

Woman as Doubly Subaltern: Resistance and Reconstruction in Bama's *Karukku*

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Abstract

The aim of the present paper is to examine the varied underlined, invisible ways of suffering embedded in the lives of the dalit community, particularly woman and their life experiences portrayed in Bama's *Karukku*. Bama foregrounds the affinity between the two groups and uses feminist strategies of representation, rereading and historicizing the oppression of Dalits in her narrativization of Dalit experience. She repeatedly points out in her writing that Dalits would have to support themselves and affirm their difference from the dominant castes as an approach of self-affirmation. She seeks to represent women by tracing gaps in literary history, underlining difference as a principle of assertion even if it is located as a social disadvantage to the group. The present study tries to envisage the reconstruction of prevailing unequal order, Bama's writings is the saga of resistance against the hegemony of upper class literature which pretends to be omniscient and all-encompassing while presenting a narrow, one sided, twisted and biased view of reality.

KEYWORDS: Dalit, Caste system, Resistance, Subjugation, Oppression

Dalit Movement is to battle against the caste conflict that lies in the forms of exclusion from common civic responsibilities, discrimination between upper and lower caste people, inequalities based on economic status, oppression of selfhood etc. Dalit literature is a rebel against the higher- class people by the lower caste people. Dalit people are crushed at every part of their life; they were also treated as untouchables. If a woman belongs to Dalit community she faces two types of suppression in her life; first being a woman, second belong to the lower community, they are 'doubly abused'. BamaFaustina is considered as one of the most distinguished Dalit fiction writers in Tamil. The theme of Dalit consciousness is carried out immensely in all her works. Bama's texts have seemed to be worked on the victimhood of Dalits. She heatedly criticizes the practice of untouchability in the caste ridden Indian society. The agency of Dalits has been powerfully presented in all her writings. As an activist writer, she forges close ideological affinity with feminist thought. Women and Dalits are both oppressed groups, oppressed on account of their birth. Bama foregrounds the affinity between the two groups and uses feminist strategies of representation, rereading and historicizing the oppression of Dalits in her narration of Dalit experience. Dalit women are shown to be constantly lamenting, shedding tears, yearning for male protection, cursing womanhood, bemoaning their inability to guard their chastity on their own. She repeatedly points out in her writing that Dalits would have to support themselves and affirm their difference from the dominant castes as an approach of self-affirmation. She seeks to represent women by tracing gaps in literary history, underlining difference as a principle of assertion even if it is located as a social disadvantage to the group. Bama aggressively affirms her Dalit identity and refuses to be accommodated into mainstream literary circles.

Dalit writings in Tamil and Bama's in particular employ feminist thought and modes of resistance. Her works embrace a more confrontational framework as they break the shackles of upper middle class matrix that often attack literary discourse. Feminism or feminist aspect deals with society in general and woman in particular. 'The Woman', 'The Dalit' and many other groups are marginalized, hegemonized, downgraded and have been put sidelined in dictionaries. This type of literature fights against the division of labour. Feminism comes under the category of postcolonial studies which focuses on marginal. Patriarchy is considered to be the big rival of women literature. Male dominance in society always means that out of public sight, in the private, a historical world of men with women, men are sexually dominating women. So division of labour resulted in the relegation of women and domination of the other sex. This is the crucial fact of history in *The Golden Notebook* by Doris Lessing. She says: "Russian revolution, Chinese revolution, they are nothing; the real revolution is the revolution of women against men" (73).

Karukkui the first Tamil dalit autobiography written by a dalit Christian woman. Bama gets international recognition when *Karukku* won the Crossword Award in 2001.

Karukkum means Palmyra leaves with their serrated edges on both sides are like double edged swords. The autobiography is a narrative of trauma, pain, resistance and atrocities committed on dalit Christian women. It is a document of poverty, violence, rejection and suffering and how the writer strives hard to overcome the problems and how she reconstructs her 'self'. The author is a representative of all dalit women who have suffered atrocities for centuries. By portraying her insults and agony, Bama gives an accurate historical picture of India. She is one of the most challenging figures in dalit feminist world. She starts her career as a writer in 1992, when she comes out of the convent. She has been awarded a life time achievement award by Canada Tamil Literary Garden Toronto.

As an exponent of Dalit Feminism, Bama has found in *Karukku* the right space to articulate the travails and sufferings of Dalit women. *Karukku* thus enjoys the unique recognition of being one of the first radical feminist discourses by a Tamil Dalit woman. The English translation has enabled *Karukku* and *Sangati* to cross linguistic and regional boundaries, and reach the global readers. *Karukku* is a reflection of different themes like religion, recreation, and education, etc. Through these perspectives, Bama presents before us a clear picture of the caste oppression meted out to the Dalit Christians not only by the upper caste society but more so within the catholic church itself. As a feminist writer Bama protests against all forms of oppression and relying on the strength and resilience of Dalit women, makes an appeal for change and self-empowerment through education and collective action.

A dalit women's life is ever filled with hurdles. Bama curses herself for being born as a female. She curses the Government for not giving her job, though she is qualified. According to Bama both married and unmarried dalit women are looked down upon by everyone. She is bold enough to focus on caste domination and social discrimination in the present work. The work describes personal crisis of the author's life and anticipates equality, social justice and love towards all. It has been adequately perceived that, dalit women's writings largely concentrate on the problems and experiences of dalit women. By portraying their experiences, Bama is trying to seek her identity in the mainstream literature. Bama herself admits, in her preface:

. . . . events that occurred during many stages of my life cutting me like *Karukku* and making me bleed; unjust social structures that

plunged me in to ignorance and left me trapped and suffocating; my own desperate urge to break, throw away and destroy these bonds; and when the chains were shattered into fragments, the blood that was split then; all these taken together.(13).

Bama's life resembles the saw edged Karukku. *Karukku* expresses sorrows, joys and humiliations that her mother, grandmother and many other dalit women face in fields and at home. Therefore, though it is an autobiography, it is linked with communal problems. Bama's inspiring words awake dalit women from the deep slumber;

We who are asleep must open our eyes and look about us. We must not accept the injustice of our enslavement by telling ourselves it our fate, as if we have no true feelings; we must dare to stand up for change. We must crush all these institutions that use caste to bully us into submission and demonstrate that among human beings there are none who are high or low.(25).

She reminiscences her childhood days in her village and reflects on them in her autobiography poignantly. The grip of caste is so overpowering in India that even the conversion to another religion cannot annihilate it. The writer argues for the wage disparity among men and women. Her feministic voice is obvious in the following words(interview with Manoj Nair): "I saw our people working so hard night and day, I often used to wonder from where they got their strength, but of course, they never received a payment that was appropriate to their labour, men received one wage, women another. They always paid men more. I could never understand why."(47).

Parayas are humiliated, irrespective of their age. Her brother always told her that education is the only way to attain equality. His words always inspired her and helped her to study hard. Throughout her life she is reminded of her caste and that makes her so sad. When Bama observes the Naikar woman pouring water from a height of four feet which her own grandmother drinks with cupped hands holding close to her mouth, she gets upset and becomes terribly furious. Each day is new to the writer as it brings something new in her life. She has experienced brutality of the high castes. By seeing the ugly face of the society, she gets enraged. As a true feminist, Bama resists all kinds of oppression on dalit women. The author wants to break all the barriers of social and cultural system and depicts her problems as a dalit and as a woman. A dalit woman is dalit among dalits. She is oppressed thrice. The writer is further oppressed by being a dalit Christian. Hence, she is oppressed by caste, gender and religion. It is a painful journey with open ending story, and many questions are left unanswered. The writer mainly concentrates on religion and education, and gives expression to her bitter experiences. It is the depiction of a journey from weakness to strength.

She narrates episodes after episode to point out how the caste-based stereotypes are created and imposed to insult the untouchable. She seems to be exploding the misconception that sees conversion of the Dalits as a way to form an alternate identity. They have made use of Dalits who are immersed in ignorance as their capital, set up a big business and only profited their own castes (69). While the adolescent Bama is able to resist in the public she loses her voice in the convent school. Bama while acknowledging the governmental affirmative programmes, points out the isolationist tendencies among the school administration to humble the studious Dalits, "All the same, every now and then our class teacher would ask all the Harizans to stand up either at the assembly, or during the lessons . . . we felt really bad then . . . hanging our heads in shame, as if we had done something wrong. Yes, it was

humiliating” (18). At last Bama in rage said she did not want special classes but realized she could “not get rid of the caste business easily wherever she went” (19). She lost her temper and challenging them “head on stood her ground. I managed to get my way at last. . .” (23).

The retrospective narrator sums up the whole situation: “. . . because I had the education, because I had the ability, I dared to speak up for myself. . .” (14). Soon she started taking pride in resisting. At her first place of work she enjoyed standing up to the authorities and teaching them with some skill and success. And it was in such a mood that she decided to become a nun to help those who got humiliation at the hands of nuns. But the oppressive atmosphere of the convent robbed her of her spirits and guts. She realized how the hegemonies of caste difference and discrimination silenced her. Her articulation and the canker of untruth troubled her, “I was filled with anger towards them, yet did not have the courage to retort sharply that I was a low caste woman. I swallowed the very words that came to my mouth, never said anything loud but battled within myself” (22). Significant to note is the fact that even after becoming self-dependent, the question of identity dogs her.

Dalit movements dominated mostly by men had a tendency to sideline issues concerning Dalit women. The Dalit women were compelled to voice their misery doubled up due to caste and gender discrimination. This gave the rise of Dalit Feminism. Dalit feminism has been described as a “discourse of discontent,” “a politics of difference” from mainstream Indian feminism, which has been critiqued for marginalizing Dalit women. Dalit feminist discourse not only questions Indian feminism's hegemony in claiming to speak for all women, but also the hegemony of Dalit men to speak on behalf of Dalit women. Uma Chakravarti observes:

Dalit feminists have analysed this as the three way oppression of Dalit women. “(i) As subject to caste oppression at the hands of the upper castes; (ii) As labourers subject to the class-based oppression, also mainly at the hands of the upper and the middle castes who form the bulk of landowners; (iii) As women who experience patriarchal oppression at the hands of all men, including men of their own caste. (“Dalit Literature” 29)

For a long time, Dalits were suppressed and oppressed. They were treated like slaves. Unconsciously their minds were trained to be slave. So it is needed to create awareness on Dalith to protest against their social injustice. Dr Ambedkar says that we should create awareness to a slave to realize his slavery then only he will protest against slavery. Most of the times Dalits not aware that they are treated like slaves, “You must abolish your slavery yourself. Do not depend for its abolition upon God, or superman”(Ambedkar Thoughts 70) Dalit women like Bama, Baby Kamble, Urmila pavar and many more Dalit women writers themselves are taking the pen to articulate and record their experiences of hurt and humiliation subverts centuries old historical neglect (by the elitist nationalist discourse) and a stubborn refusal to be considered as a subject. As an exponent of Dalit Feminism, Bama has found in *Karukku* the right space to articulate the travails and sufferings of Dalit women. *Karukku* thus enjoys the unique recognition of being one of the first radical feminist discourses by a Tamil Dalit woman. A Dalit woman is a Dalit amongst the Dalit. She is thus doubly oppressed by her caste and gender. In Bama's case, her position is further endangered by her existence as a Dalit Christian. Bama has to face degradation because of being a

Tamil woman too. The Tamils were considered inferior and a Tamil Parayar was the lowest of the low and held no esteem.

In *Karukku* Bama presents the dual aspects of female characters i.e. their potent portrayal as well as meeker one. She describes how the entire village is saved by women against the infuriated police. All the male characters survive just because of their wives: “the women managed to hide their men and save them” (33). At the same time, Bama also describes how the low caste women are under double patriarchy and bear the double burden. The narrator’s grandmother works as a laborer to a Naicker family. Bama observes: “She’d rise before cock-crow at two or three in the morning, draw water, see to the household chores walk a long distance to the Naicker’s house, work till sunset and then come home in the dark and cook a little gruel for herself” (42). The low caste women are used as bonded labourers. They do hard labour from dawn to dusk but do not get wages in proportion to their work done: “. . . at the rate they worked, men and women both, every single day, they should really be able to advance themselves. But of course, they never received a payment that was appropriate to their labour” (47). Bama’s *Karukku* thus points out the unequal wages for men and women in the Indian rural economy.

Bama also describes how Dalit women are physically abused in the patriarchal order. She describes one incident in which Uudan, blower used to beat his wife like a beast and nobody comes forward to save her: “. . . everyday he’d drag his wife by hair to the community hall and beat up her as if she were an animal, with his belt. Everyone came to watch. But nobody could go near and separate them” (52). Bama admits the fact that it is very difficult for a lonely woman to survive in the patriarchal society. They are sexually abused in every nook and corner. The women always remain unprotected in our society:

If a woman so much as stands alone and by her somewhere, all sorts of men gather towards her showing their teeth. However angry you get, however repelled by their expressions and their grimaces, even to the point of retching what can you do on your own...We are compelled to wander about, stricken and unprotected. (Sangati, 102)

Bhama’s description need to be understood as representative of the experience. It is indicative of the ill-fated situation bequeathed in a greater degree of self-awareness and quest achieving of the ill-fated situation bequeathed in a greater degree of self-awareness and quest for achieving high and nobler things in the lives of Dalith women. As Simon de Beauvoir has pointed out in *The Second Sex*, “there are women who mad and there are women of sound method: none has that madness in her method that we call genius”(717) Though Bama doesn’t include any incident of sexual exploitation of women, she is conscious of the extreme sense of insecurity that women suffer from and this exclusion might be a conscious effort of the writer to be silent on such issues that would divide her community further. As such Bama’s gender consciousness constitutes the peculiar aspect of Indian feminist response. Bama’s experience as a woman and her observation of the experiential reality of women that includes the issues of girl’s education, wife battering, sexual exploitation and humiliation, women labour and wages, her restricted movements, the burden of motherhood etc.-all construct her feminist vision while at the same time her work seems to be highlighting the resilience, strong motivation and unfaltering spirit of women to overcome all the hurdles and survive through solidarity in the most un-patriarchal condition without male protection and man’s earning. Thus Bama’s autobiography takes up the

problematic of Dalit both as a noun and adjective. Most significantly her feminist vision has the otherness as the primary attribute of self-fulfilment. *Karukku* explores the wounded self and dark territory of Dalit consciousness which accept their subordinate state in society and tries to subvert that subjugated consciousness into a strong, self-sufficient and respected one. It subverts the Dalit consciousness that accepts the lower caste people as untouchables, contemptible, polluted and inferior.

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