

Abstract

A Tale of Trauma depicted in Bama's Karukku

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Dalit literature has emerged as a separate and important category of literature in India over the past many decades. It has provided a new voice and identity to the communities that have experienced discrimination, exploitation and marginalization due to hierarchical caste system. Such agonizing experiences of the marginalized sections of Indian society based on caste and colour paved the way for Dalit Literature to assert itself as a literature of resistance. Modern Indian writers like Bama tend to depict the oppression of women with greater self-consciousness, deeper sense of involvement and often with a sense of outrage. The novel *Karukku* was written from the perspective of Dalit women, Bama which portrays the journey of the women and how she struggles to raise her voice against the suppression faced by her and her community. Bama presents her story with obvious aggressive protest against dalit women oppression. The title of her very first novel *Karukku* becomes a symbol of dalit resistance.

A Tale of Trauma depicted in Bama's *Karukku*

The novel *Karukku* speaks about Bama's inner quest for self-discovery and the resultant courage, which forces her to move away from the life of a nun to live the life of a dalit woman. Bama opens her Preface with the personal "I":

there are many congruities between the saw-edged palmyra karukku and my own life events that occurred during many stages of my life ...unjust social structures that plunged me into ignorance...There are other Dalit hearts like mine...They, who have been the oppressed, are now themselves like the double-edged karukku (Bama p.xiii).

Karukku is thus both the title of her personal autobiography and an account of the whole community. *Karukku* is significant because it takes into the public domain shameful secrets. Bama has tried to break the aesthetic of silence around issues of caste oppression, social inequality and the biases of the legal system.

The author shares her experiences as a Paraya girl, as a school teacher and as a nun.

She looks back her life from a moment of personal crisis as she leaves the religious order to which she has belonged for seven years. She reminisces 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 Christian converted Parayas are treated as untouchables even by Christian communities. Bama's family had been converted to Christianity in her grandmother's time. The writer focuses mainly on casteism within the Roman Catholic Church. 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 education, Bama finds that wherever she goes, there is a painful reminder of her caste in the form of untouchability. The government offers the financial grants and special tuitions to the Harijans. These grants and tuitions were more of humiliation mainly because it singled out her caste identity. Once the identity is revealed, Bama opines: "Among the other students, a sudden rustling; a titter of contempt. I was filled with a sudden rage." (Bama 19). Bama lights on an incident that took place in her college hostel. That incident has been piercing her heart into pieces. She made a request to the warden for availing leave for her brother Raj Gautaman's communion on genuine grounds. Her plea was rejected. But the warden granted leave for the upper caste students without any query. As an educated girl, Bama argued with the school authorities with a vibrant voice: "...there cannot be different rules for different castes, only the same rules for everyone" (Bama 19). At last, she won justice and she went home.

Lower caste people undergone serious rejections wherever they go. Once 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. Bama gives importance to retrieve women identity. Women are more vulnerable to the assault by upper caste people, and were restricted from certain freedom. They were not allowed to see movies, or walk in the streets with an open face. If any woman moves freely, she will be humiliated, assaulted and sometimes raped by upper caste men.

After graduation, Bama joined as a school teacher in a Christian convent school where the nuns deliberately oppressed the Dalit children with contempt. In order to put an end to this sort of discriminations, she decided to become a nun with a mission of helping the poor students. She entered a religious order with great hope: "...why should I not become a nun too and truly help the people who are humiliated so much and kept under such strict control?" (Bama 20). As she wanted to serve the Dalits, Bama embraced Christianity. The reason behind mass conversion is to safeguard Dalits from the cruel injustice, discriminations, humiliations, and caste bias of the Hindu religion. Dalits think that Christianity would treat them gently. Quite surprisingly, Bama found discriminations in the Christianity also. They labelled her as Dalit-Christian. In spite of the obstacles, she successfully completed nun-training with a strong will. At the end of the training, a nun-sister said "...in certain orders they would not accept Harijan women as prospective Nuns

and that there was even a separate order for them somewhere” (Bama 22). The caste and gender based bitter experiences made Bama to lose faith in God. .

Bama thought that the only weapon which annihilates the caste in the society is education and writing. She deals with the larger areas such as education, development of Dalit children, Dalit women and on the whole the liberation of the Dalits. As a result of her humbling experiences as a Dalit, Bama realizes that through the right type of education the whole community of Dalit can be empowered and can gain human dignity. Bama passes through many emotional encounters and experiences. The whole process is a trail of discovery, which makes her an independent woman. Karukku is an evidence of social behaviour of upper caste people from the perspective of caste and converted religion and its faith. It is a voice of Dalits’ trauma. Bama recorded her wounded psyche and it is representing the people’s psyche. She urges for the upliftment of her people. Bama’s writing celebrates dalit women’s life, resilience and creativity. Her decision to become a nun and later realizing the fact that every where the situation of Dalits is the same. Later she questions “Why. Is it impossible for the Harijan to study or what”? (Bama 19).

This 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. 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.

Bibliography:

Bama, Karukku, trans. Lakshmi Holstorm, Chennai: Macmillian, 2000.