

Living in the Margin: A Study of Bama's *Karukku*.

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Abstract

Bama published her autobiography “*Karukku*” in 1992. This unusual autobiography helps the reader understand the lives of the Tamil Dalit Christians. Even though Bama’s purpose of writing the book was to heal her “inward wounds”, the book has touched the heart of the readers. *Karukku* helps us understand the realities of the lives of Dalits. Bama looks at various aspects of the Dalit reality – a village which is divided on the basis of caste, Paraya men and women who cannot seem to overcome poverty in spite of working hard, children who are forced to learn lessons of untouchability at a very young age, the apathy of the church etc. An in depth study of the text throws light on the pains of caste discrimination, untouchability and poverty that Dalit Christians experience. This paper, by the study of *Karukku*, tries to understand the realities of the Tamil Dalit Christians.

Keywords: Untouchability, Paraya, Caste Discrimination, Christians.

The Dalit literary movement which flourished in various Indian languages since the 1960s offers a new perspective on the lives of Dalits in India. The caste discrimination and the plight of the Dalit community who live in the periphery of the society have been represented by many Dalit as well as non-Dalit writers. These works offer a critique of the

society which still perpetrates discriminations in terms of caste, religion and gender. A thorough reading of the literature by Dalit writers exposes the social, economic and political realities of Dalits across India. The hegemonic power that the society in general and church in particular has over the dalit community is uncovered by Bama in her autobiography *Karukku*.

Karukku, published in Tamil in 1992, was translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom in 2000. The autobiography chronicles the transformation of the author from a young girl oblivious to the realities of a discriminating society to a woman who has found a voice for herself and for many other voiceless outcastes of the society. *Karukku* challenges the hegemonic social, economic and religious discourse and offers a critique of the caste system to show how deeply it has seeped into the fabric of the society as well as Catholic Church.

Autobiographies seem to have a larger political impact compared to poetry or fiction. As Joshil K. Abraham et. al. says in the introduction to “Dalit Literatures in India” the genre of autobiography seems to be a self evident choice for a literature whose urgency is to be first and foremost a testimonial”(Abraham and Barack, 11). Bama’s *Karukku* is in many ways an unusual autobiography. Completely overlooking the conventional forms of autobiographies, the book does not trace the author’s physical, mental, spiritual and psychological development in a linear, chronological fashion. On the other hand, *Karukku* was written out of a specific experience, the experience of a Tamil Dalit Christian Woman. (Bama, xiv)

As Janet Gunn says in her book “Autobiography: Towards a poetic of Experience”, the act of writing an autobiography cannot be seen as “a private act of self writing” but as “the cultural act of self reading” (Gunn, 8). Thus the text is located in a time, space and a culture. Even though Bama highlights that *Karukku* was written “as a means of healing of (her) inward wounds” (Bama, ix), the text makes the reader acutely aware of the dismal situations in which the Paraya community lives. The choice made by the author to use a

pseudonym gives a universality to the book. The reader is able to identify with the experiences of the writer. The book is a source of consolation for many who share Bama's experiences and it also serves as an eye opener to those who are unaware of the issues faced by Dalits.

Karukku is written in such a way that the attention of the reader is more on the historical, political and cultural background from which Bama is writing. In the opening chapter, Bama talks about the scenic beauty of her village and the myths and beliefs which are popular among the villagers. Thus she places her autobiography in a fixed location and gives the reader a taste of the flavour of village life. All these details are crucial to understand the intricate life of a Paraya. Woven into the beautiful description of the village is the ugly reality of the caste system. Dalits are marginalized and are restricted to their streets. The streets they live in give them an identity which they wish to cast off. Bama's village is divided based on the caste. "The upper-caste communities and the lower caste-communities are separated into different parts of the village" (Bama, 7). The Nadars, ones who climb palms for a living; Chakkiliyar, ones who work with leather, Koravars, ones who sweep streets and the Kusavar, who make earthenware pots live in the margins of the village. Next to them is the Palla settlement and beyond them, near the cemetery, is the Paraya settlement. The Dalits live in the periphery of the society in both literal and metaphorical sense. All facilities such as the post office, Panchayath office, milk depot, big shops, church and the schools were all in the vicinity of the upper class settlements. Thus they need not mingle with the lower castes. Bama's village, thus divided on the basis of caste, stands as a scar on the face of the Republic India.

Throughout the book, Bama questions and opposes the system which has turned a blind eye to the problems of the lower caste people. Most of the land is owned by the Naickers and the Parayas are agricultural labours who are mostly attached to a Naicker

family. Owning land gives one not only the financial security but also an identity. However, Parayas did not own land or any property. They were always at the mercy of their masters. Bama's grandmothers worked as servants for Naicker families. They were dehumanized, treated with no respect. The drinking water was poured from the height of four feet which the parayas received and drank it in their cupped hands. The leftover food and curry of the master's family was tipped into the vessel from some distance. The vessels should not touch or else it will be polluted.

Untouchability in any form was legally abolished in India in 1949. However, the pervasiveness of untouchability is felt only by the marginalized. Untouchability is seen, felt and experienced even today. Bama recollects the anger that seethed inside her when her elder brother told her that as the Naickers belonged to the upper-caste, they must not touch a paraya or they will become unclean. She was insulted by her headmaster, parish priest and warden sister of her hostel at various points of her life for she belonged to the Paraya community. Parayas were deprived of honour, dignity or pride.

Karukku throws light upon the tough and hardworking life of Parayas. They can survive only through hard and incessant labour. The young and the old contribute equally towards running the household. The men and women work in the fields of the Naickers as agricultural or construction labourers. When the children grow up to be ten or twelve years of age they find some way to make some money by working in the fields. Until then they take care of their siblings and manage their homes till their mothers return from work. The boys of the house graze sheep and cattle. After school time children collect thorns for fences or Palmyra and coconut palm stems and fronds as fuels. Or they collect fresh cow dung and pat it into flat cakes for burning. During holidays children go with their mothers to pull up the groundnut crop and to clean and sort the pods.

The Parays are exploited by the Naickers, Nadars and even the forester. When they glean the last of the groundnut crop that is left over in the fields, a share has to be given to the Naicker. When there is no work in the fields they are forced to go to the forest to collect firewood to sell. But to enter the forest they have to bribe the forester. The Nadar men who set up shops swindle the ignorance of Dalit children by selling them cheap goods in exchange of rice and groundnuts.

Even after working hard they are unable to advance themselves because the payment they receive is not appropriate to their labour. Bama cites this as the reason for the state of perpetual degradation and despair of Parayas (Bama, 54). The life of Parayas does not seem to improve in spite of their hardworking nature. Bama recounts how she was humiliated in her college because she did not have a good saree to wear when children belonging to other communities always had good food and good clothes in abundance. This makes her realize the importance of education. Bama is convinced that a social change can happen only with education. Good education can give one the financial security and authority, status and prestige that come with financial security. However, Dalits fall prey to the evil of child labour. Children prefer going to work in the matchbox factories as their hunger pangs are felt much stronger than their hunger for knowledge.

There are many ways to feel like an outcaste. In *Karukku* Bama tells how being a woman, a Dalit, a Christian and a Tamil has become reasons for her to be treated like an outcaste. *Karukku* offers a powerful critique on the way in which Dalits are treated by the Church. Bama lays bare a different face of caste discrimination within the Catholic Church. Priests and nuns are assumed to have set their lives aside to serve the weak and the poor. However, Bama's experiences tell a different story.

Bama shows how the Church used Dalits "who are immersed in ignorance as their capital" to set up big business which only profited their own castes (Bama, 80). In church,

though the Dalits outnumbered the rest, it is the upper caste Christians who enjoy the benefits and comforts offered by the church. Even a priest or nun from the Dalit community is denounced and marginalized making them realize that there is no place for them there.

The church controls the dispossessed and the poor by thrusting blind belief and devotion upon them, and by turning them into slaves in the name of God”(Bama, 108). The Church encourages blind devotion and does not encourage anyone to challenge their teaching. Fear is a tool that is used by the church to subjugate the lower castes. The stories of devil that the sisters told the children reverberated in their minds generating fear. This fear of punishment does not allow them to defy any of the teaching of the church. Fear of the punishment that one might receive if one missed the *pusai* (holy mass) made them go for *pusai* regularly. The prayers are said out of a sense of duty. Confession is made out of duty. Communion is taken out of fear and duty.

Bama narrates a humorous episode from her childhood where a group of friends came across a skeleton and kept it as a relic which they believed will enable them to study well. They prayed to the teeth and the bones kept hidden in their geometry boxes earnestly until they realized what it really was. The oppressed are not taught about Jesus who was angered by injustices and inequality. They are “taught in an empty and meaningless way about humility, disobedience, patience and gentleness” (Bama, 104). This is how the dominant ideology of religion is twisted to suit the needs of the oppressor.

Karukku elaborates on the festivities of Christmas, Easter, New Year and Chinnamalai festival. It is customary for the Parayas to offer the priest and the mother superior expensive fruits like apples, oranges and grapes and biscuits. “Even though our people never tasted the fruit themselves, they somehow went through every effort to buy the fruit for the church elders; they made their offering, knelt before them in all humility and received the sign of cross on their foreheads” (Bama, 67). In return they received nothing.

The mother superior, who received their offerings with open hands, forbids them to lean on the walls or touch anything.

Caste discrimination and exclusionist approach of the church and Christians of other castes are brought to light by Bama. While Dalit Christians contributed towards the celebration of Easter, the Nadars stayed away from the Dalit celebrations. Religious festivals are celebrated without any sense of devotion. The arrival of mike sets and hanging posters of the movie stars served as harbingers of Christmas and Easter and was ended with a movie that was shown on a makeshift screen. Ironically “nobody seems to know what the festival is really about, or what it is celebrating” (Bama, 70). Celebrations happen without knowing the significance of them. Bama cites this as a failure of the church.

“The sisters and the priests too don’t say what needs to be said, but only speak words which are irrelevant, meaningless mumbo-jumbo. ... What passes for devotion nowadays is merely a matter of doing things out of a sense of duty.” (Bama, 101)

The love to bring about a change in the lives of the poor and the downtrodden motivated her to enter the religious order. When she entered religious order she thought that she was finally free from the clutches of caste discrimination. What Bama did not know then was the fact that caste difference counted for a great deal within the convents and soon she learned that “there is no place that was free of caste” (Bama, 23). Unfortunately, there she experienced a different form of discrimination and her experiences made her feel that “being a Tamil seems equivalent to being a Paraya.” (Bama, 24)

The schools where Bama worked were run by the nuns who did not care about the poor children. They served only the children of the rich and affluent. Bama highlights the hypocrisy of the nuns exposing their life style after taking the vow of poverty.

The convent does not know the meaning of poverty. When the bell rang, there was a meal. ... There was always food of all kinds. By turns, at each meal there was meat,

fish or eggs. There was always abundance of fruit and a variety of vegetables. There was a comfortable room to live in. Each room had a bedstead, a fan, a table and chair and drinking water. The school was close by the convent... no need to catch a bus, be pushed and shoved among crowds, and arrive home breathless from all the rush. (Bama, 78)

Disheartened by the meaningless life Bama lead inside the convent she decides to leave the religious order. The life inside the convent clipped her wings and made her weak. The vows were means of control and enslavement (Bama, 113). She realized that in order to love and work for Jesus who cares more about the poor and the oppressed she needs her freedom. Bama lets the world know that life of a Dalit priest and nun are filled with more challenges than the world is aware of.

The Parayas after years of oppression and inhuman treatment have internalised their position in society. They have become complacent to their situation.

“These people are the maharajas who feed us our rice. Without them, how will we survive? Haven’t they been upper caste from generation to generation and haven’t we been lower caste?” (Bama, 15)

The oppressor thrives by enjoying the fruits of the labours of the Dalits. The voice that rise in protest is soon lowered because the “mental firmness (of a Dalit) doesn’t match the influence and authority that money-power wields” (Bama, 80). As long as they depend on the other for food and money they will never attain freedom. Bama writes as a representative of the Dalits. She is the voice of the voiceless Parayas. “I share the same difficulties and struggles that all dalit poor experience. I share ...the poverty of the Dalits who toil far more painfully through the fierce heat and beating rain, yet live out their lives in their huts with nothing but gruel and water” (Bama, 79).

Karukku not only questions the injustice that prevails in the society but also suggests a possible solution to their problems. Bama says that change can come only through education. Being born into Paraya jati they are deprived of honour, dignity and respect. Progress can be made only if they study and make progress (Bama, 18). In a world where everyone looks down on the Dalits it is only with education they will be able to speak up for themselves. Bama ends each chapter with questions directed at the reader making the reader think how he can contribute towards improving the lives of Dalits. *Karukku* offers a new perspective with which the reader can see and understand the problems of millions of Dalits in India. Bama becomes an agent for change who works for the liberation of Dalits.

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