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EXPRESSING THE SELF: A STUDY OF BAMA'S *KARUKKU*

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ABSTRACT

Dalit autobiographies are representative life stories where the Dalit individual uses the narrative to raise his voice for those communities that are silenced by caste oppression. The self represents all other Dalits who were crushed down because of their Dalit identity. They differ from other types in expression and purpose. They are narratives of pain. They depicted the life of torment and anguish experienced by these people. Dalits use an array of incidents related to injustices as the theme of autobiography in order to educate fellow Dalits, but not to celebrate. There is no fictional theme in Dalit autobiographies. Unlike Dalit men, only a few Dalit women have written their autobiographies and most of them have been written in regional languages and that they have hardly been translated into English. Despite the fact that India gained independence long time ago and there were formal educational facilities, the literate Dalit women is very low. Poverty forces them to abandon education and work hard to survive. Bama, one of the first women Dalit writers, through her autobiography *Karukku* throws light on the most agonising and wretched lives of the Dalits, by experiencing the process of self discovery, identification and empowerment and it is in this context *Karukku* becomes relevant.

**Key words:** oppression, gender, Dalit, education

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Bama Faustina Mary was born at Puthupatty near Madurai in 1958. The name Bama generated from the author's real name Faustina Mary Fathima. Her family was converted to Christianity way back in the 18th century. Bama began to be noted as a writer with the publication of *Karukku* (1992) in Tamil and which was translated into English (2000) and many other Indian languages. It won the Crossword Award in 2000. Her works include *Sangati* (1994), *Kisumbukkaran* (1996) and *Vanman* (2003). The works of Bama in Tamil represents the emergence of the Dalit writings. She is hailed as the first Dalit woman writer in India.

Bama's *Karukku* is the first Dalit autobiography written in Tamil. It focuses on two aspects namely caste and religion that caused great pain in Bama's life. The book describes Bama's life from childhood to adulthood. The first person narrative expresses the traumatic experience of caste discrimination from the stand point of Dalit women. When Bama was studying in the third standard, she has seen the discriminations in her locality. She saw an elderly man carries a package without touching it.

...He came along, holding out the packet by its string, without touching it. I stood there thinking to myself, if he holds it like that, won't the package come undone, and the vadai fall out? The elder went straight up to the Naciker, bowed low and extended the packet towards him, cupping the hand that held the string with his other hand. Naciker opened the parcel and began to eat the vadais. (13)

Later, Bama understood that she and her communities were prohibited by Hinduism and were cursed to remain as poor, cloth washer, cobbler, the one who cleans dead animals, conveys death news, grave digging and drumbeat announcer.

Bama remembers her experience as a farm worker. Even though Bama went to school, she worked as a labourer for daily wages to meet her expenses. There is also double vessels system. Dalits were asked to stand away from the vessels of the Nacikers when they give leftovers:

...I knew I should not touch their goods or chattels; I should never come close to where they were, I should always stand away to one side. These were their rules. I often felt pained and ashamed... (46)

Bama says, "I am like mongrel" (78). Bama is a sincere follower of discipline, prayer, and Bible. She prayed as her elders said, but when she realized her past years that had gone her "Bhakti" and "Belief" on God changed. Bama was baptized when she was in the second class level i.e. at the age of six. However, the legacy of Christianity was brought to light. The nuns used Bama to wash and clean the church and its belongings. They threatened Bama with the story of Devil. It made Bama familiar with confession. While digging, Bama and her friends found pieces of human skeleton near the church. They were told that was one of priests' and asked to keep at hope. It is also convinced that those who possess will study well.

Bama's 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 Paraiya 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" (15).

Bama's elder brother's counsel makes a very deep impression on Bama. Ever since her brother speaks to her, she started studying very seriously. She sees to it that she always stands first in the class. Bama writes: "In fact, because of that, many people become my friends, even though I am a Paraichi." (15) 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." (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" (19). At last, she won justice and she went home.

Bama who completed the nun training admitted about various caste discriminations in the Christian institutions. She worked in the Christian school where both wealthy and Dalits students studied. In that school, Dalit children were used for menial works.

In that school, attended by pupils from very 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 consider lowcaste people as human beings. They didn't know that I was a low-caste nun... (Karukku 22)

Even women from Bama's street were forbidden. Bama gives importance to 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?" (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" (22). She thought that the only weapon which annihilates the caste in the society is education and writing.

In the new convent-school, Bama felt really sad about the pathetic conditions of Dalit workers. Children of wealthy families were given more privilege. Dalit children were crushed by the upper caste nuns and teachers. Bama's psyche is fully disturbed by these bitter experiences: ...my mind was disturbed. My conscience was battered and bruised. At last I asked myself, is this the life for me? I left the convent and went home, utterly weary and dispirited. (67)

The caste and gender based bitter experiences made Bama to lose faith in God. Both Christian and Hindu institutions mocked, marginalized, humiliated, and ostracized her. She also observed that there was no genuine love for the poor in churches and schools. But, the nuns claim that: "God's love is limitless, subject to no conditions" (92).

Bama experienced the discrimination in the village, bus, church, nun's convent, hostel, recruitment and work places. However, Bama brings out here the attitude of upper caste Indian to the world. Bama's suffering is the suffering of Dalits that remains unchanged throughout India. She comprehends that Dalits have been forced to live a life of humiliation, and degradation until death. The construction of subjectivity in her autobiography reflects her desire to re-establish the wounded Dalit population. One may not make a concrete resolution for the caste discriminations. There is a deep and underlying connection between Bama and the Dalit population. Bama converted her personal sufferings into words. Her personal experiences of poverty and discriminations are the saddest experiences that form the core of her autobiography *Karukku*.

Bama's individuality is not recognized by Christian and Hindu institutions. That is why the Dalit population started to embrace other religions. Bama rejected both Christianity and Hinduism which shackled her ambitions. Bama has come out with a renewed soul after experiencing the cruelty and injustices caused by the so called caste pride:

....I feel a certain contentment in leading an ordinary life among ordinary people....Those people who stuck with me in my prosperous days have torn themselves away and gone. A few who heard of my present distress have come to me on the pretext of wishing to help and heal, but have merely stirred the wound; they too have left....I comfort myself with the thought that rather than live with a fraudulent smile, it is better to lead a life weeping real tears. (104)

Bama globalized the real traditional character names of Dalits like, "Katterupu son," "Managatti mama." It shows Dalits' aesthetic in calling her community people by their action and behaviour. She never used the names of upper caste people. She just used caste names like Naicker, Nun, Sister, and Priests in general. On the one hand *Karukku* challenges the oppressors who have enslaved and disempowered the Dalits, on the other hand, it reiterates the need for a society with ideals such as justice, equality, and love:

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...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... (15)

Bama repeatedly talks about the importance of education for the Dalits. Bama's wounded soul gets remedy from the present day social activists who are working to eradicate untouchability that is deeply rooted in the minds of the upper caste. Bama was disappointed in her service in the Christian institution and she decided to quit her job with a view to liberate the Dalits from the clutches of poverty. But there was no other source of income to run her life.

*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 everywhere the situation of Dalits is the same. Later she questions "Why. Is it impossible for the Harijan to study or what"? (19).

Bama gives a detailed depiction of the way in which the Church ordered and influenced the lives of the Dalit Catholics. Bama 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 realises 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 a selfmade woman.

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