



DALIT CONSCIOUSNESS IN BAMA'S KARUKKU

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Abstract:

The caste system in India was originated and sustained for exploitation. An exploiting system always adheres to a set of values, favorable to it. The other systems of values are either distorted or corrupted for the convenience of the upper caste. Social inequality and untouchability were not only convenient but also necessary to keep the torch of power unextinguished for the early rulers and were hence retained. Their wretchedness forced them to forget their own existence and they lived in abject poverty and their dream of freedom was never translated into reality. The oppression experienced by women folk expressed in literature therefore can be considered as marginal literature. The horrendous experiences of Dalit women in India are certainly a double marginality. In this category, Bama one of the Dalit writers of India, expresses the double marginality in her works. Though many writers voice Dalits' sufferings in their works, Bama's novels open up new perspective on the Dalit woman. Her creative faculty and fertile imagination weave an oppressed and subjugated image of a Dalit woman. Bama has moral and social purpose in portraying the real conditions of her people in the form of fiction. She believes that if the inherent spirit in her people is properly kindled through right type of education and employment, her people will raise on the socio-political and economical ladder on par with their masters.

Key Words: Dalit, Suppression, Naicker & Paraiyar

The uncompromising struggle of Dr. Ambedkar, serenity from Lord Buddha, the value of education from Jyotiba Phule and the relentless reformative measures of E.V. Rama Samy are the four important ingredients which go in the making of an anti-dote to counter the wide spread virus 'Dalitism' in the socio-political domain and 'Dalit Literature' in the creative art for the affirmation of the Dalit identity against the caste-based Indian society. If Dalit literature is studied in the light of Derrida's 'deconstruction', it simply appears to be a process of bringing the Dalit to the centre from the margin on which they were forced to remain because of the upper-caste strategy which never allowed them to enter the mainstream. But it will be a one-sided view to take Dalit literature as an attempt to throw the offenders on the margin in order to bring the victims to the centre.

Dalit Literature is "basically in the affirmation of Dalit identity by discarding the Brahminic language and symbolism. It is in their use of their own language, idiom, metaphor and imagery" (Wankhede 31). While defining Dalit literature Harish Manglam, a Gujarati poet writes: "The Definition of Dalit literature consists mainly of the 'rejection' of superstitions, the Varna system, inhumanity and unjust exploitation; a strong 'protest' against all factors in the way of human welfare, as well as 'revolt' against the caste and class-based social structure" (194). Hence the questions, Is the scheduled caste the only class that is exploited? Are the other castes or classes not exploited and oppressed? arise while talking about 'Dalitism'. The answer is an emphatic 'No' for abject poverty plays a more important role than caste in exploitation. But in the case of Dalits, exploitation doubly affects them for being poor and Dalit as well. Even the equally poor among the caste Hindu look down upon them making their life all the more pathetic and precarious.

The oppression experienced by women folk expressed in literature therefore can be considered as marginal literature. The horrendous experiences of Dalit women in India are certainly a double marginality. In this category, Bama one of the Dalit writers of India, expresses the double marginality in her works. Dalit literature in India, as a movement says Dangle: "...owes its origin to a revolutionary struggle for social and economic changes. This literature is closely associated with the hopes for freedom of a group of people, who as untouchables, are victims of social, economic, and cultural inequality..." (237).

The caste system in India was originated and sustained for exploitation. An exploiting system always adheres to a set of values, favorable to it. The other systems of values are either distorted or corrupted for the convenience of the upper caste. Social inequality and untouchability were not only convenient but also necessary to keep the torch of power unextinguished for the early rulers and were hence retained. With all these socio-cultural predicaments, in the arduous past the Dalits in Tamilnadu lived a life of poverty, starvation, ignorance, insult, injustice and humiliation. Their wretchedness forced them to forget their own existence and they lived in abject poverty and their dream of freedom was never translated into reality.

Though many writers voice Dalits' sufferings in their works, Bama's novels open up new perspective on the Dalit woman. Her creative faculty and fertile imagination weave an oppressed and subjugated image of a Dalit woman. But she explodes the image of this helpless Dalit woman tracing her journey from 'subjugation', to the height of a 'celebration' of her life. The truth is that a Dalit woman's problems are diverse and multifarious compared to other caste women which necessitated the need to articulate their plight. The Dalit women, perhaps, are powerful mentally as they face problems such as doing hard labour to look after their family, subjected to humiliation and sexual harassment in the hands of not only their men, but also those of other castes trying to overcome the economical difficulties, experiencing exploitations in the hands of upper caste men and women.

The focal point of Bama's novel, *Karukku* is the development of the protagonist's mind and character from her childhood through varied experiences and the recognition of her identity and role in the world. It highlights Bama as a Dalit who moves towards self-discovery, self-definition and self-affirmation. Her only mission is to uplift her Dalit community by writing the true story of her own people so that the world would comprehend their pathetic plight and thereby direct the authorities to provide them ways and means and opportunity to live a decent life. The novel *Karukku* grows in significance because of her first hand knowledge about her own community which she has faithfully put it in black and white.

Bama's *Karukku* constitutes the arc of the narrator's spiritual development both through nurturing of her belief as a catholic and her gradual realization of herself as a Dalit. Bama finds many similarities between the saw edged palmyra and her own life: "Events that occurred during many stages of my life, cut me like *Karukku* and made me bleed... Later they also become the embryo (Karu) and symbol that grew into this book" (xiii). Bama also speaks of her commitment to the Dalit cause. She rejoices in the developing self-respect among the Dalits and envisages them gaining political, economical and cultural strength. She reflects on the low status of Dalit Christians and breaking of the silence of the subaltern through the process of rediscovery.

Bama painfully depicts an incident that tells the dangerous effect of casteism which is deep rooted in the Indian soil. As a little girl, Bama once happened to see a man from Dalit community working in the fields of Naicker bought "something like

vadai or green banana bhajji in the packet, because the wrapping paper was stained with oil. He came along holding out the packet by its string, without touching it" (13). As he was a Dalit, he was not allowed to touch the parcel. Such is the condition of deep rooted untouchability prevailing in Indian society.

That incident made a great revelation to Bama about her low-birth. After reaching home, she related the sight to her family members. Hearing this, her elder brother "told me the man wasn't being funny when he carried the package like that. He said everybody believed that Naickers were upper caste and therefore must not touch Parayas. If they did, they would be polluted. That's why he had to carry the package by its string" (*Karukku* 13). When she heard it, she got angry and raised a question "what did it mean when they called us "Parayas?" (*Karukku* 13). Thus the young mind of Bama had learnt the pathetic plight of her people which ultimately gave her a spirit to evolve into a liberated Dalit woman. Bama's self journey from her oppressed condition to liberated young woman is rightly commented by S. John Peter Joseph, thus..."

There are hereditary divisions of settlement of upper caste communities and lower caste communities in the village of Bama. The people of upper castes such as Naicker, Chettiyaar, Aasaari, Thevar, Nadar and Udaiyaar never came to the parts where the low caste people such as the Koravar, Chakkiliyar, the Kusavar, Pallar and Parayar lived. The Panchayat Board, the post-office, the milk-depot, the schools, the big shops and the church were situated in the streets of upper caste people. When Bama was studying third standard she came to realize the horrible nature of the practice of untouchability. She got infuriated when she saw an elderly person of her community carrying a small packet containing vadais (eatables) by its string without touching it for a Naicker...for the first time she began to have caste consciousness... (37-38).

The inquisitive mind of Bama then analyses various incidents and events and questioned the upper-caste people for the rights of their own people. Bama's grandmothers worked as servants in Naicker families under pathetic conditions. Even the small child there would call her grandmothers by their names and they were treated as unwanted garbage in the houses of Naickers. Naturally such humiliation provoked Bama to raise voice against these caste people. As a little girl she had no alternative than bury the spark of protest and anger in her mind which in due course was developed into inextinguishable fire of fury:

One day I went with Paatti to the Naicker house. After she had finished all her filthy chores, Paatti placed the 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 Paatti's vessel, and went away. Her vessel, it seemed, must not touch Paatti's; it would be polluted... These people are the maharajas who feed us our rice. Without them, how will we survive? Have not they been upper-caste from generation to generation, and have not we been lower - caste? Can we change this? (*Karukku* 14)

M. Stella Rose in her article, "A Journey Towards self-discovery and Spiritual Identity in Bama's *Karukku* painfully states how even the young children of Dalits are exploited by the upper caste people:

Bama herself worked along with her grandmother in a Naicker family during her holidays. Her own cruel experience of the hard work she did in the field and the forest enabled her to portray the plight of the oppressed in a realistic way. She helped her grandmother collect firewood and also went to collect cow dung from the streets and the fields to be used as fuel at home. At other times she along with other children, went to the field to pull up the groundnut pods. (93-94)

From her brother who was a post-graduate student in a city college, Bama learnt that the intellectual sharpness is the pre-requisite for the fulfillment of her ambition to raise in the personal life and to fight for the upliftment of her community. He opines that education alone ensures emancipation to them as they belong to "Paraya jati" (*Karukku* 15). According to him education is the passport to prosperity which alone can release them from the present predicament. He regrets "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). Motivated by these words Bama paid more attention to her studies and always stood first in the class. Even in schools the Dalits are treated as lowest of lowly. The teachers exploit the Dalit students despite their remarkable performance in their academic pursuits.

Despite her mental trauma and psychic tension Bama could become the topper in her S.S.L.C. examination among the Dalit students. The college life after high schooling gave a strange kind of revelation as Bama began to understand the reality of deep-rooted caste system in India. The very understanding kindles her rage and she decides that she should be more rigid and authoritative in order to overcome the worst effects of casteism. She relates the incidents in contempt that affected her when she was in college:

I had thought that at such a big college, at such a distance away, among so many different students, nobody would bother about such things as caste. But even there, they did certainly consider caste differences. Suddenly one day a lecturer "will Harijan students please stand; the government has arranged that Scheduled Caste students should get special tuition in the evenings. Just two students stoop up; myself, and another girl. Among the other students a sudden rustling; a titter of contempt. I was filled with a sudden rage. At once, I told the teacher that I did not want their special tuition or anything else, and sat down. It struck me that I would not be rid of this caste business easily, whatever I studied, wherever I went. (*Karukku*19)

The humiliation that Bama faced in buses agonized her more where invariably all upper caste women avoid sharing a seat with them. They either move to other seats or stand all the way. She recounts an unforgettable experience with a Naicker woman in this regard: "How is it that people consider us to gross even to sit next to when traveling? They look at us with the same look they would cast on someone suffering from a repulsive disease. Wherever we go we suffer blows and pain" (24). Then she raised the poignant question: "Are Dalits no 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 wisdom, beauty, dignity? What do we lack? They treat us in whatever way they choose, as if we are slaves who don't even possess human dignity" (*Karukku* 24).

The psyche of Bama from her childhood to her adulthood craves to erase her identity of low birth. She grows furious whenever she is addressed as Dalit. Such is the mental trauma of many Dalits in India. Even after nearly seven decades of independence, the Dalits in India are still treated as non-human beings in many parts of India. Even though activists and reformists like Ambedkar and Periyar worked for the cause of Dalits, the Dalits are still experiencing all kind of humiliations in the socio-political sphere. Hence Bama wanted to become a nun and joins a convent to overcome the humiliations. But, her entry into the convent, opened her eyes to the dark and bitter reality that even the spiritual centers like convents which preach that all are equal before God are in no way different from the worldly and materialistic centers like slums and educational institutions. She gives expression to her suppressed agony and anger:

In that school, attended by pupils from every wealthy households, people of my community were looking after all the jobs like sweeping the premises, swabbing and washing the classrooms, and cleaning out the lavatories. 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. They did not know that I was a low-caste nun. I was filled with anger towards them, yet I did not have the courage to retort sharply that I too was a low-caste woman. I swallowed the very words that came into my mouth; never said anything out aloud but battled within myself. (*Karukku* 22)

The mental trauma results into a kind of psychic tension when the Dalits encounter ill-treatment at every step. The upper caste people think that the Dalits have "no moral discipline nor cleanliness nor culture" (23). Such sweeping generalization of upper caste makes Bama lament: "listening to all this and dying several deaths within" (23) which ultimately vigours the psychic tension in her. Hence, Bama makes a strong plea to the people of her own community to establish their identity in society:

We who are asleep must open our eyes and look about us. We must not accept the injustice of our enslavement by telling ourselves it is fate, as if we have no true feelings; we must dare to stand up for change. We must crush all these institutions that use caste to bully us into submission, and demonstrate that among human beings there are none who are high or low. Those who have found their happiness by exploiting us are not going to let us go easily. It is we who have to place them where they belong and bring about a changed and just society where all are equal. (*Karukku* 25)

As the champion of Tamil Dalits especially the Tamil Dalit women, Bama openly records inner fury in her writing. She assesses the strength and weakness of her community in an impartial manner and thereby makes the world understand the feelings of the dormant community of India namely the Dalit. *Karukku* which describes the life of Bama, can be compared to Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* and Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie* for the use of the *bildungsroman* technique, a technique which becomes a powerful tool in the hands of Bama to depict the physical, mental and spiritual growth of the protagonist, from her childhood to womanhood.

Bama has moral and social purpose in portraying the real conditions of her people in the form of fiction. She believes that if the inherent spirit in her people is properly kindled through right type of education and employment, her people will raise

on the socio-political and economical ladder on par with their masters. In treating her women, Bama is highly positive. She says that her women have latent energy which is like a volcano that remains in the crust of the earth. When necessity comes in their lives they together thrive up to the level of sky with the inherent burning energy and uphold their heads on par with other men. She affirms that at times, her women are passive enduring all sorts of humiliation and ill-treatment but when need presses them they become dynamic and act positively to achieve whatever they want to acquire. Moreover, Bama has articulated various solutions in her works to the various problems that her women face.

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