

From Oppression To Assertion: The Dalit Awakening

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Abstract

This paper examines *Karukku* by Bama, a pivotal work in Dalit literature, as an atrocity narrative that not only highlights the social, religious, and educational oppression faced by Dalits, but also traces the author's journey from victimhood to self-empowerment. Through a personal yet collective lens, Bama narrates her life as a Dalit Christian, exploring the complex layers of caste discrimination within both society and the Catholic Church. The autobiography challenges conventional narratives by focusing on Bama's realization of the deep-seated casteism within the religious institution she joined, ultimately leading her to renounce Christianity and embrace her Dalit identity with pride. By rejecting victimhood, Bama reclaims her dignity and calls for a transformative Dalit consciousness, emphasizing the power of education and self-respect as tools of liberation. This paper highlights how Bama's narrative not only exposes the traumas of caste oppression but also serves as a clarion call for social change, presenting *Karukku* as a profound critique of caste, religion, and institutionalized injustice, while celebrating the strength and resilience of Dalit identity.

Dalit Literature is a literature of protest and pain. *Karukku*, an atrocity narrative by Bama is a revelation of the bitter reality of social ills confronted by a Dalit woman, which are recorded as her life story. However *Karukku* goes much beyond being merely another Dalit autobiography as the writer, eschewing the confessional mode and avoiding the linear narrative, places before us her lives' anecdotes and experiences in such a way that they illustrate her journey towards her self-realization and her community's victory.

This paper seeks to present *Karukku*, a Dalit autobiography as an atrocity narrative that documents the Dalit trauma encompassing within its fold different themes like religion, recreation and education. Through these perspectives especially through the perspective of religion Bama shows us the caste oppression meted out to Dalit Christians not only by the upper caste society but more so within the Catholic church of which they are an integral part. The autobiographical mode used by Bama assumes an even greater significance as in her hands it is no longer only an expression of "individual interiority" but rather a public act of "self-construction". The writer has an inner desire to alleviate the sufferings of the oppressed and becomes a nun to fulfill this mission only to realize and experience the gruesome reality of caste prejudice and hatred prevalent in the Catholic institution. This realization makes her renounce the religion of her birth and move away from being a Christian Dalit to being just a Dalit thus throwing off at least one layer of oppression. As Bama puts it:

The story told in *Karukku* was not my story alone. It was the depiction of a collective trauma...I just tried to freeze it forever in one book...

Bama Faustina Mary was born at Puthupathy near Madurai in 1958. Her family had converted to Christianity in the 18th Century. She began to be noticed as a writer and a new voice with the publication of *Karukku* (1992), an autobiographical novel. Her purpose of writing *Karukku* is clearly expressed in its preface:

“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 spilt then; all these, taken together.”

It was in 1992 that Bama left the Convent to write her autobiography but the Tamil publishing industry found her language unacceptable and refused to print it. So Bama published her milestone work *Karukku* privately. It is a passionate and an important mixture of history, sociology and a strength to remember as it broke barriers of tradition in more than one way. It happens to be the first autobiography by a Dalit woman and a classic of subaltern writing as it reflects a bold and a poignant tale of life outside mainstream Indian thought and function. Revolving around the main theme of caste oppression within the Catholic Church, it portrays the tension between self and community the marginalization of the Dalit Christians and presents Bama's life as a process of hurt, self-reflection and finally recovery from social and institutional betrayal. In this exposé of her hurts and ordeals we see Bama carving out a new identity for herself even as she tries to negotiate with it.

It is a first-person narrative in which the narrator moves from the past to the present exploring the varying set of different incidents that have taken place in her life. It is a powerful portrayal of Dalit suppression as its author believes Dalit life is excruciatingly painful and charred by experiences. These experiences had not managed to find room in literary creations.

The central part of the first chapter is the story about Bama's life as a Christian. It is a parallel to the story of the Nation because Christianity was considered the way to her (i.e. the nations) liberty. It came as an offer of freedom addressed specifically to the Dalit. As a child Bama's life was a mixture of festivities and rituals of her family and community. But as she moves out of this world into school and then a Convent, she finds only the crudest self-interest both in Christianity and the institutions managed by the Christians. She gives a riveting account of her betrayal by the Convent and the Church in *Karukku* as her autobiography traces her spiritual development as a Catholic coupled with her realisation of being a Dalit.

We see that *Karukku* focuses on two essential aspects namely: caste and religion that cause great pain in Bama's life. She had never heard of untouchability till her third class. Her first experience of her caste is tinged with ironic humour. She narrates her experience of returning from school and finding an elder holding out a small packet of snacks tied in a string. He has got this packet of snacks to give to a Naicker in the village without touching it. Bama, a young child cannot control her laughter but the self-questioning begins. She writes: “What did it mean when they called us ‘Paraiya’? Had the name

become that obscene? But we too are human beings. Our people should never run petty errands for these fellows, we should work in their fields, take home our wages and leave it at that”

It is at this point that she begins to look for means to uplift herself and her community from this trampled existence. Her elder brother’s counsel as he tells her that education is the only way to honour, respect and dignity have a marked impact on her as she begins to study with all her might. She makes sure that she always stands first in her class and experiences a change. As she puts it: “In fact, because of that, many people became my friends, even though I am a Paraichi”.

However, the shadow of her caste never really leaves her as she discovers that even the financial grants and special tuitions given to the Harijans are more of a humiliation because they single out her caste identity. Finally done with her graduation she decides to become a teacher and starts working in a Convent where to her chagrin she finds nuns constantly oppressing the Dalit children.

Seeing this oppression, she decides to become a nun herself and help the Dalit children. Here too she has to face caste discrimination as she finds that Tamil Paraiyar nuns are considered lowest of the low. It is through education that Bama had managed to transcend her subalternity and become a teacher in a Convent. She soon becomes aware of the extent to which the Convents are steeped in the caste system and are places of luxury and profligacy unimaginable to her spirit of sacrifice and service. Having entered this order to escape casteism she finds that it is easier to tolerate outside discrimination from society as compared to casteism inside the convent where 80% of Roman Catholics being Dalits are never given any high positions. It is indeed ironical that Christianity that stands for love, service and helping others has nothing to offer to the Dalits except insults. Bama expresses the opinion of nuns about the Dalit in the following words: “low caste people are all degraded in every way. They think we have no moral discipline nor cleanliness nor culture”.

Other women who are training with Bama to enter the order are very anxious to find out to which caste Bama belongs. They speak insultingly about low caste people and Bama is reminded of her grandmother who works as a servant for Naicker families. When she works in fields even small children call her by her name, her age notwithstanding whereas she has to address all young boys as Ayya which means master. When any Dalit woman asked for drinking water, the Naicker women poured out the water from a height of four feet even as the Paraiya women and others drank water with their cupped hands. She narrates:

“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 left overs, leaned out from some distance and tipped them into Paati’s vessel and went away”.

Her protest to her grandmother only gets her the response:

“These people are the Maharajas who feed us rice..... Haven’t they been upper caste from generation to generation, and haven’t we been lower caste? Can we change this?”.

Bama feels terrible at this injustice meted out for centuries. She also realizes that it is because of

generations of slavery that the Dalit spirit and self-respect is totally broken and that they have reached a stage when they voluntarily hold themselves apart. This she feels is the worst injustice. She has faced several bitter experiences at her school because of her caste to the extent to being branded as a thief. She is confused by all this especially since she is too young to understand it but she starts thinking about casteism early in life. She is greatly inspired by the words of her brother who has sown the seed for her desire for education as a way to getting respect in society which is something that she craves. Though she faces caste discrimination throughout her student life she feels greatly honoured when she is awarded the best Harijan student for S.S.L.C. exams. She now feels that is not impossible even for a Dalit to study and from then on, she excels in all her courses with a desire to prove her ability as equal to if not better than other students.

The realisation that religion is made up of very fixed ideas soon dawns on her. All through her life in school she had tried to be a good Christian praying every day, attending retreat programmes, receiving communion, making weekly confessions with a longing and an accepting mind. She has complete faith in Christianity and wants to spread the message of love and brotherhood but her experiences in the Convent disillusion her to quite an extent and bring home the realization that being a Christian has actually marginalized her community more than ever. Even as she condemns the false practices of the church Bama tries to uplift and bring to surface Dalit self-respect by making them realise the value of education which for her is the only way out of this subalternity. Here her tone changes from that of an individual voice to the voice of her entire community seeking justice. She puts it thus: "We who are asleep must open our eyes and look about us. We must not accept the injustices of our enslavement; we must dare stand up for change".

Her introspection on this subject also leads her to the realisation that there is marked difference between the Jesus in the Bible and Jesus who is made known through daily prayers and worship. As she puts it: "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, gentleness".

She soon realises that there is no connection between the 'Convent God' and the 'suffering poor'. Completely alienated from her environment, she suffers for three years in the Convent before she rejects Christianity and decides to leave the order to finally identify herself primarily as a Dalit. *Karukku* thus becomes a powerful critique not only on the Indian civil society, the education system but also the Church. Her leaving the Church to liberate the Dalits from poverty and serfdom is her victory as her introspection ability leads her to this realisation.

Beautifully written in simple language, *Karukku* narrates Bama's life from childhood to adulthood. The style of the narrative is very interesting and different. It is not written in the chronological order but as one of the reviewers of the books says "Feels like a web of thoughts that are connected to each other by threads only the authors inner consciousness knows and understands". The events in her life are viewed from various perspectives repeated many times and can be grouped under themes like work, games, food habits etc. Unlike a usual autobiography Bama had consciously chosen not to recall many violent incidents related to caste conflicts as she felt that they might be a deviation from the real issue

she wanted to focus on - i.e. to save her people from the clutches of caste oppression and making them realize the dignity of their identity.

Even in the face of extreme oppression nowhere do we get the feeling of Bama being a victim and giving up. Hers is indeed a majestic spirit that not only inspires but also has the readers mesmerized. She begins her narrative by evoking the Dalit consciousness which is a very important first step of making the Dalits conscious of their marginalized status in society. She then goes on to transform this untouchability consciousness into dignified Dalit consciousness by first of all exposing the hypocrisy behind the caste system and religious conversions even as she subverts all notions that project Dalits in a demeaning and inferior image. This ability to reflect on the subversive Dalit consciousness that is the first positive and progressive step towards the elevation of the Dalit status is the result of her education and goes a long way in helping her destroy the inferiority complex among the Dalits even as it makes them aware of the false pride of the upper castes. Encouraging the true Dalit spirit among the downtrodden she makes a clarion call to them to come out of their shell of polluted and contemptible self-image and stand proud in their own identity. She thus asserts: "We must crush all the institutions that use caste to bully us into submission and demonstrate that among human beings there are none that 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 indeed explores the wounded Dalit consciousness but never in a self-pitying victimized mode. On the contrary the author infuses a lot of humour and strength in her writing even as she explores the Dalit psyche and consciousness and tries to bring to surface their self-confidence and self-respect to stand firm and fight all forces that stand in their way of justice and equality.

Coming to the language that Bama has chosen it is not the language as she herself says "recognised by the pundits of literature". She uses the colloquial not only for the reported speech but also for the narrative and the argument besides breaking rules of grammar and spelling. She also manages to break the main stream aesthetic by using different word combinations thereby giving the Dalit community a hope that they too can develop an identity of their own.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Karukku* transcends being merely a militant voice advocating for Dalit liberation; it is a profound memoir with significant cultural value that provides the Dalit community with an empowering identity. True to Bama's intent, the book operates like a "two-edged sword." On one side, it challenges the oppressors who have historically marginalized and oppressed Dalits; on the other, it calls for the creation of a new society founded on ideals of justice, equality, and peace. This narrative not only documents the trauma of Dalit life but also offers strategies of survival and resistance. The very act of a Dalit author decentralizing mainstream structures signifies a victory in itself, symbolizing the strength of self-determination and awareness. *Karukku* becomes a catalyst for awakening, empowering Dalits to question, resist, and redefine their identity. As Bama eloquently writes in the afterword to the book, "It is a great joy to see Dalits living with self-respect, proclaiming aloud, 'Dalit endru sollada; talai nindru nillada'—say you are a Dalit; lift your head and stand tall." Ultimately,

Karukku, which begins as an atrocity narrative, transforms into a celebration of Dalit pride and identity, making it not only a critique of oppression but also a declaration of the Dalit community's strength and resilience

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