



Metamorphosis Of Minds In Bama's Short Story '*The Yellow Butterfly*'

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Abstract: This article examines Bama's Short story 'The Yellow Butterfly', which intricately explores the themes of childhood curiosity, innocence and the subtle indoctrination of violence and detachment in educational environments. The story highlights Sarada, a dedicated teacher, and her efforts to cultivate empathy among her fifth-grade students while addressing their wanton disregard for living creatures.

The story juxtaposes children's playful deeds and their alarming disregard for life, epitomized by episodes of violence against butterflies and lizards, reflecting a deeper societal desensitization. Sarada's gentle yet firm approach encourages her students to recognize the emotional implications of their actions, fostering a sense of responsibility and respect for all living beings.

By implementing a project on butterfly's metamorphosis, Bama metaphorically illustrates potential for transformation and growth within her students, emphasizing the mentor's crucial role in enduring compassion in individuals. Ultimately, *The Yellow Butterfly* serves as a poignant reminder of the necessity for nurturing empathy in schools to counter the normalization of violence, thus contributing to the creation of a more humane society.

Index Terms - Children, Innocence, Cruelty, Empathy, Bias, Social discrimination, challenges, transformation, growth

INTRODUCTION:

Bama, a prominent Tamil Dalit writer born in 1957 in Puthupatty, Tamil Nadu, India, has emerged as a powerful voice in contemporary literature, advocating against caste domination and social discrimination through her compelling narratives. Overcoming significant challenges, she pursued her education and trained as a teacher, aiming to instil values that promote self-esteem and social consciousness among her students. Her notable works include *Karukku* (1992), *Sangati* (1994), *Kisumbukkaran* (1996), *Vanmam* (2002), *Oru Thathavum Erumayum* (2004), *Kondattam* (2009), and *Manusi* (2011), which have been translated into several languages, including English, French, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam. Bama's writing not only transcends

caste boundaries but also challenges conventional exclusions of language and genre. As former nun, she has played a pivotal role in Dalit literary activism, giving visibility to Dalit aesthetics in India's literary scene. Her short story collections include *Harum-scarum-Saar & Other Stories* (2006), *Just One Word: Short Stories* (2018), *The Ichi Tree Monkey: New and Selected Stories* (2021)

CHANNELLING CHILDREN'S CURIOSITY AND EXCITEMENT INTO CONSTRUCTIVE LEARNING ACTIVITY:

The Short story *The Yellow Butterfly* is from Bama's second short story collection *Just One Word: Short Stories*. The story is originally published as 'Manjal Nira Vannathu Poochi' in 'Thavitu Kuruvi' Through the lens of a compassionate teacher, Sarada unveils the complexities of human behavior and the urgent need for a more compassionate society.

What are the stages in the life of a butterfly? If you trap a caterpillar in a box, will it blossom into a butterfly? When discrimination and violence are hidden lessons in our schools, can we hope to make a better world? (*Just One Word* cover page)

The life of a butterfly unfolds in four stages: egg, caterpillar (larva), pupa, and adult butterfly. Each stage represents transformation, growth, and metamorphosis, requiring a nurturing environment to reach its full potential. When a caterpillar is captured or locked inside a box, it cannot develop into a beautiful butterfly. The caterpillar's captivation symbolizes how external limitations stifle inherent potential for growth and as a result the natural process of its development is stopped abruptly.

In the same way the author explores how hidden discrimination and violence within seemingly innocent spaces, such as schools, which prevent children from blossoming into kind-hearted individuals. Schools are the places which ideally shape young minds, can sometimes propagate prejudice and detachment.

In the article titled '*Role of Education for the Emancipation and Empowerment of Dalits in India*,' researcher Yash Raj explores the transformative power of education, particularly for marginalized communities. He emphasizes how education serves as a tool for challenging the entrenched social hierarchies and promoting equality. As Raj writes

Education has the potential to transform lives...Education helps people from the lower caste to raise the question about the norms and rules which are totally inclined in favor of the high caste people. (https://www.academia.edu/72500724/Role_of_Education_for_the_Emanicipation_and_the_Empowerment_of_Dalits_in_India?auto=download)

Similarly, Bama reveals that beneath the surface of these ‘innocent’ environments, deeper issues of hatred and bias exist, subtly influencing children’s worldviews. Society cannot truly progress towards a better world if prejudice and cruelty continue to influence the early stages of moral development. Through her narration, the author urges to consider the essential need to foster empathy in children to prevent harmful mindsets of cruelty, caste discrimination.

The narration begins with a lively classroom setting, where Sarada teaches various subjects, infusing knowledge in them with her warmth and a sense of curiosity. The primary school students love for learning is palpable, the students eagerly participate in activities, recite, and engage in experiments that spark their young minds. However, their playful and innocent demeanour harbors a darker side, revealing a normalized disregard for life. Sarada discovers that some boys in her class stone garden lizards to death and kill butterflies and dragonflies in the belief that burying them will yield money. The superstition reflects not only a form of innocent ignorance but also a deep-seated culture of violence that, if left unchecked, could infiltrate their development and mould their characters as they mature.

Mangai, Tamil writer who penned the Introduction to *Just One Word* Short story collection titled ‘The collective ‘I’ in Bama’ opines that, the author effectively positions herself as a teacher and a student, demonstrating that the journey of learning is an ongoing process that enriches both the instructor and the learners. Mangai writes,

This collection is also different from her earlier writings in that it foregrounds her dominant sense of being a teacher. Children and their world views, shaped and reshaped, form the major leitmotifs of these stories. What is even more interesting is that, as a teacher, she learns a lot from her students. (*Just One Word* xiv, xv)

The portrayal of Sarada emphasizes that teaching is not merely about imparting knowledge; it is also about nurturing a space where both teacher and student grow together. This dynamic relationship serves as a powerful motif throughout the collection, reinforcing the idea that true education transcends traditional boundaries and flourishes in an environment of mutual respect and understanding.

One poignant moment is when Sarada confronts Sivakumar, a student who brings three dead baby sparrow to class. His initial nonchalance and the act of placing the dead chicks on the teacher's table illustrate the children's desensitization to suffering. The student reasons, that he placed the sparrows in his pocket only to protect them but the sparrows died due to suffocation.

The episode reflects the absence of understanding about the consequences of children's actions and exposes a gap in empathy. Teacher Sharada gently warns Siva, explaining that all living creatures, including animals and plants, feel pain and deserve respect. She educates him on the consequences of his actions, emphasizing the importance of empathy and compassion towards all forms of life. She then firmly addresses the class saying,

Right. None of you should ever behave like this. Throwing stones at stray dogs on the street, smashing garden lizards to death, catching butterflies and dragonflies and killing them don't ever do any of these things. All those creatures have life, don't they? So they feel pain, don't they? You would have seen how some people swish at plants and bushes with sticks as they walk by, or break off branches from trees just for fun. Aren't plants and trees living things too!... So we shouldn't break or hurt plants either

Understood. *The Yellow Butterfly* (39)

Sarada's method of handling the situation is profound. Instead of scolding Sivakumar harshly, she guides him and the entire class to reflect on the consequences of their actions, highlighting that all creatures suffer and feel the pain. She asks them to consider the mother bird's grief upon discovering her dead offspring, introducing an emotional perspective that the children had not considered. This moment underscores how societal norms often overlook the importance of nurturing empathy and compassion in human beings from an early age. Through her caring approach, Sarada attempts to instil a sense of responsibility and respect for life among her students.

What is more heartening is the way the children in her stories become teachers of a new ethics. In fact they teach some of the basics of life and sustenance. The coping mechanisms of children become an eye-opener to the adult world. (Just One Word .xvii)

The butterfly experiment, which becomes a class project, is emblematic of transformation and growth. Sarada involves the students in observing the stages of a butterfly's life cycle—egg, larva, pupa, and finally the butterfly. The student project captures the children's excitement and curiosity, channelling their energy into something constructive and educational. This science experiment is not just a lesson but it is to gain knowledge. It becomes a metaphor for the children's psychological development. Just as the caterpillar transforms into a butterfly, Sarada hopes that her students evolve into responsible citizens. The story critiques how society often misses opportunities to teach values of kindness and empathy, especially in educational spaces. The story resonates with Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's emphasis on education as a tool for social transformation. Ambedkar viewed education not merely as a means to employment but as a path to enlightenment, self-respect, and liberation from societal oppression.

For an Ambedkarite who is invested in education and its potential for social change, this perhaps is the most important purpose of writing—to stir discussions about the infirmities in the system. As she advocates a culture of questioning and experiential learning, she finds their potential liberating. (JOW xviii)

Bama seems to imply that school should be a place where students learn not just academic subjects but also values that would contribute to a humane community. The killing of the sparrow chicks and the excitement of observing a butterfly's metamorphosis stand in stark contrast, demonstrating how children can either be nurtured into empathy or inadvertently led toward insensitivity.

CONCLUSION:

The Yellow Butterfly thus serves as a gentle yet powerful reminder of the responsibilities educators hold in shaping young minds. Teacher Sarada's patient guidance and thoughtful approach sheds light on the importance of nurturing empathy in children and questions the societal patterns that often allow insensitivity to persist. The story invites readers to reflect on how easily violence can become normalized in innocent spaces if left unchecked, and it emphasizes the need for compassion in creating a better world.

References:

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