

## Bama's *Karukku*: A Quest for Integrity

\*Richa Sharma

\*PhD Scholar (Department of English), University of Jammu, Jammu (India)

### INTRODUCTION

Literature became an effective tool for the Dalits to express their unheard words, trauma, unfelt emotions as well as anger against the exploitation and ill-treatment meted out to them. Dalit literary movement was inspired by the thoughts and ideology of Dalit leader, activist and politician, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. To convey the excruciating pain and their traumatic and harrowing experiences, the Dalits have articulated the reminiscence and disseminated them mainly through the medium of autobiographies called as Dalit autobiographies or Dalit discourse, which acts as distinctive part of Dalit Literature.

Dalit literature, typically Indian not only in its roots but in its purpose and goal is a symbol of distinctive Indian creativity. It is a new significant identity of modern Indian literature which signifies a new dimension of the concept of Marginal literature as used in the general literary canon. It is a literature that protests against the traditional unjust social order and calls for a change in the attitude of society towards caste based discrimination. Dalit literature, narrating the pain, sufferings, humiliation, tribulations, rejection and revolt, gives a clear and resounding message. Sharankumar, an imminent Dalit writer says about the rejection and revolt in Dalit literature:

“Rejection’ and ‘revolt’ in Dalit literature have been birthed from the womb of Dalit’s pain. They are directed against an inhuman system that was imposed on them. Just as the anguish expressed in Dalit literature is in the nature of a collective social voice, similarly, the rejection and revolt are social and collective.”

In India, almost all the major languages including regional languages and literatures have their past and present of Dalit expression. The qualities that distinguish Dalit literature from mainstream literature are its expressive vigour, fiery strength, vibrancy, authenticity and a sense of social mission. Prominent Dalit writers are Mulk Raj Anand, Munshi Premchanda, Sharankumar Limbale, Mahasweta Devi, Lakshman Gaekwad, Om PrakashValmiki, Bama Faustina Soosaira etc.

### BAMA’S KARUKKU

Bama Faustina Soosaira, originally Faustina Mary Fathima Rani was born at Pathupatty near Madurai (Tamil Nadu) in 1958. The name Bama was generated from the author’s real name Fathima which is pronounced as Bathima in Tamil and from that the name Bama comes. Her ancestors were landless labourers in Pathupatti village. Her grandfather was converted to Christianity way back in the 18th century to escape the disgrace attached with being Dalit. Bama was encouraged to write her memoirs by a friend and her works- *Karukku*, *Kisumbukaran* and *Sangati*- received critical acclaim. She began to be noted as a writer with the publication of *Karukku*

in 1992. *Karukku* is an autobiographical novel originally published in Tamil and was immediately translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom in 2000. The English translation enabled *Karukku* to cross linguistic and regional boundaries, and reached the global readers. The novel won the Crossword Award in 2000.

*Karukku*, the first Dalit autobiography in Tamil, brought with it a force of a whirlwind to whip the literary world with its characteristic Dalit theme and language. It achieved a special identity for having been written by a Dalit Christian woman. It is an unusual autobiography in the sense that it grew out of a particular moment: a personal crisis which drives the writer to make sense of her life as a woman, a Christian, a Dalit. Dalit Christian identity in India is a complex web of double alienation, double discrimination and double socio-cultural and double religio-psychic displacement. The status of the rural Dalit Christian women is much more than a treble dispossession- based on caste, religion and gender.

Bama’s *Karukkuis* an autobiographical statement of what it is to be a Dalit Christian woman. *Karukkumeans* Palmyra leaf and Bama finds many congruities between the saw-edged *Karukku* and her strife-filled life. She writes in the preface of the book: “The driving forces that shaped this book are many 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 then; all these taken together”.

Besides, *Karukku* exposes the social, cultural and familial life of Dalits. It elaborately describes the daily life, language, culture, festivals, religion, naming conventions, food habits, games, entertainment and kinship in the paraya community. Bama describes the dalit’s position of liminality outside the village as, “I don’t know how it came about that the upper caste communities and the lower-caste communities were separated like this into different parts of the village. But they kept themselves to their part of the village, and we stayed in ours. We only went to their side if we had work to do there. But they never, ever, came to our parts.” (6) The first time she realises her community’s pathetic state is when she is studying in her third standard in school and the incident is ironically tinged with humour. As she is coming back from school, she finds an elder from her community bringing a small packet of snacks, holding it by its string without touching it and giving it to a Naicker in the village. Bama first couldn’t help laughing, looking at that funny sight of such a big man carrying a small packet in that fashion. When she reaches home, she relates that incident to her elder brother with a bout of laughter. But her Annan did not laugh. He explained that the elder from the street was carrying the

parcel like that because he was a paraiyan, an untouchable; and the Naickers were the upper-caste men and hence wouldn't touch anything brought by the parayas. The innocence of the child Bama, who hadn't yet heard people speak openly of untouchability is shattered. There is a socio-political self-education begins and grows from the moment she realizes what untouchability means: "When I was studying in the third class, I hadn't yet heard people speak openly of untouchability. But I had already seen, felt, experienced and been humiliated by what it is." (11) The incident sowed the first seeds of fury and revolt in Bama. The very thought of an elderly person of her community should be put to such humiliation infuriates her. The self-questioning had begun. She begins to wonder, "What did they mean when they call us 'Paraya'? Had the name become obscene? But we too are human beings." (13)

Most of the land in Bama's village belonged to the upper-caste Naicker community. Her people's lives were marked by shameful humiliation, abject poverty and endless toil from dawn to dusk. Both her grandmothers worked as servants for Naicker families. They were mostly paid with the unwanted food of the previous day. Yet her grandmother behaved "as if she had been handed the nectar of the gods." (14) When her grandmother works in the fields, even small children would call her by name, order her and command her. Bama's grandmother like all the other servants, called the little boys 'Ayya', which means master. When the Paraiya women asked for drinking water, the Naicker women poured out the water from a height of four feet, and the Paraiya women drank the water with cupped hands. She recalls painfully, "One day I went with Paati to the Naicker house. After she had finished all her filthy chores, Paati placed her vessel that she had brought with her, by the side of the drain. The Naicker lady came out with her leftovers, leaned out from some distance and tipped them into Patti's vessel, and went away" (14) Then Bama tries to protest, her grandmother tells her: "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? Can we change this?" (14) Bama feels terrible and concerned about her community's service to the upper caste as slaves and the way they are oppressed in the name of untouchability, casteism, suppression, domination and whatever it may be. The Nadar men who had shops in the Paraiyar streets exploited them during their bartering sessions.

Bama started to look out for means to uplift herself and her community from this trampled existence. Her brother shows her the right path and tells her that education is the only way to attain equality: "Because we are born in the Paraiyajati, we are never given any honour or dignity with respect. We are strived of off that. But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities. So study with care, learn all you can. If you are always ahead in your lessons people will come to you of their own accord and attach themselves to you. Work hard and learn." (15) Her elder brother's counsel is an eye-opener to Bama. Inspired by his words, she studies very hard and by sheer hardwork, she stands first in the class and gains friends.

Bama had bitter experiences at school as well. Dalit children were asked to do all the menial work at school. The teachers used them as servants to carry water to the teacher's houses and water their plants. One day as Bama was playing along with the other children; it was by mistake that a coconut dropped from the tree. The following day she was not allowed inside the school. The playful innocence of the child is named as theft by the headmaster. He tells her, "You have shown us

your true nature as a Paraya." (16) And the priest's reaction is not very different from that of the headmaster: "After all, you are from the Cheri. You might have done it. You must have done it." (16) This incident shocks her when she is abused in the name of caste even before she can understand this discrimination. After completing her eight standard, she joins a school in the neighbouring village. The warden sister of her hostel would get hold of the low caste or poor children and abuse them for no reason. And when the students returned to school after their holidays she would comment: "Look at the Cheri children! When they stay here, they eat their fill and look as round as potatoes. But look at the state in which they come back from home- just skin and bone!" (17) In spite of the Dalit children paying their fee for food and other things, it was embarrassing for Bama to listen to such remarks. The class teacher would sometimes ask all the harijan students to stand up during the assembly and Bama would feel humiliated to stand before thousands of students. The financial grants and special tuitions that the government offered the Dalits were more of a humiliation than consolation, mainly because it singled out her caste identity. Once the identity was revealed, she could sense "among the other students, a sudden rustling; a bitter of contempt." (19).

Overcoming every hurdle on her path, Bama completes her undergraduation and B.Ed. She raises larger questions like, "Why, is it impossible for a harijan to study or what?" (19) Bama's education and the empowerment it gives her, encourage her to speak up for herself and to hold her head high. Thus at her first place of work, when a nun asks her "Are you a Nadar?" she replies, "No, we are Parayar." Bama writes, "When I recall the expression that came over her face, I want to laugh, even now." (20) When she works as a teacher in a school, she realises that the nuns there don't care for the Dalit students. It is then that she takes a drastic step of resigning her job as a teacher and become a nun to sacrifice her life for the poor and Dalit children. But her belief that the convent is the only exceptional place devoid of class consciousness, is shattered when she sees the caste hegemony even in the convent. "And in the convent as well, they spoke very insultingly about low caste people. They spoke as if they didn't even consider low-caste people as human beings." (22) She realises that it is easier to tolerate discrimination from the society than to face politics and casteism inside the convent. The nuns felt that "low caste people are all degraded in some way. They think we have no more moral discipline nor cleanliness nor culture." (22-23) She is angered by the treatment given to the Dalits in the convent: "Are Dalits not human beings? Do they not have common sense? Do they not have such attributes as a sense of honour and self-respect? Are they without any wisdom, beauty, dignity? What do we lack?" (24)

If the humiliation of caste-based discrimination on the part of society at large is hard to bear, the attitude of the church is intolerable to Bama. Didn't the Church claim to treat all people alike and to uphold justice? Instead, she realizes, "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. It is only the upper-caste Christians who enjoy the benefits and comforts of the Church. Even among the priests and nuns, it is the upper-castes who hold all the high positions . . . even though Dalits like me might wish to take up the path of renunciation, we find there is no place for us there." (69) The Church left the Bible-preaching to mere theory, literally putting nothing of it to practice. Bama says, "There is a great deal of difference between this

Jesus and the Jesus who is made known through daily pieties". (90) There was a lot of good food and the nuns lived a luxurious life in the convent. There was also "such jealousies, such competition, such arrogance that one could survive by one's own strategies, guile and cunning" (95). Bama says that there were "prayers throughout the day. But there was no connection between these prayers, the life we led, and the work we did." (97) All these prayers were "as if done as a duty" (97). Having realized that there was no connection between the 'Convent's God' and the suffering poor, Bama's mind is tormented. She was "dying several deaths within." (23) Revolting against the lack of humanity in the piety of the religions, she denounces exploitation in the name of religion. She asks: "How long can one play-act this way? Anyway it wasn't possible for me. I had to leave the order to come into the world"(93).Bama's inner quest for self-discovery and the ensuing courage, forces her to move away from the life of a nun to live the life of a Dalit woman. She thus "leaves one community (of religious women) in order to join another (as a Dalit woman)." (Holmstrom, ix) Having come out of the religious order, Bama feels a sense of fulfilment and 'belonging' to the community of Dalit women despite the fact that she has to face a lot of criticism and economic insecurity. The book therefore becomes the harbinger of an awakening and a reiteration of the Dalit's freedom to question, rebel and reinterpret. As Lakshmi Holmstrom puts it, "Bama's work is among those that are exploring a changing Dalit identity."

## CONCLUSION

Karukkuis thus a pathetic and moving statement of the suffocation and suppression of the trampled and marginalized existence of the Dalits. In her preface to Karukku, Bama states, "There are many congruities between the saw-edged palmyra Karukku and my own life. Not only did I pick up the scattered Palmyra Karukku in the days when I was sent out to gather firewood, scratching and tearing my skin as I played

with them; but later they also became the embryo and symbol that grew into this book." (xiii) She continues that though the Bible describes the word of God as a two-edged sword, it no longer stirs the hardened hearts of the many who have sought their happiness by enslaving and disempowering others. Bama's journey is tedious, the encounters are excruciating and the experiences reveal pain. But her quest for self-discovery, identification and empowerment has to be necessarily an ordeal. Bama's writing is a form of battle against such injuries both past and present. It is a literature of commitment.

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