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English Literature

THE CONDITION OF THE DALIT WOMEN IN POST-INDEPENDENCE INDIA: A STUDY OF BAMA'S KARUKKU IN PERSPECTIVE

KEY WORDS: Dalit, Marginalization, Caste Discrimination, Double Exploitation, Subaltern

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ABSTRACT

Dalit literature focuses on the oppression, subjugation, marginalization and exclusion of the Dalits by various institutions of the society. Though great leaders like Jyotiba Phule and Dr B R Ambedkar fought for the rights of the Dalits and many Dalits had taken significant roles in the Indian nationalist movement, yet the condition of the Dalits is marginalized even in the post-Independence period. Bama (Faustina Mary Fatima Rani) is a prominent Tamil Christian Dalit writer whose autobiographical novel *Karukku* (1992) won the Crossword Award for the best fiction in Indian languages in English translation in 2001. In *Karukku*, Bama speaks about the pain and suffering of caste discrimination, untouchability, poverty and destitution of her own people. The novel deals with the complicated and interrelated issues concerning caste, class, religion and gender. Through several incidents in her life, Bama tries to unravel her identity as a woman, a Dalit, a Tamil and a Christian. She had to undergo double exploitation, firstly because of her caste and second owing to her gender. This paper intends to address the issues of exploitation, discrimination and subjugation of the Dalits, especially the Dalit women in the present context and how Bama tries to find a means of liberation both for herself and her community through *Karukku*—one of the classic texts in subaltern writing.

"My Language, My Culture, My Life Is Praiseworthy, It Is Excellent." (Bama, 2012, p. x)

Dalit literature depicts the oppression, discrimination and marginalization of the Dalits by various institutions of the society. It is rooted in the regional literatures. In India, The Dalit literary movement started in Maharashtra around 1960s and slowly spread to the rest of the country. Following the emergence of the Dalit Panthers in the 1970s, there was an upsurge in the production of Dalit literature in various genres including autobiography, poetry, fiction and drama. The decade 1990s is significant regarding the progress of the movement of the Dalits. Dalit literature portrays the lived experience of the authors and becomes a manifesto of the awareness and identity of the Dalits. It counters the corruption, manipulation and segregation of the caste hierarchy. Though practised in various genres, Dalit literature is mostly written in the form of autobiographies. Regarding these autobiographies, Preeti Dewan in her essay "Dalit Women's Autobiographies: From Subjection to Subjecthood" comments: "Dalit autobiographies have not only challenged dominant representations of Dalits as being socially, morally and intellectually inferior in mainstream literature but also imbued the Dalit community with favourable characteristics such as industriousness, resilience, skillfulness, and playfulness" (p. 224). Even the well-intentioned and progressive non-Dalit writers "reduce Dalits to objects of empathy and compassion, dependent on outside forces for bringing about change in their lives" (Dewan, 2018, p. 225). Dalit authors bear the double responsibility of writer and reformer.

The condition of the Dalit women is fraught with trauma, subjugation and resistance. They often become victims of verbal abuse, kidnapping, rape, murder and so on. The writings of upper caste women rarely represent the sufferings of Dalit women. Dalit Feminism challenges the unified voice of Indian Feminism and refutes all attempts towards homogenization. It "insists on reviewing the categories of caste and gender not as mutually exclusive and discrete, but rather as connected and influencing each other" (Mukhopadhyay, 2016, p. 99). Dalit women are victims of double exploitation—on the one hand by the upper caste patriarchy and on the other hand by the Dalit men. Dalit women's writings challenge and subvert the predominant discourse (s) and expose the injustice and oppressive strategies of patriarchy.

Bama (Faustina Mary Fatima Rani) is a prominent Tamil Christian Dalit writer whose autobiographical novel *Karukku*

was first published in Tamil in 1992. It was translated into English in 2000 and the next year it won the Crossword Award for the best fiction in Indian languages in English translation. Later it was translated into several Indian (Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada) and foreign languages (German, French). In this novel Bama speaks about the pain and suffering of caste discrimination, untouchability, poverty and oppression of the Dalits. After ten years of the publication of the book, Bama writes: "...I wrote my book, *Karukku*. That book was written as a means of healing my inward wounds; I had no other motive" (p. ix). In the Introduction, the English translator of the text, Lakshmi Holmstrom explains that the Tamil word '*Karukku*' means Palmyra leaves 'with their serrated edges on both sides, like double-edged swords' (p. xv). Bama mentions that there are many congruities between the saw-edged Palmyra *karukku* and her own life. She reveals:

"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." (p. xxiii)

She further claims that "they, who have been the oppressed, are now themselves like the double-edged *karukku*, challenging their oppressors" (p. xxiii).

The novel treats the complicated and interrelated issues concerning caste, class, religion and gender. In the very first chapter of *Karukku*, Bama presents the evil of caste discrimination prevalent in her village in Tamil Nadu where the Naicker community who were the landowners of the village enjoyed all kinds of privilege—the post office, the panchayat board, the milk-depot, the big shops, the church, the schools—all were located in their streets. Bama puts forward the hierarchy of the caste-system of her village and their traditionally allotted jobs with much dexterity: the Nadars (palmyra palm climbers), the Koravar (street sweepers), the Chakkiliyar (leather workers), the Kusavar (earthenware pot makers) and at last the Parayas (agricultural labourers and firewood gatherers). Bama belonged to this Paraya community who were treated as the lowest in the caste hierarchy and were victims of untouchability and several kinds of discrimination and oppression. Bama depicts the humiliation of her family members by the so called upper caste Naicker community. Both of her grandmothers used to work as servants for the Naicker families. Even after

delivering hard toil throughout the whole day in the Naicker fields and managing their household chores, the grandmothers used to return home with the left-over rice and curry from the previous evening. The Naicker women would pour out the drinking water from a height of four feet lest their hands touch the cupped hands of the low caste servants.

Bama thought that education was the only means which can bring an end to this oppressive caste discrimination. But the most striking thing was that the school and the church—the two most dominant institutions of the society were not free from caste prejudices. The lower caste children were discriminated against and humiliated in every way in these institutions. Inter-caste conflict was predominant in the school which Bama attended. Some of the teachers of the school used to ask the Harijan children to stand up during the assembly or in the class and used to write down their names in a separate list. When the government arranged special tuition for the Scheduled Caste students, Bama could not accept this segregation. But all these incidents could not curb down her spirit. She stood first among all the Harijan pupils of the district in the government S.S.L.C. examination and everyone had to applaud her in the assembly. Bama underwent several humiliations during her college days too. Frustrated with the same story everywhere, she raised her voice of protest: “Yet, because I had the education, because I had the ability, I dared to speak up for myself; I didn't care a toss about caste. Whatever the situation, I held my head high. And I completed whatever I took up, successfully” (p.22).

When Bama began her career as a teacher in a convent school, she had to face another kind of insult there. Most of the nuns in that convent were Telegu and they looked down upon the Tamils. Realizing her subjugated status as a Tamil Dalit woman, Bama firmly decided to join the church to work for the poor, oppressed Dalit children. She had to fight against her family and her community who strongly discouraged her decision. No sooner had she joined the order of the church, her dream for the upliftment of the poverty-stricken children was shattered. One day during her training as a nun, locating a discrepancy regarding Bama's date of birth in her degree certificate and christening certificate, the Sister abused her Tamil identity. In this context, Bama perceived—“I thought to myself, what a nuisance this is turning out to be; thus far they made us hang our heads in humiliation because of our caste; in this order being a Tamil seems to be equivalent to being a Paraya” (p. 24). She realized that Tamil people were treated as a lower caste and among the Tamils the Parayas were the lowest of the low.

Bama noticed that before joining the order the nuns had taken vows of living a life of poverty and serving the poor but after joining the order all vows became hollow shams. She found that the upper caste Christians used to enjoy all kinds of benefits and comforts whereas the Dalits were 'pushed aside' and 'marginalized'. As Bama used to protest against such humiliations, she was frequently transferred to different places. Within a month she was asked to move five times. Finally she was sent to Jammu from Madras to satisfy the prejudice of the church order. Being disillusioned with her experiences of the church life, Bama finally walked out of the church with a broken mind: “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” (p. 78). After this incident being urged and encouraged by her well-wishers, Father Mark and Father M. Jeyaraj, Bama wrote *Karukku* as a means of healing not only for herself but also for her entire community.

Karukku, a classic text of subaltern writing, captures a series of incidents in Bama's life which enabled her to realize her identity as a woman, a Dalit, a Tamil and a Christian. Solomon Paul Raj and T Muraleeswari in their article “Broken world of Bama in *Karukku*” observe: “Dalit literature is not only

considered as a marginalised literature but also the voice of freedom for every denied group regardless of the caste” (p. 125). In this autobiographical novel, Bama speaks for the liberation and empowerment of all deprived people, especially the women. In 2011, she revealed her own feeling: “I described myself in *Karukku* as a bird whose wings had been clipped; I now feel like a falcon that treads the air, high in the skies” (p. xi). This redemptive text would inspire the Dalits to find a voice of their own. This would encourage them to realize that their life is praiseworthy; their culture deserves to be celebrated.

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