



IDENTITY CRISIS AND DALIT LITERATURE : A STUDY OF BAMA'S KARUKKU

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ABSTRACT

Dalit Literature is a way of expression for the voice of downtrodden and deprived people. It presents the experience and self consciousness of the Dalit community. It becomes a direct narration of the exploited people who try to assert their selves through these writings. Bama's voice becomes the collective voice for all exploited people. Bama's Karukku describes two aspects namely caste and religion that caused sufferings in her life. The plight of dalit people is based on caste, gender and religion. Bama, through, Karukku raises question of exploitation and marginalization of her community. She tried to make the dalit people aware that study and writings are a dominant approach to gain their identity.

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INTRODUCTION

Search for self, a sense of recognizing identity, is overtly seen in Dalit literature especially in autobiographies by Dalit writers. Dalit people have been exploited for many years at every level by upper caste people. Though the constitution of India provides equal rights to all castes, yet the lower caste people are deprived of their rights. The lower caste people victims of the hegemonic practices; motivated by caste and gender based social system, searched for their existence in this Dalit literature. As Indu B.C. in an article "Silence Speaks: A study of Bama's *Karukku*" defines Dalit literature:

Dalit literature is a writing that parallels the revolutionary movement spear headed by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar with a view to bring about psychosocial transformations in the minds of the oppressed. Dalit literature, a strong oppositional voice only raises important question but also narrate the ability of the people at the margins to fight against all odds and injustices. (*The Criterion* 1)

Dalit literature was mainly written in Marathi, Tamil and Kannada languages. Gyaneshwar, Chakradhar and Mukundraj were the earliest Marathi writers and later on saints like Namdev, Eknath, Ramdas, and Tukaram sang in the devotion of God but these writers kept intact the discriminatory system of Vedas, *Smriti*, *Ramayana*, and *Mahabharata*. These Marathi writers didn't reflect the true image of casteism rather than they glorified only God. It was after 1960 that this literature gained a new direction and became popular.

Dalit literature is different in its values, role and nature from other categories of literature as it is written from the Dalit consciousness or the Dalit's point of view. Other literature may be fictional and written for entertainment but Dalit literature is never written for entertainment rather it presents the real and live picture of rigid caste-system and oppression of downtrodden people by upper caste people. As Tarakateertha Joshi says:

Dalit literature is that literature which in an artistic manner shows the agony of the Dalits, their painful perplexity, family deterioration, poverty, humiliation, and impoverished condition. (*Dalit literature: Nature and Role* 75)

Bama's *Karukku*, an autobiography, depicts that Dalits are reduced to sub-human beings. Even though, they convert themselves into Christianity which has no caste system, do not get any relief. She herself faced the hypocrisy of the Upper caste society which makes her autobiography more real and powerful.

Bama's *Karukku* is a path-breaking intervention in Tamil Dalit fiction. Bama, a Dalit woman, a former Christian nun and now a school teacher tells about her experiences, her identity and her marginalized position in the society influenced by her gender, class and religious location. She describes about the oppression that operates in the lives of Dalits, and more specifically in the lives of Dalit women. Writings from the margins and about the marginalized is an attempt to empower Dalit people.

Karukku means leaves of Palm tree, that, with their serrated edges on both sides, are like double-edged swords. The author used a felicitous pun, and the Tamil word *Karukku*, containing

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the word Karu embryo or seed, also means freshness. This book was written as a means of healing her wounds, and Bama felt a freshness by reflecting reality in the book *Karukku*. It was done by its one edge, and the other edge inspired many Dalit people to raise their voice against their oppression. So, it became a symbol of two-edged sword. As Bama herself says in 'Ten years Later,' "that book was written as a means of healing my inward wounds; I had no other motive" (*Karukku* IX).

Karukku presents a real account of the Dalits in Tamil Nadu. They are illiterate people. Due to lack of education, they are not aware to their suppressed identity. They work as bonded labourers and are very poor. They are the worst victims in the Hindu caste system. Some converted themselves into Christianity but they could not get equality and just treatment by the Christians. *Karukku* describes a lack of unity among the people of different Dalit sub-castes. When a communal fight between the Chaaliyar and Paraiyar castes takes place, the Pallars, another sub-caste, were found to be in favour of the Chaliyar. Pallar boys told the police about the hiding place of the Paraiyar men. Pallars are victims of the casteism, but they are unaware about their inhuman existence. Bama in this book makes an attempt to make Dalit people aware by saying that they should know the truth and uplift themselves. She has devoted her life to improve the pathetic condition of the Dalit community and has focused on the importance of education for the liberation of the Dalits.

Bama's story is that of her betrayal by the promise of freedom and dignity as an Indian. The more dominant account is the story of her betrayal in the convent and the church. *Karukku* tells a child's life of spiritual journey as a catholic and realization of her identity as a Dalit. Even in that spiritual life, religious festivals that became part of yearly cycle of crops and seasons, formed her life. Later on, she described the religious and social life, which detained Dalits as untouchables. In her life Bama had bitter experiences. We can see and observe her feelings and expressions about *Karukku* when she herself reveals in the preface of the book:

The driving forces that shaped this book are many: events that occurred during many stages of my life, cutting me like Karukku and making me bleed; unjust social structures that plunged me into 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 all these taken together. (*Karukku* XXIII)

In *Karukku*, Bama vehemently criticizes the practice of untouchability in the Roman catholic churches in particular and the casteism in Indian society in general. The language she uses, is itself a manifestation of her Dalit consciousness. Use of colloquial, Tamil Dalit language instead of using standard/mainstream Tamil language shows her faith in the strength of Dalit culture and language. The years of pains and sufferings have the power to encourage Dalits to protest and to revenge. Sufferings or pain is a double edged weapon for Dalits. The sharp leaves of Palmyra trees can harm the hands that touch them but it can also defend them. The awareness to this very status of Dalits can also instigate them to raise their weapon against their oppression. The existence of Dalits is a double edged weapon for Dalits. It has been used to hurt them but now they have realized that it can be used to defend

themselves. *Karukku* thus symbolizes the Dalits' awareness, Dalits' consciousness that instigate them to fight for their quest of existence. Bama realized this subverted consciousness which inspired the other Dalits and Paula Richman observes, "Bama uses *Karukku* to articulate the notion that pain need not be an ending point; it can spur realization and new growth, as it did for her". (*VSRD* 74)

The overwhelming nature of caste is portrayed here. When Bama lives in the convent, she feels angry at the upper caste authorities, because all the inferior jobs are done by Dalits. Dalits are treated in a shameful and degrading way. She feels pained to see even older Dalit men trembling like small children when they see and talk to the upper castes priests and nuns. Dalits are frightened by the power and wealth of the nuns. Bama feels uneasy among the unfair and cruel upper caste nuns. She realizes that religion is forcefully imposed on the Dalit communities. In her childhood, she worshipped God, and prayed in the church because she had faiths in God that all men are equal in the eyes of God but now she comes to know that the upper caste communities oppressed them in the name of religion and caste. Now Bama has no faith in God and religion; and she does not feel fear of God anymore. She wants to spread the principals of Ambedkarite thought like love, equality and brotherhood. Her experiences in the convent shatter her faiths in the God and religion. The nuns, the priests of the church belonging to upper caste are themselves God and maker of religion. Among the nuns, there were caste divisions, divisions between the rich and the poor, and even divisions over the languages that they spoke.

The life as depicted in *Karukku* throws light on the most agonizing and unfortunate lives of the Dalits. The portrayal of her experiences is indicative of the unfortunate situation bequeathed in a greater degree of self awareness and quest for achieving loftier and nobler things in the lives of Dalit women. Her journey is tedious, encounters are painful and the experiences reveal agony. But the process of self discovery, identity and empowerment is an ordeal.

The unpleasant experience and a suppressed have to compulsorily undergo a traumatic change. Bama's act of commission or omission is not individual but that of the society. Bama suffered the pain of caste-discrimination, untouchability, poverty and destitution but the book *Karukku* has given her courage and helped her to love life once more. It has been written as a means of strength to the multitudes whose identities have been lost and destroyed.

Thus *Karukku* examines the wounded identity and dark territory of Dalit consciousness which accept their downtrodden state and tries to subvert that subjugated consciousness into a strong, self-sufficient and respected existence. It subverts the Swarna caste authority that accepts the lower caste people as untouchables, polluted, contemptible and inferior. *Karukku* has enabled many oppressed people to raise their voices against injustices and, instills self respect among them. It is replete with double objectives of liberation and reflection of self respect. It reflects over the tension which grows out of a constant battle between loss of identity and asserting of self.

It is the need of the hour that the suppressed or the downtrodden must convert themselves from their depressed existence into a confident and respective one. Indeed, *Karukku* spreads the defiant message that encourages Dalits, despite of

all the oppression, to stand firm and revolt against all the indignities and the destructive factors that hinder the creation of an equal and just society.

The problem before Dalit is to survive. The question of existence has become very important in the 21st century. There are so many challenges before the human beings to meet with. The Dalit people have more challenges than the others as they have been subjugated for the centuries. In this century they have to compete with the elite class who have all the resources. For Dalit the resources and opportunities need to be created in order to become equal to the other society. Dalit writers in their writings pose this question again and again. In this paper attempt is made to study the solution of this question given by Bama in her work - *Karukku*. *Karukku* is a mode of revolution that tries to free Dalits from the clutches of casteist oppression. The narrator herself suffered the pain of caste-discrimination, untouchability, poverty and destitution but the book *Karukku* has given her courage and helped her to love life once more. Bama is a first Tamil Dalit woman writer and has found a place in academic circles. So she lays emphasis on education. This book has been written as a means of strength to the multitudes whose identities have been lost and destroyed.

CONCLUSION

After reading *Karukku*, it can be said that there is a close link between education, writing and empowerment that Bama used as tools that could liberate Dalits from leading a degraded and repressed lives. *Karukku* is a mode of revolution that tries to free Dalits from the clutches of casteist oppression. The narrator herself suffered the pain of caste-discrimination,

untouchability, poverty and destitution but the book *Karukku* has given her courage and helped her to love life once more. Bama is a first Tamil Dalit woman writer and has found a place in academic circles. So she lays emphasis on education. This book has been written as a means of strength to the multitudes whose identities have been lost and destroyed.

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