

Vociferating of Self: A Study of Bama's *Karukku*

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Abstract

Dalit autobiographies are representative life stories where the Dalit individual uses the narrative to raise his voice for those communities that are silenced by caste oppression. Dalit women are the worst affected and suffer the three forms oppression-caste, class and gender. The caste system declares Dalit women as impure and they are socially excluded. Dalit women have written their autobiographies and most of them have been written in regional languages and that they have hardly been translated into English. Despite the fact that India gained independence long time ago and there were formal educational facilities, the literate Dalit women is very low. Bama, one of the first women writers articulates the thoughts, aspirations and anxieties, hopes and fears, past and present of her society. This paper throws light on the most agonising and wretched lives of the Dalits. Bama assumes herself to be a bird whose wings have been clipped, yet she desires to live a meaningful life. She feels that for the better survival of women empowerment of women is necessary and it is possible only by irradiating inequality and untouchability, by empowering them through education and taking pride in their identity.

KEYWORDS- Oppression, gender, patriarchy, Dalit

Dalit literature is uniquely Indian as it is a by product of an evil caste system that existed for many years in this country. Although the constitution of India has abolished the caste system it still lingers in many walks of life with its grasps as firm as ever on the minds of its people. It may be compared with the slavery in America and apartheid in Africa. The literature that arises as an outburst against casteism is Dalit literature. Bama's writing comes from these margins of the caste code dictated for many centuries. She uses her voice not only to expose the atrocities faced by Dalits, but also to represent the anger that boils within them as reaction to these prejudices.

Women are always more oppressed and are victims of male domination. The plight of dalit women in Indian society is horrible as they are oppressed on the basis of class, gender and caste. But nowadays women have started protesting against the discrimination, oppression and injustices levelled upon them and are trying to create a female space for themselves. In this context the work of women writers who come out to the main stream to explore the problems faced by the oppressed women become highly important. The Dalit women started searching for the root cause of these injustices levelled upon them. Women in these discourses bring their own identification as women as well as Dalit. Gouthami says, "Bama's contribution to Dalit literature is noteworthy in terms of use of Dalit vocabulary. Her use of Dalit spoken idiom as her narrative voice gives a different resonance to her writing"(288).

Bama's *Karukku* (1992) is the first autobiography written in Tamil. It focuses on two aspects namely caste and religion that caused great pain in Bama's life. The

book describes Bama's life from childhood to adulthood. The first person narrative expresses the traumatic experiences of caste discrimination from the stand point of Dalit women. When Bama was studying third standard she has seen the discrimination in her locality. She saw an elderly man carries a package without touching it. "He came along, holding out the packet by its string, without touching it. I stood there thinking to myself, if he hold it like that, won't the package come undone, and the vadais fall out?" (15).

Later Bama understood that she and her communities were prohibited by Hinduism and were cursed to remain as poor, cloth washer, cobbler. the one who clean dead animals, convey death news, grave digging and drum beat announcer. She saw the humiliation faced by her grandmother and mother. Her grandmother worked as servants for Naicker families. When she was working in the fields, even tiny children would call her by name and order her just because they belonged to Naicker caste. As soon as thye dawn broke, she would go the Naicker homes, sweep the cowshed, collect up the dung and bring home the leftover rice and curry. When Bama says to her grandmother that she should not accept leftovers, she says, "These people are the mahajans who feed us our rice. Without them, how will we survive?"(14).

Her brother says to Bama about the reason of marginalization and subjugation of Dalits. He said that because they born in Parayajati, they were never given any honour dignity or respect. The words of her brother made a very deep impression on her. Bama was ill- treated in school on the basis of caste. One day Bama was playing with other children, she climbed the coconut tree and coconut fell at her touch. She says, next morning in the assembly, the headmaster called out her name, "You have shown as your true nature as a paraya"(16). The headmaster was of Chaaliyar caste. At that time there was a battle between the Chaaliyar people and Parayas. When Bama analyzed the caste difference in society, she began to wonder "what did they mean when they call us 'Paraya'? Had the name become obscene? But we too are human beings"(13). Bamastarted to look out for means to uplift herself and her community from this trampled existence. Her brother shows her the right path and tells her that education is the only way to attain equality. Throughout her education, Bama found out that wherever she went, there was a painful reminder of her caste and untouchability. The financial grants and special tuitions that the government offered the Harijans were more of a humiliation than consolation, mainly because it singled out her caste community.

Hard work is part and parcel of Dalit life. Dalits had the physical strength to endure all sorts of hard work. Amidst a life of penury and humiliation the survival instincts never wane. "This is a community that was born to work"(55). It is a heart rending to see small children setting off to work early in the morning. The food prepared and eaten in the Dalit houses speak volumes about their poverty. It is kuuzh, a porridge that is eaten daily, sometimes accompanied by the watery dried fish curry. Poverty makes them to work hard. Instead of going to school these children go to matchbox factory and she says "At an age when they should be going to school, studying like everyone else and playing about in the evenings, they are shut up inside the factories instead"(55).

When Bama was eleven years old, there were continous skirmishes between Paraya and the Chaaliyar community. Police supported the Chaaliyar community. Most of the male Paraya community were arrested and a few had disappeared into the

mountain jungle. The police behaved deplorably towards the women. They uses obscene languages and sworn at them. Anitha observes, “The women in *Karukku* are marginalized but they have the courage to bounce back, to live and to earn their livelihood in the absence of males.....”(24).But the women in the absence of males, the women returned to the streets as usual, and set off for their customary coolie-work. The police was furious that women were smart enough to continue work and to take care of their children without the support of men.

Bama breaks free from the shackles of unemployment and poverty by educating herself and by becoming a teacher and by educating her people the so called unprivileged. She asked her people to stop working as slaves to the upper class Naickers and Nadars by doing menial jobs like cleaning the lavatories sweeping and swabbing. Indu observes, “Bama battles against the superstitions and myths around her. Even the Roman Catholic church use and abuse Dalits and forced them to attend meetings and offer offerings”(4).

Karukku is the narration of painful memories, despair, disillusionment, dejection and the pathetic conditions of the life and culture of people. Incidents are narrated and over narrated and reinterpreted each time to express the oppression of Dalits. Bama’s rewriting of self is thus rewriting of Dalit history. She voices the emergence of dalit literature. The Dalits are in a state of mental enslavement. The *karukku* leaf continues to hurt those handling it, at the same time energizes them to face the odds. Bama moves a step ahead in her life creating *Karukku* in the hope that the silence of the Dalits will articulate itself and herald a world of respect and pride.

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