

Portrayal of Women's Position in Bama Faustina's Karukku

P.Kavitha

Assistant Professor of English, Sri Sarada College for Women, Tirunelveli, India

Abstract

Bama Faustina Soosairaj, is a Tamil, Dalit feminist, teacher and novelist. She got fame through her autobiographical novel Karukku which chronicles the joys and sorrows experienced by Dalit Christian women in Tamil Nadu. Bama's novels focus on caste and gender discrimination. They portray caste-discrimination practised in Christianity and Hinduism. Bama's works are seen as embodying Dalit feminism and are famed for celebrating the inner strength of the subaltern woman. Bama's Karukku shows the various aspects of caste discrimination and gender discrimination. These novels show the sufferings of Dalit community in the hands of "upper-caste" communities in church, places of education and society. These also show the sufferings of the Dalit women in the hands of the upper caste men and also in the hands of their own husbands.

KEYWORDS : Feminism, self identity, sufferings, Rejection, Caste.

Dalit literature is literature written by Dalits about their lives. Dalit literature forms an important and distinct part of Indian literature. Dalit literature emerged in the 1960s in the Marathi language, and it soon appeared in the Hindi, Kannada, Telugu, Bangla and Tamil languages, through narratives such as poems, short stories, and autobiographies, which stood out due to their stark portrayal of reality and the Dalit political scene. In 1958, the term "Dalit literature" was first used in a conference in Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha (Maharashtra Dalit Literature Society) in Mumbai. Baburao Bagul (1930–2008) wrote in Marathi. Dalit literature started being mainstream in India with the appearance of the English translations.

The terms 'Dalit' and 'Dalit literature' have been a subject of arguments, controversies, etc. The term 'dalit' refers to the vision of caste binaries and caste based oppression, discrimination and celebration of the politics of 'otherness'. Most of the thinkers and creative writers related with dalit literature have expressed their consensus on the inference that dalit literature is a manifestation of cultural conflict of the society, economically and culturally deprived groups of society. It is not a literature of caste but of a specific consciousness that deprives innocent individuals from their basic rights of self-survival, self-preservation and self expression. Much of Dalit Literature is found in the regional languages and it has to be translated into English to receive due attention everywhere. Several Tamil Dalit Literary works have been translated into English and in other languages and have received appreciation.

Karukku is an autobiographical novel. It is an unusual autobiography. It makes a sense of Bama's life as woman, Christian and Dalit. It is the driving quest for integrity as a Dalit and Christian that shapes the book and gives its polemic. Karukku is concerned with the single issue of caste oppression within the Catholic Church and its institutions and

presents Bama's life as a process of lonely self-discovery. Bama leaves her religious order to return to her village, where life may be insecure, but she does not feel alienated or compromised. The tension throughout Karukku is between the self and the community. The narrator leaves one community in order to join another one. In other words, she leaves the community of 'religious women' in order to join another one as 'a Dalit Woman'. Karukku eschews the confessional mode, leaving out many personal details.

Karukku tells about the personal crisis of the author as she leaves the religious to which she belonged to for seven years. Karukku means Palmyra leaves which, with, their serrated edges on both sides, are like the double edged swords. In her childhood, Palmyra Karukku injures her as she goes to gather firewood. Like Palmyra leaves, life with its unjust social structures and inhuman activities wounds her so much. "Karukku" starts with the line 'our village is beautiful'; Bama narrates the beauty of mountains from the peak and slowly descends to the low castes sufferings add ugly discrimination of castes in the society. This could be evidently seen in "Karukku" Bama says,

I don't know how the upper caste communities and the lower caste communities were separated like this in to different parts of the village. The other castes such as Thevar, Chettiyar, Nadar, Naicker, Udaiyaar had their own settlement for themselves were Dalits are not.(6)

This clearly suggests that they are discriminated from the society. It is so painful to see them to live without a home. It reflects that they have no identity in the society.

Bama presents the dual aspects of female characters. 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 a double patriarchy and bear the double women. Bama pointed out,

My grand mother worked as servants for Naicker families. In the case of one of them, when she was working in the fields, even tiny children, amid the other day, would call her by her name and others her about, just... drank it with cupped hand held to their mouths(16).

Dalit women and children are suffered more by the atrocities of the upper caste. They are suppressed within and outside of their community. Bama says,

"Women suffer more than men, even if they did the same work, men received one wage, women another.... men are always paid more."(47)

Education is provided by the government for the improvement of Dalits. When they struggle for survival even children happen to go to work to support the family economically. Though they get educated, their identity as an Dalit persists till their death. Bama and her brother realize their importance of education.

"Because we are born into Paraya jati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that. But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities".(15)

Bama's faith goes wrong and she feels that there is no connection between God and the suffering poor in the content. Nuns and the priest rose themselves to be true devotees of God but they are malicious inside and like to punish Dalit students. Nuns who belong to the upper caste enjoy their power and position. With the power they had, they dominate and exploit the poor in the name of God.

"What kind of piety can this be? They fake themselves into God's so that they can exploit others. So where has God gone?"(94)

Bama gives a terrible picture of the female subaltern and the marginalized. They work hard both outside and inside. They become real animals and work restlessly. No one cards for them and they become mechanical in every corner of life. Individuality, freedom, and even the self and self consciousness are lost under the male patriarchal domination both inside and outside at home. Paraiya women are ready to go to any extent make their life peaceful. Bama shows a rebellious character against male oppression on women and the patriarchal domination culture, social, economic, religious, and familial life of Paraiya womanhood.

Bama explains:

The position of women is both pitiful and humiliating, really. In the fields they have to escape from upper caste men's molestations. At church they must lick the priests shoes and be his slaves while he threatens them with the tales of God, Heaven, and Hell. Even when they to go their own homes, before they have had a chance to cook some kanji or lie down and rest a little, they have to submit themselves to their husband's torment. (122)

The novel also probes deep in to the soul of a Dalit. It tries to explain that there is no mercenary motive behind the writing of the author. It makes an effort to relate author's passionate recordings of the suffering folk. In her work , she reveals her love and concern for her people and voices for their liberation in its true senses. As a result of her embarrassing experience as a Dalit, Bama realises that through the whole community of Dalit can be empowered and can gain human dignity through the sound education. Bama passes through many emotional encounters and experiences. The whole process is a trail of discovery, which makes her a self-made woman. Though through her education, Bama made a difference in her life. Dalit literature is an arduous endeavour from the canonical to the marginal, from meganarratives to micro-narratives, from the virtual to the real, and from self-emulation to selfaffirmation.

Work cited

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