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Educational and Spiritual Journey of a Marginalized Woman in Bama's Autobiographical Novel *Karukku*

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Abstract

There is a famous quote of Nelson Mandela 'education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world' Protagonist of the novel Bama was highly educated. She got the job of teacher. She wanted to help the poor, destitute and marginalized like herself. to fulfill her desire she became a nun and joined Convent. She closely observes the hypocrisy, frauds and discrimination in the name of God. The nuns are required to make three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. But in truth the vows became a means of control and enslavement. Disappointed and pained she left Convent.

Keywords: marginalized, poverty, discrimination, oppressed.

Introduction

Bama was born in 1958 in Roman Catholic family belonging to the Paraya community of Madras. She is a Tamil Dalit feminist, committed teacher and novelist. She became famous with her autobiographical novel *Karukku* (1992). Later she wrote two more novels *Sangati* and *Vanman* and two short story collections and twenty short stories.

Bama was educated in a very discriminatory atmosphere. Everyone seemed to think Harijan children were contemptible. But they did not hesitate to use them for cheap labor. So they carried water to the teacher's house, they water the plants. They did all the chores that were needed about the school. Thus exploitation, violence, suffering, discrimination, and oppression was common experience to her life.

When Bama finished her education, she started to work. By chance she took up a post at a school run by nuns. At the start when she met nuns, she thought they would be different in their ways. But as time went on, she realized they were truly like white sepulture as Jesus said. She worked there for five years. All the children who attended that school were from poor families. About threefourth of them where from dalit families. She liked teaching them. But when she observed some of the atrocities that were going on, she would be ablaze with fury. The boarding school which was nominally for the sake of destitute children, but in fact they made those children do every menial task that was needed. They (nuns) behaved as if they were the queen there.

She saw in the boarding school besides the usual lessons, they could have educated the Dalit children in many matter, and made them aware of their situation in the world about them. But instead everything they said to the children, everything in the manner in which they directed them, suggested that this was the way it was meant to be for Dalits; that there was no possibility of change. And mainly because of this, those children seemed to accept everything as their fate. By all these, she became very troubled at heart. She felt a yearning to treat those children as all children to be treated to

look after them rather than torment and exploit them. Grandmother of Bama was working in Naiker's house in lieu of that they used to give her leftover rice and curry from the previous evening. This behavior seemed ugly to Bama. She said, her grandmother, not to lay, herself to such behavior.

Bama's elder brother Annan was educated. He mentioned an incident with his sister, how an attendant brought him stool to sit on, when he added title M A in the library. He also told her that we are born into paraya jati, we are never given any honor or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that. He told the importance of education to his sister. "If we study and make progress we can throw away these indignities" (*Karukku* 18). The words that Annan spoke to Bama made a deep impression on her. And she started studying hard with all her breath and being in a frenzy almost.

When Bama was admitted into college during the time love and devotion that she felt towards God gradually diminished. All sorts of questions beset her mind. Such as why should she go to Pushai every day? Why should she take communion? She Started thinking that the priest and nun had deceived her hugely. Up to that time she had thought that God came to her, through those people but that belief changed to the extent that she now began to feel strongly that God was not with them and so she began to dislike everything they did. She began to question them. She argued and fought. She thought to herself with some disgust and called them hypocrite and frauds.

She felt in her heart that she could go and speak directly to God without their intervention. She could no longer believe that God could only be reached, as they had taught us, through prayer learned by rote, through pious practices, through the novena and the rosary. She came to realize that one could see God through the mind's eye in nature and in the ordinary event of life every day. All the rituals that she had followed and believed in so far suddenly begin to seem meaningless and just a sham. She continued to cherish in her heart a certain love and devotion towards Jesus. But she found what the nuns and priest preached distasteful.

She learnt that God has always shown the greatest compassion for the oppressed. And Jesus too associated himself mainly with the poor. Yet nobody had stressed this nor pointed it out. All those people who had taught us, had taught only that God is loving, kind, gentle, one who forgives sinners, patient, tender, humble and obedient. Nobody had ever insisted that God is just, righteous, is angered by injustices, opposes falsehood, never countenance inequality. There is a great deal of difference between this Jesus, and the Jesus who is made known through daily pieties. The oppressed are not taught about Him, but rather are taught in an empty and meaningless way about humility, obedience, patience and gentleness.

In spite of all her criticism of the nun, she wanted to become a nun. When she discussed her plan at her home and with her close friend, not one of them supported her. In spite of all the people advising her against becoming a nun. In spite of some of them downright forbidding her to do that. She resigned her job and prepared to enter religious order. Now she realizes that an extremely foolish thing she did. But at that time she did not understand in the least what she was doing.

Before her decision to enter the order, she had read about the woman, who founded that particular order, how she had done so for the sake of the poor and lowly, lived and died for them alone. She wanted to be like her, living only for the poor and downtrodden.

One day, the sister who was supervising their training asked her in English why the birth dates were different on her degree certificate, and on her christening certificate. She replied that people at her school had put down whatever birth date they chose for her. Because they didn't know any better. She would not believe her. She complained "you Tamil people want to get admission into School under false pretences. Changing the dates on your birth certificate". (*Karukku* 24). So a little later she explained to her, in great detail, that there was no great problem about getting admission at their school, that, on the contrary, teachers visited home and drag their pupils out, and so there was no need to put a false date of birth in order to find a place in the school.

It was only after this that she began to understand little by little that in that order Tamil people were looked upon as lower caste. And then among Tamils, Parayar was a separate category. Even so she continue to stay in the Convent. Among those who were training with her to become nuns, every single one was anxious to find out to what caste she belonged. One day one of them asked her straight out. When she answered her honestly, she wouldn't believe her. So she let that go thinking, "what more can I do. Leave it. If you want to believe me, do so. If not, what can I do about it" (*Karukku* 24).

When there were only a few days left for them to finish their training and to become full-fledged nuns. In a particular class a sister told them that in certain orders they would not accept Harijan women as prospective nuns and that there was even a separate order for them somewhere. Hearing this she was thunderstruck. She despaired at heart lamented inwardly that there was no place that was free of caste. And facing such bitter experiences she became a nun and was sent to a convent elsewhere.

She was shocked when she saw the Convent and the school attached to it. She could not begin to think how she would spend her years in such surroundings. And that Convent too was not without its caste discrimination. From the very first moment she understood the state of affairs.

When Bama was a bit older Patti (grandmother) used to take her to the field with her. They were not a household with many Comforts for conveniences. During school term, as soon as lessons were over, she would go and collect such things as the thorns used for fences, Palmyra and coconut- palm stems and fronds for fuel. She would collect fresh cow dung and pat it into flat cakes for burning. Sometimes she would go into the fields and pick up dried cow dung. During school holidays she would go with Patti or some other women to work in the field. Most often she helped to pull up the groundnut crop and to clear and sort the pods. Small children were not asked to do anything harder than this.

Until the time that she was in the 8th class she worked in her village in all these ways. All the time she went to work for the Naickers, she knew she should not touch their goods or chattel; she should never come close to where they were. She should always stand away to one side. These were their rules. She often felt pained and ashamed. But there was nothing that she could do. They belong to a higher caste. They had the money. She had to listen to what they said. However furious or resentful she felt in her heart, she has stepped aside for them along with other women of her community.

When she was admitted into the convent school in a nearby village so that she could attend the ninth class. There she didn't work all the time like she was doing in her village. She ate her meals, and she studied; that was all. Children who boarded at the Convent and studied there certainly had a special status in her village. All the same when she went home she did all the chores that fell on her customarily.

Many of the children at her school were very poor at their lessons. She studied hard and got the best marks in her class. Frequently she remembered what Annan her elder brother had said to her when she was at home. The teacher and sister who taught her often encouraged her and were friendly towards her. This made her keener about her lessons. They asked her to help the children who were really backward at their lessons. She was awarded a prize for standing first among all the Harijan pupils of that district who took the government S.S.L.C. exam that year. All the same, every now and then their class teacher or the PT Teacher would ask all the Harijan children to stand up, either at assembly, or during lessons. They would stand in front of nearly two thousand children, hanging their heads in shame, as if they had done something wrong. That really felt bad and humiliating.

After tenth class she finished her final exam and went home. Her mother was walking from the street of the Naickers with a bundle on her head made up of mango wood; which she gathered and tied together. She went along with her mother back and forth, with two or three loads of fire Woods which she gathered for her mother. To come to their part of village from Naickers street one had to cross the Nadar street, the Thevar street and then come past the oil-press and Bazaar. Some people who had seen her carrying the firewood said to her mother with astonishment, "your daughter has finished her schooling at the Convent yet she doesn't mind carrying firewood like this" (*Karukku* 54).

Nowadays tiny, crab-like children go to work like adults. "At an age when they should be going to school, studying like anyone else and playing about in the evening they are shut up inside the factories instead. There are two or three Schools available for the children nowadays. But these little ones' fate is the smell of matchbox solutions, not the smell of knowledge or learning. How can they afford to study, when it is such a struggle even to fill their bellies" (*Karukku* 55).

She was at Convent School until the eleventh class after which she returned home. Everyone had said she would gain good marks in 11th year public examination, and she was pleased about that. But then her parents wanted her to stay back home, saying there was no need for her to go to college or to study any further in any case there was no money. Then they said, it would be difficult for her to find a husband in her community if she went in for further education. So they wrote to a few places to find out about teaching training.

During those holidays she went to see a nun who had taught her in the 11th class. She really grieved to think for her sitting at home without studying. She spoke to her mother and made a fuss complaining that she must not stop a girl who really enjoyed her studies from going further with it. When her mother said that she didn't have the money, that nun made her pawn the ear ring she was wearing, then took her by the hand and sent her to college with the money. And she, firm in resolve that she would carry on with her studies one way or another, arrived at the college with just the clothes she was wearing and admitted herself into the hostel.

For the whole week she went around in the same skirt, jacket and daavani. All her classmates look at her as if she was an outlandish creature. Some of them asked her, did she only possess one set of clothing's? Did she not have any others? She felt deeply humiliated. She told them her mother was bringing her belongings and she went to the hostel and wept. Meanwhile, her father wrote to her from the Army, very abusively, 'you listen to the nuns' advice and join college; so now ask them to give you the money, go on, go to them. She did not wish to go back home though. There was certain something in her that urged her to go on and complete her studies. That's why she endured all the shame and humiliation and stayed on.

When her result was declared they saw her marks, then they realized how alert she was at her work, the teachers and nuns praised her. And a week later her mother brought her clothes, her box and her beddings. After that her classmates began to be friendlier towards her. They were surprised that she got the first mark in all the tests.

In her fourth year, the time neared for college day. College Day was celebrated on a grand scale. All the final year students were invited to a party, which they attended dressed in silk sari and decked out their best things. As for her, she did not have a single decent sari to her name. She did not know what to do. She did not want to borrow a sari from someone or the other and wear that. And on that particular day she could not take her away elsewhere, nor would they have allowed her. So at last, she made up her mind and went and locked herself up in the bathroom. She wanted to weep and weep, when she considered her plight and realized how deeply ashamed one can be for the lack of a few rupees in one's hand.

Once she finished her B. Ed. and started to work, life became comfortable enough. That was really good to earn enough money every month and to go about independently, and as she pleased. She could buy the Sari or jacket that took her fancy and wear it. She could go wherever she wanted to go. She could buy and eat what she liked. She became aware that if one has a little money in his hands one can get some authority, and status, and prestige. And she realized that those who have the cash to spend can always afford to live in comfort.

But her people, however hard they toil, never seem to be able to have that cash in hand. They worked so hard that they wear themselves out like potsherds. They live on gruel every day, they wear nothing more than a couple of rags, they own neither property, nor land nor even a decent house to live in. In such condition they work and only for the good of the rich. How can they even hope for luxuries? She realized that if only the children on her street acquired a little education and found a job, then they could live reasonably well. But then, how are they to educate themselves? The struggle to fill their bellies is the main struggle after all.

It was this train of thought that led her to the desire that she could become a nun and enter a convent, and in that way work hard for other children who struggled as she had done. There was a desire in her heart to help other children to better themselves, as she, born into the same community, had been able to do because of her education. She really wanted to teach such children. But she understood, after she entered the order that the Convent she entered didn't even care to glance at poor children, and only wished to serve the children of the wealthy. In that Convent they really do treat the people who suffer from poverty in one way, and those who have money in their pockets in a totally different way.

Before they become nuns, these women take a vow that they will live in poverty. But that is just a sham. The Convent doesn't know the meaning of poverty. There was every comfort and convenience there. But she began to think, soon after she entered the Convent, is this all there is to the life of renunciation? Is there an understanding of poverty here? The school was full of children from wealthy families. The nuns from Convent matched their attitude and behavior to the power and Prestige of those families. The more she watched that, the more frustrated she felt. Her mind was disturbed. Her conscience was battered and bruised. At last she asked herself, is that the life for her? She left Convent and went home, utterly weary and dispirited.

There were catechism classes every evening at Church. In the morning, dew or rain, they had to rise at dawn and go to morning pusai. It used to be torment just to get up. From the time she was a child she found it easy to learn by rote. Whenever there was a test on the scripture, she always won the first prize. When she went to study at the primary school run by nuns, the sister entrusted her to lockup and to open the Parish Church. She could do all such jobs as going to the church and bringing the vases over at school time, polishing them, and then putting them back after the sisters had arranged them with flowers.

Sisters had told them if they kept on committing sins, the devil would put them all down in a long list written into a big note book, which he would show to God. In order to bring down her pan of good deeds, she did everything that sister told her to do. She obeyed them in all things. When she received the host at communion she was not supposed to touch it either with her teeth or with her fingers. They had said if she touched it blood would flow down her hand. Once she kept the teeth of a skeleton in her geometry box. Every day she prayed to the teeth. She prayed for all sorts of things like that. When her mother and grandmother told the reality that these teeth were not priest's teeth, everyone laughed at her heartily. Once she stole flowers to offer them to the picture of Jesus and while she was tucking one of the flowers by its stem into the first hole of an electric plug, she felt the tug of current along her arm. She was frightened and thought that God allowed the current to tug at her, because she stole the flowers and brought them here. Immediately she said a prayer. Such was the fear of God in her mind.

Bama emphasizes that marginalized should break free from the socially constructed prison in order to fight against the force of operation and discrimination. Bama stands up against the traditional hierarchy of caste prevalent in India. Bama asserts the importance of education for transformation in Indian society. She exposes hypocrisy and frauds in the name of spirituality and religion.

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