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DALITS, THE MARGINALIZED AS REFLECTED IN BAMA'S *KARUKKU*

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ABSTRACT

Marginalization happens in a society for many causes. Among them caste, gender and money are the major causes. A group of people can be marginalized as untouchables with regard to the caste. Dalit community is one such community in which the people are considered as untouchables and are marginalized by the people of the upper castes. Dalits are always on the marginalized 'other' side of the Indian society. So when they started voicing after centuries of silence, about themselves, there comes a literature depicting assertion of human rights, self-pride, revolt against social injustice, chronicles of personal and collective suffering, and hopes and aspirations for a new society devoid of discrimination. Dalit literature is written by the members of the Dalit communities or the literature that is specifically written to represent the typical social, historical and cultural aspects of the Dalit communities and it is a literature of explicit social commitment aimed at promoting ideas of social equality, justice and resistance to suffering, discrimination and economic exploitation. Bama belongs to the class of first generation learners in her community and has found a place in academic circles by virtue of being a school teacher and more significantly as a writer. She lays great emphasis on education as a means of social empowerment. Bama's *Karukku* (1992) discusses the various forms of violent oppression unleashed on Dalits, specifically on the Paraiyar caste. This article entitled "Dalits, the Marginalized as reflected in Bama's *Karukku*" discusses the sufferings of Dalits, the marginalized at the hands of the upper castes, school officials, state (police) and at the church.

Key words: marginalized, injustice, discrimination, Paraiyar, oppression, suffering

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Marginalization happens in a society for many causes. Among them caste, gender and money are the major causes. A group of people can be marginalized as untouchables with regard to the caste. Dalit community is one such community in which the people are considered as untouchables and are marginalized by the people of the upper castes. Dalits are always on the marginalized 'other' side of the Indian society. So when they started voicing after centuries of silence, about themselves, there comes a literature depicting assertion of human rights, self-pride, revolt against social injustice, chronicles of personal and collective suffering, and hopes and aspirations for a new society devoid of discrimination.

Dalit Literature is a literature about Dalits. It is a literature written by the members of the Dalit communities or the literature that is specifically written to represent the typical social, historical and cultural aspects of the Dalit communities and it is a literature of explicit social commitment aimed at promoting ideas of social equality, justice and resistance to suffering, discrimination and economic exploitation. Etymologically speaking, the term 'dalit' has originated from Sanskrit, 'dalita' meaning 'oppressed'. It means a member of the caste that is considered the lowest and has the fewest advantages. Post-modern Dalit writers portray their protest for liberation and empowerment of Dalits. 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). It is relevant to all regional Dalit Literatures in India and is applicable to Dalit Literature in Tamil.

Bama belongs to the class of first generation learners in her community and has found a place in academic circles by virtue of being a school teacher and more significantly as a writer. She lays great emphasis on education as a means of social empowerment. As an activist, she forges close ideological affinity with feminist thought. Tamil Dalit writing has been heralded with the publication of Bama's *Karukku* in 1992. *Karukku*, an autobiographical novel written by Bama in Tamil in 1992, won worldwide acclaim only after Lakshmi Holmstrom translated it to English in 2000. It has won the Crossword (Translation) Book Award in 2000. It is the driving quest for integrity as a Dalit and Christian that shapes the book and gives its polemic. It discusses the various forms of violent oppression unleashed on Dalits, specifically on the Paraiyar caste. It can be considered as the childhood memoir written by Bama, which voices the joys and sorrows of her people, oppressed by the higher castes in India. The book reflects the various events happened in her life. This article entitled "Dalits, the Marginalized as reflected in Bama's *Karukku*" discusses the sufferings of Dalits, the marginalized and the oppressed at the hands of the upper castes, school officials, state (police) and at the church.

There are hereditary divisions of settlement of upper caste communities and lower caste communities in the village of Bama. The village in *Karukku* divided along caste, class and communal lines are the representative of a typical South Indian village. It is true that class divisions in Indian villages are most often along caste lines. The people of upper castes such as Naicker, Chettiyaar, Asaari, Thevar, Nadar and Udaiyaar never came to the parts where the low castes 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. Bama's village is not an exception to this rule. Referring to the divergent caste and religious groups residing the village like Nadars, Koravar, Chakkiliyar, Kusavar, Pallar, Paraya, Thevar, Chettiyaar, Asari, Udaiyar and Naickars, Bama identifies a clear pattern in the distribution of the caste groups in the village:

I don't know how it came about 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. The post-office, the panchayat board, the milk-depot, the big shops, the church, the schools- all these stood in their streets. So why would they need to come to our area? Besides, there was a big school in the Naicker street which was meant only for the upper caste children. (7)

The demographic specificities and the distribution of divergent communities of the village reveal its inner confrontations and prejudices that are chiefly related to caste and class differences. The geographical division of the settlements of the people belonging to different castes can be seen as a symbolic representation of the wide gulf within the village community. The division is reflected in the interactions within the village community. Early realization of this deeply felt experience is touching when it is presented in Bama's words, "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. (13) What made Bama aware of her identity

as a Paraya, even as a young girl, is the humiliating experiences that she had seen as well as felt in her own village. Innumerable instances that illustrate caste discrimination are narrated in *Karukku*.

Karukku focuses on two essential aspects namely: caste and religion that cause great pain in Bama's life. Bama has bitter experiences at the school. One day, Bama and her friends were playing the game of running up the coconut palm and touching its tip in the school in the evening. Unfortunately when Bama climbed up and touched the tip, a green coconut fell down. The children out of fear left it there and ran away. Next morning at the school assembly the head master who belonged to the Chaaliyar caste called out Bama's name and chided her. Actually, Bama was not guilty but the Headmaster treats her badly. He scolds her in the name of caste: "You have shown us your true nature as a Paraya", he said. "You climbed the coconut tree yesterday after everybody else had gone home, and you stole a coconut. We cannot allow you inside this school. Stand outside". (19) As a result of this, Bama is in agony. She has been ashamed and insulted in front of all the children. After that she gets suspended from the school. When she is crying, a teacher advises her to meet the church priest for an apology matter. When she went to the priest to get a letter from him to get admitted in the class, the priest's immediate response was, "After all you are from the Cheri. You might have done it. You must have done it". (19) When she enters the classroom with the recommendation of the priest, the entire class looks at her in a strange way. She expresses:

When I entered the classroom, the entire class turned round to look at me,
and I wanted to shrink into myself as I went and sat on my bench, still
weeping" (19)

Bama has never heard of untouchability until her third standard in school. The first time, she comes to know her community's pathetic state, which is ironically tinged with humour. As Bama is returning from school, she finds an elder from her street who is holding out a packet of snacks. This packet of snacks is tied in a string. The elder is bringing the snacks by holding the strings without touching the packet and is giving it to a Naicker in the village. Bama is unable to control her laughter, looking at the funny sight. But Bama's Annan told her 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". (15) The self-questioning has begun in Bama with wonder. Bama writes:

What did it mean when they call us 'Paraya'? Had the name become that obscene? But we too are human beings. Our people should never run these petty errands for these fellows. We should work in their fields, take home our wages, and leave it at that. (16)

Bama recollects one incident from her life in which Dalit people have to take the left over food from the upper caste people. This left over food suggests the leftover identity of the Dalits in India:

It was a longtime before I realized that Paatti was bringing home the unwanted food that the Naickers were ready to throw away. One day I went with Paatti to the Naicker house. After she had finished all her filthy chores, Paatti 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 Paatti's vessel, and went away. Her vessel, it seemed, must not touch Paatti's; it would be polluted. (16)

Bama starts to look out for means to uplift herself and her community from this pathetic existence. Her elder brother shows her the right path and tells her that education is the only way to attain equality. Bama's elder brother opines:

Because we are born into the Paraya jati, 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. 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. (17-18)

Bama's elder brother's counsel makes a very deep impression on Bama. She wants to prove herself. Ever since her brother speaks to her, she studies hard with all her breath and being. Bama takes her studies very seriously. She sees to it that she always stands first in the class. Bama writes: "And, because of that, many people became my friends, even though I am a Paraichi" (18).

Throughout her education, Bama finds that where ever she goes, there is a painful remainder of her caste in the form of untouchability. The government offers the financial grants and special tuitions to the harijans. These grants and tuitions are more of humiliation than consolation, mainly because they single 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" (22). It was against the odds that Bama completes her undergraduation and B.Ed., subsequently; she decides to become a teacher. She works in a convent. Bama finds that the nuns working there constantly oppress the Dalit children. When she is in the hostel after completion of her eighth class, Bama painfully recalls the nuns commenting on the Dalit children. She expresses her grief: "The warden- sister of our hostel could not abide low-caste or poor children. She'd get hold of us and scold us for no rhyme or reason". (20)

In fact, Bama is very happy teaching the children because most of the children in the convent are Dalits. She enjoys teaching with some skill and success. Nuns used to suppress Dalit children and Dalit teachers very much. On seeing the oppression at convent, it is Bama who is suddenly struck with the idea of becoming a nun. She decides to sacrifice her life, help the poor and the Dalit children. The Paraya caste nuns are not given any kind of respect and positions in the convent. Bama notices this in the convent. It is very hard to face the politics and casteism inside the convent. Because of the purpose of her survival, she has to pretend there. Though the circumstances are like this in the convent, Bama continues to stay in the convent because of her strong determination and perseverance towards the poor and the Dalit children. Those who are taking training with Bama to become nuns are anxious to find out to which caste Bama belongs. Whoever asks Bama about her caste, she answers honestly, without any hesitation. In a particular class, a sister tells Bama that there is a separate religious order for Harijan woman to become nuns. Bama is admitted in the religious order only after she gets confirmation from the convent. The convent has asked for her services. Convents are service oriented. But their orientation is different towards upper castes and Dalits. They could not admit Dalit students in their school because their standard will fall. They marginalize all Dalits as poor quality. The nuns in the convent speak insultingly about low class people. They do not consider low caste people as human beings. About low caste people, the nuns' notions are, "low caste people are all degraded in every way. They think we have no moral discipline nor cleanliness nor culture. They think that this can never be changed. (26)

According to Bama, the authorities in the church lack kindness, compassion, tolerance, a sense of justice, fraternal qualities and a cosmopolitan outlook. The series of incidents that took place in the life of Bama enabled her to discover herself as a woman, Dalit and Christian. At the church, Dalit Christians are not allowed to sing in the church choir, are forced to sit separately, away from the upper caste Christians. They are not allowed to bury their dead in the cemetery within the village, behind the church, but are made to use a different graveyard beyond the outskirts. The Paraiyars who are converted to Christianity in order to escape casteist oppression at the hands of orthodox Hinduism are shown to be greatly disillusioned as they are not able to escape caste oppression within the churchfold. Further, reservation benefits are not granted to Dalit Christians as theoretically, Christianity does not recognize caste. Bama traces her personal disillusionment with the church and her walking out of a nunnery after seven years of stay, as she found the unjust, unchristian, and discriminatory conduct of church authorities towards Dalit Christians. Bama's work points out that the church distorts the real image and teachings of Christ and preaches docility, meekness and subservience to the faithful while suppressing the teachings of Jesus. She hence urges Dalits to educate themselves, read the Bible themselves and recognize Jesus as a defender of the oppressed.

Legal system demarcates the poor Dalits. A dispute arose between the Chaaliyars and the Parayar community over the cemetery for the high caste claimed ownership. The Parayar community is dispossessed of even the cemetery. Some effeminate Chaaliyar boys beat up the Dalits and in turn the Dalits marched to deal with them. The Chaaliyar women threw stones at the Dalits while the men hit them. Then it was silent for some time. But, Izhava's husband had been caught and stabbed and blood splashed everywhere. Yet the Chaaliyars fabricated an elaborate case, packed solely with strange lies. As a result, the Reserve Police from Sivakasi camped there feasting on the sheep, Dalit butchered for them. They never gave a fair hearing but

acted upon the false report and beat up the Dalits' "black and blue" (34) and "whip them like they whip animals" (35). No Chaaliyar was questioned. They walk around with an air of victory.

Day after day, they came on rounds in the Dalit streets. The place was so still that their boots stamping sent shivers in the heart of women and children. Alphonse was beaten so much that he could not stop vomiting blood. He died on the second day. Some men were rounded up and were sent to Madurai jail. Those who escaped, were hiding in the forests and mountains. The headman dashed into the high earthenware enclosure in Bama's home, only to be caught, kicked and rained with blows. A ten-year old boy died in this strangling atmosphere. The women went with a sari to the hiding father and disguised him in a sari. The police interrogated the group while returning. Immediately, the women raised a funeral dirge and escaped. Some women dug grave at night and buried the boy. The father was not able to weep for the fear of the police identifying him. The men who were hiding in the belfry of the church were caught and taken away. The priest was very relaxed. He could not even lend a paltry loan of five rupees to the Dalits at this crucial condition. The village remained desolate as a cremation ground. They had none to help and no money to fight against. They remained hapless and helpless. Bama, the military man's daughter, felt choked at night as the police force encircled the area. Thus Bama depicts how policemen were partial in their attitude towards the Dalits.

Bama's *Karukku* brought with it the force of whirlwind to whip the literary world with its quintessentially Dalit theme and language. It becomes an attempt to break the existing tradition and to identify ways of defining one's own identity. It is a reflection of different themes like religion, recreation and education etc. Through these perspectives, Bama gives a clear picture of the caste oppression meted out to the Dalit Christians not only by the upper caste society but more so within the catholic church itself. As a result of her humbling experiences as a Dalit, Bama realises that through the right type of education the whole community of Dalit can be empowered and can gain human dignity. The life portrayed in *Karukku* thus throws light on the most agonizing and hapless lives of the Dalits, the marginalized sector of the society.

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