of her own caste, ‘Paraya jati’ and ‘Chaliyar’ caste as they waste their energy and resources in fighting against each other, for instance over the control of the cemetery, instead of joining hands in challenging upper caste people who reap benefit from their mutual animosity and suppress them further.⁹

This tendency to resist homogenization is interestingly apparent in Bama and Aboriginal writer, Sally Morgan’s (1951-) autobiographies that are paradoxically highly ‘communal’ in nature. These should not be seen as two opposing strains as Elizabeth Fox-Genoves “identifies a feminist need to recognize both the ‘distinctiveness’ of particular groups as well as the particularity of differently situated individuals within these groups” (qtd in Sonoski 31). Moreover, unlike male autobiographies that trace “personal or individual histories,” Bama and Morgan’s narratives invoke “collective cultural histories” (Friedman 72). This becomes apparent as Bama opens her autobiography not with the individual subject “I” but with a collective pronoun “our.”¹⁰ Underscoring the communal nature of her work, Bama writes: “The story told in *Karukku* was not my story alone. It was the depiction of a collective trauma – of my community”(qtd.inNayar4). Furthermore, Friedman emphasises “relationality,” “interconnectedness” and “community” as central features of women’s autobiographies.¹¹ Underlining group dynamics and interpersonal relationships, Bama contends that *Karukku* is “the living story of a particular *group* of Dalit people in a particular village in which the *narrator (myself) is a part...* It talks about, *their* culture..., their struggles...and dreams” (emphasis added, Sarangi 2).

Bama’s “constant movement from the individual to the collective” propels Pramod K Nayar to read *Karukku* as a “Testimonio,”¹² a “collective biography,” and “a collective archive of suffering” (85). Bama uses autobiography as a vehicle in order to

⁹ Bama criticizes both the *Paraya* and *Chaliyar* communities for fighting amongst themselves instead of joining hands to resist the oppression that is meted out to Dalits: “Instead of uniting together in a village of many castes, if they keep challenging each other to fights, what will happen to all these men in the end?” (47).

¹⁰ “Our village is beautiful.... Most of *our* people are agricultural labourers” (1).

¹¹ Susan Friedman observes: “A woman’s autobiographical self often does not oppose herself to all others, does not feel herself to exist outside of others, and still less against others but very much with others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community”(72).

¹² Pramod K. Nayar explains that Testimonio is a “genre where the narrator stands in for a whole social group....There is no ‘problematic hero’ as in a novel, but there is a ‘problematic collective situation.’ The Problematic collective situation in *Karukku* is caste” (85). Also, “like Testimonio, Dalit writings are narratives of trauma, pain, resistance, protest and social change” (84).

expose the manner in which Dalits have been humiliated, exploited and oppressed by the dominant forces in the society. Bama unearths Dalit women's experience of castism, domestic violence, disease and economic exploitation as these women are exploited by their "Naiker employers" who "always paid men more" for the same amount of work and also "swindled by tradesmen," (53), thereby, debarring Dalits from making any progress (55). Bama further laments how even Dalit children, instead of studying and playing, "go to work like adults" in matchbox and firecracker factories. Bama explores the manner in which stereotypes are deployed by the dominant sections as tools of oppression in order to vilify Dalits and justify/further their subjugation. Denied the status of humans, Dalit children are denounced as "contemptible" "cobras," labelled as "thieves" and used "for cheap labour"(18). Bama astutely deploys children's games to both uncover and critique the manner in which Dalit women and children suffer due to intersection of sex, caste and class at the hands of Dalit men, upper caste landlords, traders and even nuns and priests: "Sometimes we played at being married... the husband coming home drunk and hitting his wife... three boys would play at being Naicker... They'd...humiliate us, and make us do a lot of work....Sometimes we played at being nuns and priests who came and gave us blows..."(56-57). Bama, thus, not only "witnesses", but also invites readers to "undertake 'rhetorical listening' as secondary witnesses" to the multifarious ways in which Dalit women are marginalized (Nayar 87).¹³

It is interesting to note that that thinker such as John Beverley and Judith Brett have applied the theoretical paradigm of "testimonio" to Morgan's *My Place* as it traces the growth of the subject not in terms of absolute individuality but as a member of a social group¹⁴ and provides "testimony to the unspeakable sufferings perpetrated on Aboriginal people" (Bret qtd in Groen1). Unlike male autobiographies that Estelle Jelinek contends are "characterized by linearity, harmony and orderliness,"(16) "irregularity characterizes (women's) texts which have a ...fragmentary pattern of diffusion." (17). Reflecting strong interpersonal and familial bonds, autobiographies of Bama and Morgan are more circular, episodic, and diverse as "even when they use "I," the link with the larger community, especially that of women is never severed" (Jelinek 18). Morgan in *My Place* (1987) intends to find out her identity and place but she does so by digging out her family history and tries to understand and situate not only herself but also the predicaments of her mother and grandmother in the larger socio-political and economic history of their times, thereby, tracing a link between their life, material conditions and choices and her life and identity. Morgan's autobiography is, therefore, composed of the autobiographies or biographies of her mother, grandmother and grandmother's brother.¹⁵

¹³ Bama explains her intention behind writing *Karukku*: "I just tried to freeze it forever in one book so that there will be something physical to remind people of the atrocities committed on a section of the society for ages"¹³ (qtd in Nayar 87).

¹⁴ Testimonio has been explained as writing, by Beverley, in which "the narrator represents a social class or a group. This gives voice to a previously "voiceless" anonymous collective popular democratic subject, the people (Beverley 91).

¹⁵ Joan Newman argues that "the depiction of self in relational terms, emphasizing one's interdependence with others, is considered to be a characteristic of women's autobiography, rarely to be found in works written by men. It may also be interpreted as a characteristic of Aboriginal autobiography in which the

Thus, Morgan's quest for "self-knowledge is coupled with community knowledge" (James Moffett).

Further analysing this 'communal' quality, I wish to underscore how like Philomela's tale that stresses the sorority and love between sisters, both *Karukku* and *My Place* are centred on the triangular bonding of grandmother, mother and the narrator herself. One can read these as unique kind of 'quest narratives' that are woven around the theme of 'Passing'¹⁶ and are shaped by some of the crucial choices that are made by both the protagonists. Using Post-Structural theory,¹⁷ this part of the paper also underscores the manner in which 'identity' is not natural, fixed, or singular but are multiple, ideological constructs that are highly contingent in nature. Morgan grows into an educated urban young woman completely unaware of her aboriginal roots thinking that she is daughter of white man and an Indian woman. She, thus, unconsciously passes off as a member of another group. The text, however, is about her search for her roots and questioning of the identity that has been constructed for her both by her family and dominant hegemonic discourse (read Euro-centric white patriarchal discourse). Morgan's grandmother hides her Aboriginal roots from her grandchildren and disguises herself as an Indian. One, thus, becomes conscious of the constructed nature of the identity. Like grandmother, Morgan's mother too accepts the Indian identity and probably marries a white man to further strengthen 'security,' and respectability' which might be denied to her if she is not discreet about her Aboriginal past.¹⁸

Morgan, however, decides to reject the identity that has been constructed for her both at the familial and larger socio-political racial level. She decides not to pass off either as an Indian or as white but makes a crucial choice of finding and reclaiming her Aboriginal roots.¹⁹ In doing so she is propelled to question as to why her grandmother

idea of joint ownership of a narrative is a more common understanding than ideas of single, originating authorship" (qtd in Bird and Haskell 71).

¹⁶ Passing can be understood as "an individual's assumption of the appearance and lifestyle of another group so well, or to such a degree, that one passes for a member of that group" (Dara Tomlin Rossman 299).

¹⁷ Post structural theory, unlike Renaissance Humanism, emphasizes the constructed nature of this identity or the so called natural self, thereby, bringing about a paradigm shift from 'self' or selfhood to subject or 'subjectivity' which is socially constructed. The essentialist idea of the self is deconstructed by feminist, race and postcolonial and theories and others that underscore how identity is not singular, not stable and/or essential but are multiple, provisional, unstable, shifting and changing. Since it is not natural but constructed, it is open to subversion and reconstruction. "The shift from 'self' to 'subject' also marks the idea that subjects are the product of signs or signifiers, which make up our ideas of identity. Selves are like signifiers within a rigid system, whose meanings are fixed; subjects, by contrast, are like signifiers in a system with more play, more multiplicity of meaning" (Klages 112).

¹⁸ Nan tells Sally the history of "Stolen Generations": "In those days, it was considered a privilege for a white man to want you, but if you had children, you were not allowed to keep them. You was only allowed to keep the black ones. They took the white ones off you 'cause you weren't considered fit to raise a child with white blood"(415). In the light of above facts, after Sally's white father dies, Sally's mother and grandmother feel vulnerable and are afraid that they might be separated from their children, therefore, they decide to hide their Aboriginal roots. Gladys tells Sally: "It was after the visit from the Welfare lady that Mum and I decided we would definitely never tell the children they were Aboriginal. We were convinced...if word got out, another Welfare person might come and take them away" (378).

¹⁹ Morgan explains the immense vacuum, sense of identity crisis and depravity that she felt before discovering her past and roots: "The sum total of all the things that I didn't understand about them or

chose to reject her Aboriginal roots, thereby, uncovering and reconstructing an ‘alternate history’ that is usually obliterated from official narratives that are authored and controlled by those in power. Morgan expresses her anger at being denied voice and representation as a member of a marginal group. She underscores how “all our history is about the white man. No one knows what it was like for us” (208). Morgan is critical of the fact that the history and official records of brutalities that have been committed against her people have either been destroyed or made inaccessible to them as these records are maintained not by the National Library but by the government: “A lot of our history has been lost, *people have been too frightened* to say anything. There are *all sorts of files about Aboriginals* that go way back, and *the government won’t release them*” (my emphasis 163). In such a scenario, “to tell a bit of the other side of the story”(164), Morgan “employs the oral history approach which as Paila Hamilton points out , emerged during the 1960s and the 1970s as an effective method to reveal the hidden life history of oppressed people”(Sonoda 159).

Morgan discovers how Aboriginal people have been ‘Othered,’ enslaved/ “owned”²⁰ and stereotyped as “sub normal” (192) “evil,” cultureless savages who were treated as “beast of the field” (433). She also unearths that the Aboriginal children, (especially mixed blood children /‘half castes’), who were “stolen”²¹ by the white government from their mothers in the name of educating, civilizing, assimilating and “de-socializing as Aboriginals” were actually trained to be cheap labour such domestic helps and farmers. “Harumi Aoyama observes that the Protection Acts of various states aimed “at accomplishing three things: appropriating land from Aboriginal people; using them as workforce for white people; and converting them to Christianity” (Sonoda 161). Exposing racist attitudes prevalent in Australia, Aurther observes “the trouble is that colonialism isn’t over yet. We still have a White Australia policy against the Aborigines....They say there’s been no difference between black and white, we all Australian, that’s a lie....the black man has nothing, the government’s been robbin’ him blind for years”(266). Morgan’s text, then, questions and ruptures master narrative that upholds Australia as a non-racist, egalitarian state.²² It also make one sensitive to the manner in which History is

myself. The feeling that a very vital part of me was missing and that I’d never belong anywhere” (133). Underscoring the significance of her quest, Morgan writes, “how deprived we would have been if we had been willing to let things stay as they were. We would have survived, but not as whole people. We would have never known our place” (294).

²⁰ Exposing the way in which Australia too practised a kind of slavery, Morgan writes “like America we had slavery too. The people might not have been sold on the blocks like American Negroes were, but they were owned, just the same” (192).

²¹ “Robert Donaldson, a member of the New South Wales Legislative Assembly was largely responsible for the policy of child removal.” The following are few statements concerning *policy and intention* of Australian state towards Indigenous children: “...children range from *half –castes to almost white...* living life of *idleness* and vice... under the evil influence and bad examples of adults they almost invariably drift into an aimless, useless life of idleness and immorality.... In the course of the next few years there will be no need for the camps; the old people will have passed away, and their progeny will be absorbed in *industrial* classes of the country” (my emphasis qtd in Read 55). These children later came to be known as “Stolen Generations.”

²² Rupturing egalitarian image of Australia, Morgan writes, “up until now....we’d both thought Australia was the least racist country in the world, now we knew better. I began to wonder what it was like for Aboriginal people with really dark skin and broad features, how did Australians react to them?” (175).

also a construct and bares the politics behind history writing where certain groups are legitimated as heroic while others are either obliterated or denounced. The autobiographies, such as that of Morgan, then can be read as “autoethnographies” (Lionett) that intend to recreate/rewrite collective ethnic history of a group. Anne Brewster underscores the subversive political potential of this act of challenging the ‘official’ narrative and reconstructing an ‘alternate discourse’: “By reclaiming and rewriting history, Aboriginal women intend educating both black and white Australians. For white Australians this education has the purpose of revealing the violence of colonization which has been suppressed in official histories. For Aboriginal people the narration of the past...produces a sense of unity and group solidarity”(54). Furthermore, Brewster contends that since Aboriginal women situate and analyze their lives in the familial context, they should be read as “autobiographical narratives” or as texts that are “both autobiographical and biographical.

Like Morgan, Bama’s autobiographical narrative also deals with the sorority of women and theme of passing. Her grandmother, worked in the upper caste household and had accepted her position of subservience and followed the rules that had been laid down by the caste Hindus. Her mother too accepts these rules and like Morgan’s mother shoulders the familiar responsibilities in the absence of her father, who works in the army. Both these women work very hard to provide food and education to Bama. Since Bama is educated, people are unable to suspect Bama’s caste from her mannerisms. While travelling in bus she is often asked by people about the location of her house. On revealing it, they suspect that she is a Dalit and either change their seat or ask her to get up from hers. Bama’s mother advises her not to reveal her real address or caste affiliations to strangers in order to avoid such discrimination. Bama obstinately refuses to hide her real identity and ‘pass off’ as a member of some other caste.

Like Morgan, Bama’s life is shaped by crucial choices that she makes. First, she rejects marriage in a patriarchal setup. Second, leaves the school teacher’s job to join a Convent to work for the uplift of Dalit children. Her desire, however, remains unfulfilled as she witnesses that they are humiliated and discriminated against in Convent schools that are catering to the demands of upper caste/class children.²³ She is also critical of the kind of education that is imparted to them. Instead of teaching them critical thinking that enables them to sharply question the dominant oppressive discourse, the teachers not only endorse it but also convey to the Dalit students that there is (or rather should be) no possibility of change. The students as a result become extremely subservient as “accept everything as their fate” (103). Third, after Bama realizes that not only society but conventional religion and education system that ostensibly offer equality, are also

²³ When Bama starts working as a teacher in the school run by nuns she realizes that “they were truly like ‘whited sepulchres’, as Jesus said.”(102). “They ran a boarding school which was nominally for the sake of destitute children, but in fact they made those children do every menial task that was needed.”(103). Bama recalls the humiliation that was meted out to Dalit children when she was a student. She writes, “the warden of our hostel could not abide low caste or poor children. She’d get hold of us and scold us for no rhyme or reason” (20).

casteist,²⁴ she renounces the life of ease and comfort and re-enters the world without job, familial, emotional or financial support in order to serve her people. She exposes that though caste is a concept that originated in Hindu religion, it is adopted by other religions such as Sikhism and Christianity in India that traditionally have no concept of caste. Bama realizes “no matter what they do, how much education they achieve, which ever religion they belong to, they cannot escape their caste” Bama finally asserts her identity as a Tamil Dalit Christian woman and decides not to pass off as an upper caste Christian nun.²⁵ This is accompanied by a spiritual transformation as she realizes that God does not reside place of worship or ‘empty’ rituals. God, rather, can be achieved through love and service.²⁶

Morgan, like Bama who is critical of two dominant religions (Hinduism and Christianity), condemns both the religious practice of whites and their colonization of Australia in a single stroke: “...the white people in Australia, ...brought the religion ...with them and the Commandment, Thou Shall Not Steal, and yet they stole this country....They twisted the religion. That’s not the way it’s supposed to be” (268). In order to escape the crisis regarding the religion (Christian or Aboriginal) that they should follow, Morgan adopts a more assimilative sort of an approach that shows her concern for spiritual and psychic wholeness: “Spirituality does not function on one level, it functions in layers...” (Bird and Haskell 12).²⁷ Their “spirituality,” thus, “is a hybrid and draws not only on the visions of the past and traditional Aboriginal culture, such as Aboriginal music from the swamp but also on Christian imagery” (Brewster 27).²⁸

²⁴ Bama scathingly exposes castiesm prevalent in the convent as :“Even amongst themselves (nuns) there were caste divisions, divisions between the rich and the poor, and even divisions over the languages they spoke”(103). She observes that many sisters, in the Christian Convent where she enters as a nun, try to find out her caste indirectly and many assuming her to be a non-Dalit criticize Dalits in front of her: “And in the convent, as well, they spoke very insultingly about the low-caste people....as if they didn’t even consider ...(them) as human beings (25).

²⁵ After leaving the Convent Bama writes that “today I am like a mongrel-dog, wandering about without a permanent job, nor a regular means to find clothes, food and a safe place to live. I share the same difficulties and struggles that all Dalit poor experience. I share to some extent the poverty of the Dalits who toil far more painfully through fierce heat and beating rain...” (78).

²⁶ Bama’s spiritual transformation becomes evident when she writes “earlier I thought that God came through these people; but this belief changed to the extent that I now began to feel strongly that God was not with them. And so I began to dislike everything that they did. I began to question them. I argued and fought. I thought to myself with some disgust; Che, they are all hypocrites and frauds. I felt in my heart that I could go and speak directly to God without their intervention. I could no longer believe that God could only be reached, as they had taught us, through prayer learned by rote, through pious practices, through the novena and the rosary. I came to realize that you see God through the mind’s eye, in nature, and in the ordinary events of everyday life. So all the rituals that I had followed and believed in so far suddenly began to seem meaningless and just a sham” (102).

²⁷ Morgan in an interview talks about her spirituality which is a hybrid of the Christian and Aboriginal worldviews. Rejecting the idea of conflict, she says “I think there is a conflict when people make a conflict...Spirituality does not function on one level, it functions in layers and so you might have a form of spirituality in the Christian sense but then you can have another from outside of that which is just as valuable , and that tends to be what happens in Aboriginal people(Bird and Haskell 12).

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Apart from recovering “indigenous histories/knowledge,” Morgan and Bama engage with vast repertoire of oral narratives and myths. Aboriginal spirituality in *My Place* is reflected in Nan, Galdy and Sally’s love for Nature, birds and animals respectively along with the special healing powers of Daisy, Arthur and Galdys. Gladys tells Sally her experience of healing people: “I would feel the power come into me, it would build into my hand and then flow from me to whoever I touched”(308). Also, Nan and Galdys hear the Aboriginal music when Billy used to torment them. Gladys felt though she had “never been to a corroboree...that music had always been inside” her and was “like a message” which made her feel “supported, protected” during hard times (264). Jill also tries to get in touch with their Aboriginal spirituality and decodes a bird’s call as indicative of her grandmother’s death.

Bama also engages with folktales in order to construct “alternative epistemologies”(A.j. Brown) and disrupt the centre by offering subversive readings from the periphery. Unlike most Dalit writers who uphold Dr. B.R Ambedkar in their works, Bama chooses to celebrate a local trickster figure named “Bondan-Mama.” Unlike con men, trickster figures, who are often “weak amoral characters,” deploy their wit not to “defraud” but to “overcome social inequality” and outwit their powerful opponents (Harris 1). Bondan-Mama is also an “amoral” character as “his chief means of livelihood was stealing limes, coconuts, and mangoes from the landowning families’ gardens and then selling them”(5). Bama recalls how she revelled in the episodes detailing Bondan-Mama’s daring feats and exploits, especially the once where he outwitted the rich (exploitative) landlords and heroically defeated Cobras and ‘Pey’.²⁹ Despite flouting codes of conventional morality, Bondan- Mama seems attractive as he becomes insignia of survival, destroyer of the old hierarchies and creator of an alternate order where Dalits are active, heroic figures as opposed to the crushed, abused, passive models that the children encounter all around them in real lives.³⁰ Bama also upholds strength and ingenuity of Dalit women who seem to resemble Bondan-Mama when they outwit both the Police and Chaliyar community by not only burying a boy at midnight in the disputed cemetery while the feud between Chaliyar and Paraya community was at its peak, but also by daring to bring the father of the dead boy, disguised as a woman dressed in saree,

spirituality in the Christian sense but then you can have another from outside of that which is just as valuable , and that tends to be what happens in Aboriginal people(Bird and Haskell 12).

²⁹ Pey is “a minor evil spirit or ghost”(Karukku 142). Bama narrates that after stealing mangoes, in order to escape the caretaker, Bondan once jumped in a nearby well where he encountered a cobra that was about to bite him. “Somehow he kept the Cobra at bay...and then he came home safe and sound with his bundle. Then on another occasion when he was out on raids”, a “king cobra” bit “him right on his big toe....Anyone else would have died of fright there and then. This man, though, immediately struck a match, burnt out the spot, cut away the toe with his sickle; then finished his raid and returned. Such a sharp fellow he was”(6).

³⁰ For instance, Bama recalls with twin emotions of both anger and sadness when she saw one of her most respectable village elders almost crouching in obeisance, holding *vadai*³⁰ packet “by the strings without touching it” and carrying it to a *Naicker* landlord. This is the first time that she came to know that they were lower caste and Naikers were “upper caste” who would become “polluted” if they touched “Parayas” (15).

in order to attend the funeral.³¹ Thus, celebration of this subversive figure, along with resilience of Dalit women seems to underscore Bama's political desire to challenge and overturn the oppressive dominant discourse.

One can conclude by observing that the manner in which Philomela deploys her creative act of weaving as an act of resistance, writers such as Bama and Morgan summon their creative literary powers in order to achieve not only a personal transformation and metamorphosis but also voice the pain of the entire community through their autobiographies that serve as "testimonio." Bama and Morgan's autobiographies, like testimonio, are not just accounts of "trauma and pain," but also represent "enigma of survival" (Cathy Caruth qtd in Nayar 83). Deploying folklores, they challenge and destabilize various 'centers' by offering subversive accounts (of history) from the margins. In fashioning a new identity for themselves, the marginalized subjects develop radical resistant voice and writing that is both healing and empowering.

³¹ A feud erupts between the Paraya and Chaaliyar community regarding a cemetery and Chaaliyar "invited Reserve Police" and bribed them to hunt down Parayas. When a small boy dies everyone is afraid to go near the cemetery as "the Chaaliyar boys used to hang around there" and the police "constantly patrolled" their streets and "there was no other male presence(41). "At last my Patti and some of the older women...made a plan. They decided that two women would go...where the boy's father was hiding....They'd make him wear sari, disguise himself as a woman...and pretend to be a mourner attending the funeral. At the same time...some others would go to the cemetery and prepare a grave for the burial....Everyone talked about this incident....Everyone was full of praise; they said how *clever* the women had been and how *smartly* they had *managed everything themselves*"(emphasis added 43).

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