The Politics of Form in Dalit Fiction: Bama’s Sangati and Sivakami’s The Grip of Change

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Abstract
This article examines two Dalit novels, Bama’s Sangati and Sivakami’s The Grip of Change. It argues that the two novels hybridise the very novel form through the appropriation of different registers, the mythic, the historical and the immediate. It argues that this narrative hybridisation is a political project, reflecting a radicalisation of consciousness itself. Bama and Sivakami, I argue further, transform folkloric and local-mythic language and narrative by infusing into it the language of rights, Ambedkarite philosophy, dignity and the law. The language of the law and rights, I suggest, have entered common usage and thus results in a radicalising of the common sense, so that folkloric language itself becomes a language of protest and political challenge.

Keywords
Dalit fiction, Bama, Sivakami, narrative hybridisation, genre, political reason

This article examines two Dalit novels, Sangati by Bama (2006) and The Grip of Change by Sivakami (2007), both originally written in Tamizh (Tamil), and argues that they represent what Joseph Slaughter, tongue in cheek, terms ‘generic engineering’ (Slaughter, 2007, p. 55). It proposes that Sangati and The Grip of Change hybridise the novel form not merely

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through their use of oral traditions—a feature too well established in postcolonial writing since Chinua Achebe to merit, I think, further repetition—but through the incorporation of other registers and discourses. It argues that the narrative hybridisation is not only a radicalisation of the genre but also a political project. Literary texts, the article assumes, embody a new political consciousness. If the narrative is the articulation of a political unconscious (as Fredric Jameson famously argued in 1981), then, conversely, my article assumes that a radicalisation of narrative form epitomises a radicalisation of the political unconscious as well.

**Questions of Form**

What form of the novel should a radicalised political consciousness appropriate? What registers would suit the new voice of social change in Dalit writings? What political consciousness emerges in hybridised forms? These questions of form constitute the frames in which Bama and Sivakami might be read. As Joseph Slaughter (2007) demonstrates in his justly celebrated work, the universal discourse of human rights, with its emphasis on the autonomous individual subject, found its appropriate literary form in the Bildungsroman, or novel of individual development. Slaughter calls attention to the *forms, languages* and *registers* of human-rights discourse, whether legal or literary.

Treating these texts simply as sociological tracts on the Dalit condition is to ghettoise them and reject their attempts to develop a distinctive form and voice. It also absolves literary critics from addressing questions of language and narrative modes—they simply consign them to the category of ‘authentic representations of the Dalit experience’ or affix a label such as ‘political/subversive texts’. This also means such critics end up, unwittingly maybe, treating such texts as aesthetically insignificant. Politics of any kind has a language, and subaltern, victim, atrocity texts deploy particular kinds of narrative modes.

More recently, thankfully, attention is being paid to questions of subaltern aesthetics and narrative form (Kumar, 2010; Nayar, 2009; Rege, 2006). These readings seek to explore subaltern narrative forms. I have elsewhere argued that Dalit human-rights politics adopts particular narrative conventions and aesthetic modes to stake political claims in the

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form of trauma narratives (Nayar, 2006, 2008, forthcoming). My intention in this article draws inspiration from Slaughter’s work, and argues that to read Bama and Sivakami as merely offering ‘authentic’ pictures of Dalit oppression or culture is to negate the significance of their choice of form, which is, I suggest, a political choice. Questions of formal practice have always accompanied discourses of rights, and Bama’s and Sivakami’s novels foreground these discourses through the formal experimentation in which they engage.

Neither Sivakami nor Bama is interested in the mere repetition of the authenticity argument by providing ethnographic narratives or confessional texts. They are not attempting to tell us about Dalit life or reinforce stereotypes of a distinct tribe or community. They are not interested in the now-clichéd binary of indigenous versus global. Thus, ‘thick descriptions’ of cultural practices, folklore and local proverbs may abound in these texts, making them suspiciously akin to ethnographic fictions, but Bama and Sivakami refuse to restrict their work to this form of the novel. Instead, as I shall show, by infusing the ethnographic with other discourses they thwart the risk of being labelled ‘nativist’ writers or ghettoised as (only) offering ‘authentic’ visions of Dalit life. This play of form, therefore, is a political act, even as their political visions generate new forms—as this article demonstrates. In other words, political radicalisation, the radicalisation of a ‘folkloric’ sense by the infusion of the rights discourse and awareness finds its counterpart—or articulation—in the radical narrative forms and linguistic registers of Bama and Sivakami (I have elsewhere explored the centrality of such a ‘translation’ or folklorisation of human-rights discourses as central to the subaltern’s empowerment and cultural citizenship) (Nayar, 2011). Rather than producing texts that can be readily classified as ‘social novels’ or ‘women’s fiction’, Bama and Sivakami (perhaps more than Mariama Ba or Flora Nwapa in African contexts) work towards destabilising the genre.

I further argue that this emphasis on the dynamics of change and cultural engagement as a political act is tied in with the larger social movement for emancipation, relief from traditional structures of oppression and the quest for new routes to state their subjectivity and history. If they produce novels that are readily assimilable under the category of women’s or social novel—for example, if they move only from ‘subjugation to celebration’, as Geetha and Srilata (2007) argue about Sangati—they run...
the risk of retaining the same oppressive structures, social as well as narrative. This unique feature in Bama and Sivakami offers a whole new paradigm of postcolonial resistance literature for it resists ghettoisation under the ‘authentic subaltern’ tag.

Michael Wilson, reading Native American fiction, has argued that in storytelling cultures a ‘stable center of value is created through the concerted efforts of speakers and listeners over time’ (Wilson, 2008, p. 9). External elements are translated and transformed by tribal cultures so that the tribal centre itself changes. In other words, Wilson treats all tribal cultures as ‘dialogic’, and in constant conversations with the world. I build on Wilson’s argument to propose that the ‘dialogic’ nature of Dalit texts is embodied in their radicalisation of the genre through the appropriation of different registers, a process one could think of as ‘narrative appropriation’.

As I shall demonstrate, both Bama’s and Sivakami’s texts are replete with references to and the tropes and images of story-telling, textuality and the processes of signification—narrative, in short.

**Narrative Hybridisation**

Narrative hybridisation is achieved through the merging of three distinct registers in Bama and Sivakami: the mythic, the historical and the immediate (I have adapted Wilson’s [2008, p. 13] reworking of N. Scott Momaday’s formulation). The individual creates a language of the self (personal), which interacts with and draws upon the language of the tribe/community (oral) and, finally, the language of history itself.

Sivakami’s *The Grip of Change* opens with the hysterical ranting of a woman, Thangam, who has been violently abused. She peppers her account of beatings at the hands of upper-caste men with proverbs of self-abnegation: ‘I didn’t throw mud on anyone’s food’ (p. 6), ‘He measures my rice’ (p. 7); and the witnesses respond with similar proverbs and aphorisms: ‘[T]he broomstick is tied with a silk thread’ (Kathamuthu, p. 9), ‘The frog asks for trouble with its own voice’ (Nagamani, p. 9). Sivakami offers multiple voices within the ravings of the abused woman in order to foreground the Dalit condition. Thangam’s anguished voice narrating her troubles is the personal one. The reference to their local god, who will, Thangam believes, avenge her humiliation, is the mythic
voice. The historical voice is subsumed into these two when Thangam expresses the poor Dalit’s inability to go to court to claim her dead husband’s share of land (p. 6). Three voices and three contexts are set out for us: the personal, the historical-social and the mythic.

The first line of Bama’s Sangati is a proverb—by definition something the entire community would immediately recognise—quoted by her grandmother: ‘If the third is a girl to behold, your courtyard will fill with gold’ (p. 3). This is a mythic voice coming to us as a shared memory of the community. In a quick move in time we see the narrator-protagonist now as a young girl, and her relationship with her grandmother is delivered to us through the prism of a narrative act: ‘And while she was about it [combing the protagonist’s hair], she’d give me all the gossip of the village’ (pp. 5–6). The first ritual Bama describes is the coming of age of Mariamma. Bama carefully points to the role women play in this ritual, and also to the songs they sing (p. 16). The grandmother pronounces the centrality of song—and thereby narrative—to the women: ‘Even if there’s no kanji to eat, the women can never be stopped from singing loudly and ululating’ (p. 17). This is the social document or ethnographic register of Sangati—but Bama, as we shall see, does not stop here.

Later, when Bama needs to situate the Dalit woman’s life in context she does so by directing us to the power of a community’s ‘narrative’. Mariamma, returning from the fields, is accosted by an upper-caste landlord, Kumarasami Ayya. He tries to pull her into a shed, but she escapes. After this incident Bama offers two narrative events. In one, Mariamma is warned by her friends:

> It is best if you shut up about this. If you even try to tell people what actually happened, you’ll find that it is you who will get the blame; it’s you who will be called a whore… Are people going to believe their [upper-caste landlords’] words or ours? (p. 20)

These comments gesture at a socio-historical narrative already in place: Dalit narratives will always be subsumed into and under that of the upper castes. There will be, Mariamma’s friends warn her, nobody to listen to her ‘story’. This denial of a speaking position constitutes Bama’s political critique of the social and historical marginalisation of Dalit and women’s narratives. This historical narrativising is the context of all marginal narratives such as Mariamma’s. In fact, Sangati is built around women’s
conversations—events are narrated through women’s stories and opinions delivered through them, a feature Paula Richman claims produces a ‘dramatized audience’ that foregrounds the experience of specific Dalit women (Richman, 2008, p. 147). What Bama does is to plot events within dialogues, thereby giving us a chance to see and hear the events through different women’s lenses.

In the second event, Kumarasami, worried that Mariamma may complain about him, goes to the head of the Dalit community and spreads canards about Mariamma. He claims that Mariamma and Manikkam were ‘behaving in a very dirty way’ (p. 20). The issue becomes a crisis on account of this upper-caste man’s ‘narrative’. It is storytelling that leads to the events that follow. A meeting of the village is called, but the women are prevented from speaking there (p. 21). Even though the accused deny the charges, the ‘trial’ revolves around the trust reposed in the upper-caste man’s narrative. ‘Did the mudalaali lie to us in everything he said?’ shouts the Dalit headman (p. 23). Bama draws our attention to the fact that the women who begin to protest are ‘silenced’ (p. 23). Mariamma, of course, is found guilty (pp. 25–27). The personal voice—Mariamma’s—is subsumed under the weight of both the landlord and the Dalit men at the meeting. The historical voice is what is delivered to us through the headman’s shouted query: ‘Did the mudalaali lie to us in everything he said?’ (emphasis added). The historical voice is that of upper castes and patriarchy. When Bama’s protagonist admonishes her grandmother for not protesting, the world-weary grandmother tells her: ‘From your ancestors’ times it has been agreed that what the men say is right. Don’t you go dreaming that everything is going to change just because you’ve learnt a few letters of the alphabet’ (pp. 28–29). This is a searing indictment of the power of the narrative voice itself. The grandmother cites textual history—the story of Tiruvalluvar and his docile wife, concluding with ‘hasn’t all this been written about in books as well?’ (p. 30). This textual history serves as a piece of conclusive evidence against her granddaughter’s plea for more equal gender relations.

As in the case of Sivakami’s work, Bama’s novel also signals a narrative emplotment of individual and collective identity. Patriarchal and casteist narratives are appropriated by Bama to show how a social condition is created. The narrative of the upper-caste culprit is valued over that of the lower-caste victim. It is this differential evaluation of truth in
a narrative that constructs the Dalits’ cultural centre: their narratives will never attain the level of validity or legitimacy of the socially powerful upper castes. The Dalit narrative develops its cultural centre—the horrific structural contexts that enable the men to abuse, humiliate and penalise Mariamma—precisely through the appropriation of personal narratives. If in Sivakami the centre wobbles because Gowri seems to be subverting the narrative, in Bama the other narrative is silenced beyond hopes of power.

Narrative hybridisation also occurs through the achronicity of proverbs. Gerald Prince has argued that achronicity (in which events are deprived of all temporal connections with other events) and anti-chronicity (whereby the narration involves and exploits a multivalued system of temporal ordering) are temporal features characteristic of the postcolonial narrating act (Prince, 2005, p. 378). Proverbs and myths that constantly occur in Bama and Sivakami, especially in women’s conversations, render the event being described achronic and anti-chronic. When Bama’s narrator uses proverbs to illustrate the woman’s condition, she does not merely appropriate a community’s language but positions the character whose oppression she is describing in a ‘continuum’ of historical suffering by women.

The evident blurring of generic boundaries through hybridisation still does not serve the purpose of capturing the new political unconscious. Thus far what we have examined is the destabilisation of the novel, not its radicalisation at the hands of Bama and Sivakami. It is to this I now turn.

**Narrative Radicalisation and the Political Unconscious**

New forms of the political demand new forms of writing. In keeping with such demands, this radicalisation of form in Dalit fiction is achieved through the intrusion of and contamination by the language of rights and dignity.

In Bama’s novel, while the narrator discusses marriage and its prospects with older women, her mother says to her:
Haven’t you heard the words the priest speaks at the time of the tali-tying? … He says ‘What God puts together, let no man put asunder’ … The nuns say that the promise we make to the priest is as good as the promise we make to God … We have to live our lives according to the promise we made to God, in front of four, five people. (p. 94)

In this extended treatise on the sanctity of marriage, the narrator’s mother runs what Melissa Dinverno (2004, p. 51) terms ‘the ventriloquism of regime rhetoric’. The voice of scriptural, patriarchal authority speaks through the mother. The mother here is simply the medium of articulation minus subjective agency—she frames her identity and existence within this voice of scriptural and social authority. It is in opposition to this ventriloquism of regime rhetoric that the narrator sets up her own agential story, and therefore her own subjectivity. The narrator responds to the comment: ‘Go on, Ma. It’s by calling on all this stuff about God, the promises made to him, our sins and our good deeds, and Heaven and everlasting Hell, that priests and nuns frighten the life out of us’ (pp. 94–95).

What the narrator is subverting is not only the scriptural injunctions (regime rhetoric) about marriage but her mother’s ‘stories’. By placing the mother’s stories under the interrogative, she effectively alters the narrative context. She continues this narrative in a different fashion: ‘I am sure God doesn’t want us to be living like slaves to the day we die, without any rights or status, just because of a cord around the neck’ (p. 95).

By turning to the language of rights and dignity, Bama’s narrator has changed the course and nature of the debate. It is no more within the realm of the scriptural-theological but within the domain of politics and the law. Despite (or maybe because of) the context being a personal rather than a public or communitarian conversation, the shift of registers within the narrator’s response is, I suggest, a significant one. While the mother deploys the register of scriptural authority, the daughter appropriates that of human rights and the law.

Yet another incident serves this argument about narrative inversion and appropriation. The general elections are on in Bama’s Sangati. The narrator reports a conversation between her grandmother and their neighbours about voting. A woman says: ‘I stamped the picture of the man ploughing. See, it’s only because of the plough and bullock that our
stomachs are going to be filled. Without them our lives are nothing but dust. That’s why I chose that picture.’

To this the narrator’s grandmother responds: ‘Anyway you stamped just one picture. God alone knows how many people did it my way and stamped four or five pictures’ (pp. 98–99). Here the entire edifice of democracy comes crashing down: the Dalits, Bama suggests, do not have a ‘rational’ approach to the electoral process. But what is significant about this incident is the way it foregrounds questions of meaning-making.

The meaning of symbols is, Bama suggests, rooted in lived experience. The ‘misreading’ of the signifiers of the electoral process is, in fact, a contestation of the signifier: does the sign make the same sense to a Dalit woman? The woman who stamps the picture of a man ploughing does so with absolutely no knowledge of the candidate’s politics or ideology. She responds to the man’s symbol in precisely the way she knows—by connecting it with the centralities of her life: food, labour, hunger. Here the narrative of politics is subverted when it meets another language altogether, constructing a meaning and launching an interpretive act that is at odds with the democratic process. Bama suggests here that the ‘external’ narrative of the candidate’s sign language is far away from the ‘centre’ of Dalit life. The external language makes no sense to the Dalit way of life, in which labour, food and hunger constitute the ever-present signs. The interpretive act of the woman voter gestures at this dissonant narrative of the post-Independence Indian democratic process. Bama’s brilliant textual metaphor must be seen as an act of contestatory reading of the signs of political processes that do not take into account the lived experience of the Dalits.

The final comment on this resilient and independent interpretive act comes from the narrator’s grandmother, who declares: ‘Whether it is Rama who rules or Ravana, what does it matter? Our situation is always the same’ (p. 99). When she invokes mythic-historical figures to describe contemporary statesmen and the political process, she achieves a radicalisation of, one, the mythic realm, as she aligns it with the democratic process of contemporary India; and two, the folkloric, as she conflates contemporary politicians with the mythic-scriptural. It is this hybridisation, this messy merger of registers and discourses—of the law, socio-historical, personal—that marks generic radicalisation in both authors.
The rationale of electoral processes might be based on ideas of deliberative democracy and rational debate, but Bama’s protagonist works from what can be thought of as a ‘folkloric’ approach to the processes where signifiers are misread. In this instance, the folklore as well as the rational process is transformed: the former is revitalised within the infusion of the democratic project, even as the democratic project’s universal claims are subverted by new and unforeseen interpretative schemes.

Bama shows how Dalit narratives of loss and suffering appropriate a new register, language and discourse. Gowri, Kathamuthu’s daughter, is asked to draw up a petition-complaint to the police. Kathamuthu dictates and Gowri writes. What follows illustrates my narrative-appropriation argument. Kathamuthu dictates the complaint in archaic diction and register: ‘In the said zilla … said taluq … said village’ (p. 11). Gowri, writes Sivakami, ‘enjoyed having her slight revenge on him, drawing attention to his outdated language’ (p. 11). And later: ‘Gowri wrote “deceased” in place of “late”, and gloved at the change’ (p. 11). Kathamuthu retells the story of Thangam’s abuse and Thangam corrects him: ‘It wasn’t in the upper caste street. It was in our street, and in front of my house’ (p. 12). Kathamuthu shouts at her: ‘You are such a stupid bitch. I’ve changed the whole story … If you say anything different from what’s written in the petition, you’ll be jailed’ (p. 12).

The incident is worth examining in some detail. First, Kathamuthu has repurposed the Thangam story to maximise its effect. Sivakami indicates storytelling’s role as a resistance narrative: the Dalits, in order to gain some leverage from the law (which is otherwise controlled by the upper castes), retell the facts. Second, the language of the law—‘said zilla … said taluq’—is appropriated by Kathamuthu in order to gain some advantage for the Dalits. Third, Kathamuthu’s own language of petitioning is archaic and he can also be abusive (swearing at his wife, daughter and Thangam). Significantly, his own daughter modifies and modernises it, thus marking a feminine appropriation of the patriarch’s language. The three women together constitute a creative appropriation—of the languages of law, of patriarchal power and their cumulative effect. What Sivakami’s opening moments reveal is a careful balancing out of the historical (law), the personal (Thangam, Kathamuthu) and the mythic. The Dalit narrative develops its cultural centre—the horrific structural contexts that enable the men to abuse Thangam and deprive her of her
The Politics of Form in Dalit Fiction

rights—precisely through the appropriation of many languages and voices. There is no attempt to construct a simple oppressed–victim narrative. Rather, Sivakami’s proto-feminist attempt is to show how a young girl is able to subvert both the language of the law and that of patriarchy. We see another instance in The Grip of Change when Sekaran declares: ‘Unlike some men we know, I am not into collecting wives or hoodwinking the world reciting stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata’ (p. 125), thus once again foregrounding the theme of storytelling and its social power.

That Sivakami chooses to open with the theme of narrative and language is in itself significant—for it underscores the centrality of narrative to the creation of identities, both individual and communitarian. Sivakami refuses to privilege any specific register, such as:

- the personal (Thangam’s rantings), which would have made it a woman’s confessional tale;
- the social-historical (Gowri’s rewriting), which would have rendered it a social document about postcolonial legal and social structures;
- the mythic (the references to gods), which would have situated the novel as a quasi-spiritual account.

What she does, instead, is to merge the mythic, the personal and the socio-historical, and thus overrun the borders of each form of the novel. We read at once the confessional, the social document and the quasi-spiritual tale. This mixing of registers is the narrative appropriation of forms and voices that define resistance in Sivakami.

Gowri in The Grip of Change and the unnamed narrator in Sangati generate contestatory narratives that upset the ‘dictating fictions’ (as Melissa Dinverno calls them) mouthed by the senior generation of women in both texts. Where the older women mourn their lot, we see the younger ones arguing, via feminism and Ambedkar, in a whole register of rights. Following Ralph Rodriguez, I propose that Gowri’s utterances, the older woman’s misreading of the electoral sheet and the narrator’s arguments in Bama represent the ‘contestatory capacity of a particular utterance’ (Rodriguez, 2000, pp. 67–68). This contestatory capacity is made possible through citationality. Kathamuthu’s hold over the illiterate villagers, notes Sivakami, rests on his ability, after a few drinks, to cite
extensively from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and Gandhi’s *My Experiments with Truth* (p. 33). Gowri is almost always immersed in books. Storytelling wields enormous power as Thangam’s story is given to ‘the latest interpretation’ with each narration (p. 37). The citation of Ambedkar and the rights discourse within the frame of Bama’s novel disturb the narrative effectively.

By presenting protagonists with human-rights literacy, Bama and Sivakami achieve several things. First, both authors deliver protagonists who are self-aware, and thus agential subjects. ‘Voice’ is the ability to represent oneself, to tell one’s story, and agency is about voice and narration (Slaughter, 1997). Here, citationality is what empowers the subject with a voice. Second, the citation enables the fiction itself to become self-reflexive.

Bama and Sivakami, I propose, transform folkloric and local-mythic language and narrative by infusing into it the language of rights, Ambedkarite philosophy, dignity and the law. The language of the law and rights becomes a radical move. In order to understand the significance of this move I turn to the writings of Antonio Gramsci via Green and Ives (2009).

**Conclusion: The Narrative Forms of (New) Political Reason**

Antonio Gramsci argues that ‘common sense’ among peasants has not resulted in political movements because it is too fragmented. He also argues that the imposition of a normative language (referring to Manzoni’s attempt to standardise Italian in the 1920s) is not the solution. Gramsci suggests that critical awareness develops through a process of critical self-reflection, in which one understands one’s history, position and activity in relation to dominant and prevailing structures of power, ‘fragmentary collection of ideas and opinions’ drawn from differing philosophies, ideologies, religion, folklore, experience, superstition and ‘scientific notions and philosophical opinions which have entered into common usage’ (Gramsci, 1992, p. 328). The language of the law and rights, I suggest, following Gramsci, has entered common usage and thus
results in a radicalising of the common sense. It is through this radicalisation—which I see as embodied in Gowri’s rewriting of events in Sivakami’s novel—that folkloric language itself becomes a language of protest and political challenge. Questions of language, Gramsci argues, must be related to the changing nature of lived experience. This means that as the lived experience of the Dalit changes in terms of addressivity by the law, addresses to the law, the language of rights and the language used by Dalits in their fiction will also change—and this is something we see in both Bama and Sivakami.

This might seem like a tall claim. However, I see the experimentation with form engaged in by Bama and Sivakami as symptomatic of the rise of a new language, or register. This new language (of political resistance) is constituted by a radicalised common sense, a ‘modernised’ folklore where Bama’s Gowri can readily, and seamlessly, move from a proverb capturing the woman’s condition to the language of the law. Gowri shows how Dalit consciousness (hers) has been revitalised through an external language. This external language is not imposed but woven into the proverbs, aphorisms and mystic sayings of the common folk. It is not, also, an uncritical acceptance of the new language of modernity and rights. M.S.S. Pandian has rightly noted that ‘the subaltern counter-public, in extracting the response of the modern authorised public sphere with its upper caste protocols, is engaged in an antagonistic dialogue with the Indian modern’ (Pandian, 2002, p. 20).

To extend this argument by foregrounding questions of form one could say the Dalit fiction of Bama and Sivakami is in an antagonistic dialogue with modern Indian fiction as well. Dalit fiction is a careful mix of the old and the new so that the power of the common recognisable folkloric is accentuated through the infusion of the language of universal human rights or the law. It situates Gowri within the dominant discourse of rights.

Such a radicalisation of common sense through the infusion of the language and culture of human rights situates the fiction produced by historically oppressed subjects within a larger cultural frame. Sophia McClennen and Joseph Slaughter (2009, p. 2) argue that the increasing presence of rights-associated discourse outside of legal–juridical frameworks produces a ‘scaled-down conception of human rights’. I propose
the contrary: the widespread dissemination and appropriation of the language of rights by those subjects that have never spoken actually widens the ambit of rights. It is *not* ‘banal’, as McClennen and Slaughter believe, but energises the very genre of Indian fiction within the culture of rights.

So we now come to the question: how does fiction such as Bama’s or Sivakami’s work? Considering that different cultures have different conceptions of rights, individual and citizen, to argue that these texts fit into a global regime of human rights, which presupposes individual autonomy and agency, is to force the Dalit texts’ presentation of the individual subject into a universal frame, ignoring the local context. However, I want to propose here that Dalit fiction’s hybridised representational strategies that deform the form of the Indian novel in English symbolise a battle over cultural values. If the Indian novel in English is seen as mainstream (whether ‘twice born’ or symptomatic of an ‘anxiety of Indianness’), then Bama and Sivakami are blurring the edges of the mainstream. The cultural value of Indian fiction in English (which almost always effaces the caste question) is being called into question through the narrative appropriations in their work. In other words, we need to see Dalit fiction as altering both the ‘culture’ of India and the cultural values embodied in Indian writing in English.

Narrative radicalisation through the infusion of rights discourse and alternative storytelling voices energises the genre of Indian fiction. The novel is no more a ‘natural’ form for, as our genre criticism has demonstrated, Bama and Sivakami open up the genre to new experimental forms. Dalit fiction does not subvert ‘mainstream’ Indian fiction by foregrounding authentic voices or folklore but by messily merging folklore—or contesting it—with the discourse of law, rights or Ambedkarite philosophy. It is in this productive contamination of form that the radicalisation of the political unconscious becomes visible.

References
