



Study of racism in Bama autobiography Karukku

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Abstract

While Blacks in America and Dalits in India are oppressed with similar experiences of marginalisation and 'othering', they also exhibit unique grounds of differentiation to some degree. Bama, one of the prominent Dalit thinkers, is the pen name of a Dalit woman writer from Tamil Nadu. Faustina Soosairaj was born into a Paraya family in the Puthupatti village in the Virudhunagar district of Southern Tamil Nadu. She, a Christian nun who converted to Roman Catholicism, is a well-known Dalit woman writer. In 2001, she got the Crossword Award for her Autobiography Karukku. This was when she and her memoirs gained the attention of readers and writers on a national and worldwide scale. The study of Dalit identity formations reveals more differences and pluralities than commonalities. This means that identity difficulties are multi-layered and intricate in these groups. It is not easy to articulate how Dalit identities are conceptualised, compared, and demarcated. The Racism in Bama Autobiography Karukku is discussed.

Keywords: dalit, identity, autobiography, Karukku

Introduction

An Autobiography reveals the stark prejudice in American jails and the court system. Davis notes that most women in the prisons where she was confined were black or Puerto Rican. Additionally, she draws attention to the jail officials' bigotry towards black inmates. When black convicts were removed from their cells, they were always "handcuffed", although white ladies were exempted from this restriction. In recalling how a Los Angeles police officer murdered a youngster named Gregory Clark on the allegation of "drinking beer while driving", although he was drinking "soda pop," the autobiographer demonstrates the underlying racism of so-called law enforcers.

What is more terrible, she said, is that the cop walks free while countless blacks linger in prisons on the flimsiest of pretexts, unable to afford the enormous bond sums asked. She utilises her memoirs to express her opposition to all forms of injustice committed in the name of the law. Davis then uses her memoirs to attack American society's racism subtly. Throughout the autobiography, she references her attempts to gather both blacks and whites to reject this repressive system. An Autobiography is an endeavour to end tyranny by raising public awareness. Her autobiography serves the objective of chronicling a pivotal era in American history to combat the state's attempt to conceal it.

Autobiography, as a distinct literary genre, enlightens and sparks several realms. The creation of specific academic domains and their division into categories and sub-disciplines reflects a variety of modes of social investigation. Autobiographies reveal social imaginations and experiences distinct from the canonical narratives that exist. The progression of a writer from other literary styles to autobiography occurs due to the growth of historical and social relationships. Changes in storytelling norms must be analysed in light of their social purpose.

Years of oppression and suffering compelled oppressors to speak out about their exploitation, resulting in the birth of Dalit and African-American literature. These modes of creative expression paved the ground for forming a new

stream of ideas and emotions to awaken the public to their exploitation. Dalits and African-Americans developed their literary tradition by rejecting the dominant literary genre. They began to depict a life marked by torture and ill-treatment and fought the injustice meted out to them through their work.

Bama, a converted Christian, also sees a double standard in Christianity since they clearly distinguish between Dalit and Upper caste Christians. Bama knew God's love had been discriminated against following the societal system. Every act of compassion was reserved for upper caste and wealthy family members. When she became a nun and was sent to a convent, she discovered a lack of empathy for the poor. She writes:

There was no love in that monastery amid these people who constantly preached how kind God is. There was no regard for the destitute and the lowly. They asserted that God's love is unconditional and without conditions. However, inside the convent, there were many restrictions about behaving and who you should be to earn their devotion (Bama 106).

The most egregious example of Christianity's falsehoods was the episode in which Bama turned herself into a nun. She considered assisting the Dalit Community by abstaining from marriage, teaching at convent schools, and devoting her life to humanitarian causes. According to the Bible, God loves all human beings equally and has a particular affinity for and concern for the downtrodden class. All of this influenced Bama's decision to become a nun. However, she could not help her community since she was hired to educate children from the higher caste. She also saw that Christianity's tenets were not to support the impoverished population but to amass wealth by offering education to upper-caste children. She writes about her realisation:

I discovered that God has always shown incredible compassion for those persecuted. Moreover, Jesus, too, identified primarily with the impoverished. However, none had emphasised or emphasised this. All those who taught us had one thing in common: God is loving, kind, gentle, forgiving sinners, patient, compassionate, and obedient.

Nobody ever maintained that God is fair and just, that he is enraged by injustices, hates deception, and never tolerates inequity. Significant distinctions exist between this Jesus, and the Jesus are shown via daily pieties. The downtrodden are not taught about him but about humanity, obedience, patience, and tenderness in a hollow and useless manner (Bama 104).

The Dalit people's lives in her town, as recounted by Bama in *Karukku*, were comparable to those described by other Dalit autobiographers. Their lives were filled with unpaid labour. They were compelled to serve as indentured servants. They were required to do menial tasks at convent schools and government offices. According to Bama, "... members of my community took care of all the duties, such as sweeping the premises, swabbing and washing the classrooms, and cleaning out the restrooms" (Bama 25). They worked hard to make a livelihood. In her own words, Bama explains their existence of poverty and struggle:

Bama's *Karukku* displays a societal system that stayed nearly constant throughout the twentieth century. 'Karu' is a term that has been used in Tamil and Malayalam for a long time to mean 'seed' and 'essence/sap'. 'Karu' emerges from Tamil traditions as a keyword with numerous political connotations. The interview between Bama and Manoj Nair is significant. She states:

The story recounted in *karukku* was not solely mine. It portrays a community's collective pain, whose duration cannot be quantified in time. I just attempted to freeze everything in one book in perpetuity so that there would be something tangible to remind people of the crimes performed against a segment of society for centuries. I was incapable of erecting a monument, incapable of erecting a sculpture. I authored a book (Bama 118).

Current understandings of what constituted caste, particularly in the social sciences, are often erroneous when evaluated through the lens of real-world experiences. Bama's testimonies are a distinctive aspect of casteist society in India. They communicate not simply Indian caste life but also the intricate innards of gender inside the caste structure.

Bama's works illuminate previously unspoken and unarticulated experiences. It develops into fresh voices on prejudice, tolerance, marginalisation and a particular manner of seeing, caring for, and sharing pragmatic places. Bama describes how *Karukku* becomes the voice of the voiceless in the prologue to the Second Edition of *Karukku*: "My parents read it. They comprehended me more. My siblings read it. They understood the anguish I had had throughout my life. My buddies read it. They lauded it for being a novel style of writing. Residents of my village read it. Although they were the first resistant, they saw the need" (Holmstrom 45). They expressed their joy and encouragement. Numerous Dalits claimed to have read it and found it a source of strength. Bama demonstrates how identity is developed in this passage. Additionally, the critique levelled against theorists that identity does not exist, but identification does (Ahmad 17) occurs in Bama's explanation. The response of readers to *Karukku* demonstrates this identification.

If Hinduism was exploitative and discriminating, Christianity was also. Bama explains the humiliating position of Dalits in her *Karukku*. The higher caste people denied them equal parts inside their social hierarchy. They also opposed government welfare schemes since they saw

Dalits as cobras. They dismissed any attempts of Dalit upliftment as futile.

Dalit autobiographers endured anguish, suffering, and disgrace throughout their lives. They have been humiliated and exploited due to caste-based prejudice and untouchability. Their surroundings and circumstances changed as they got older, but their aches and sorrows did not; their lives remained tormented by these societal ills. When they were students, the dominant section of society abused and exploited them and their community; at school and college, their higher caste classmates, teachers, and other higher authorities constantly reminded them of their lack of social position. They became social outcasts for the remainder of their lives. They never had the chance to experience complete freedom, despite India gaining independence in 1947.

Due to the Hindu religion's discriminatory customs, Dalit women were enslaved and subjected to psychological pressure. They were not allowed to associate with anybody other than their families, children, and husbands. They were not allowed to speak or share anything with the other males. She faced social shunning if any of the Mahar women were seen conversing with other males. In *Karukku*, Bama describes a similar state of famine among the Dalit people. She attributes their plight to Hindu society. Rice, fish, and meat were the primary foods consumed by the Paraya population. Usually, we eat rice and *kuzhambu* at night, Bama writes. Otherwise, it was a kind of "Kuuzh" in the mornings and noon (Bama 71). They used to dry fish for days when they could not arrange meals.

Similarly, Omprakash Valmiki describes the plight of Dalits in *Jonathan* and compares it to that of Dalit colonies in Maharashtra. Generally, their environments are not deemed fit to live for human beings. According to Valmiki, Chuhra's dwellings were near the pond, where everyone went for daily ablution. They lived in clay dwellings; only higher caste members owned concrete buildings. The pond served as a type of divider for the Chuhra people. The area around the Chuhra hamlet was filthy and resembled hell on earth.

Lakshmi Holmstrom, the translator of *Karukku*, acknowledges that Bama's experiences are part of the Dalit struggle, although she did so of her own volition. He opines: "She recognises that her personal experience is part of a bigger Dalit struggle" (Holmstrom 17). However, it is intriguing because she seems to realise this independently. This suggests that Bama, too, was influenced by the Dalit movement's vision and theology. She drew strength from it to convey her story of oppression. The Dalit movement helped her resist societal prejudice, but she also utilised her power and knowledge to confess the tragedies she observed throughout her life. She embarked on a journey of self-discovery to voice her opposition to societal ostracism, sexism, and erroneous concepts of Christianity, propelling the Dalit cause forward.

Bama believes in the message of love and brotherhood but feels a significant difference between belief and superstitions. She starts believing that to Know Jesus, one need not worship any priest. Bama realises she cannot live a life of deception and leaves the convent. Bama angrily reminds the nuns, who "stated that God's love is infinite and without limits. However, inside the convent, there were many restrictions about how you should behave and who you should be to earn their devotion" (Bama 92).

Ultimately, Bama rejects the blind trust that creates fear in her mind and develops rational thinking. "It seemed pointless to me," she confesses, "to repeat prayers in lovely and ornate language and to live apart from the correspondence and link between prayer, worship, and living. Never should we think one thing and act otherwise. We should be vocal about our convictions. That is being authentic. Everything else is a performance" (Bama 106).

In convents, ideology manifests itself in the form of elitism. Christianity, too, is not immune to casteism. Bama demonstrates Christianity's casteist worldview in Tamil culture by emphasising Christianity's disability to abolish the caste system. While elucidating oppression at a convent, Bama describes how Tamilians are discriminated against and referred to as lower caste members of the convent by the majority Telugu community. Her condition worsens further since she is not just a Tamil but also a member of the Paraiya Caste, one of the lowest castes in untouchables (here, Paraiya), according to Manusmriti, an ancient Hindu scripture. Bama claims that as a member of the Paraiya caste, she is oppressed in both society and the convent. She also explains how a nun tells her that certain convents do not allow Harijan (untouchables) to have their convent in class.

Acutely aware of her status as a Dalit, Bama approaches the nun in despair and inquires whether she would be accepted into the convent as a nun. Sister, who was there in the office, raises an interesting point: has she been welcomed to any other convents? Bama informs her about the offer from the convent school where she formerly worked. Then the sister explains that since another convent has welcomed her, it is not an issue for them to retain her in that convent. "However, they inquired about you as well. They did not? Do not be concerned. You are welcome to join us" (Bama 25).

Bama emerges from the Church, exposing the Church, convent, Christian institutions, and their members for their hypocrisy. She is taken aback by the inconsistency between what is taught and implemented there. They serve the wealthy rather than the impoverished and live a life of refinement. They disregard people who need their services. Bama observes the same hierarchy, caste differentiation, and prejudice in such institutions. Christianity has been Brahmanicized in Tamil culture due to the casteist Hindu society's significant influence. According to Bama, "there is no distinction between Hindus and Christians regarding how they treat Dalits. The sole distinction between the two is that, whereas Hinduism is fundamentally hierarchical, Christianity pretends to be caste-free while maintaining a caste structure in actuality" (Jogdand 5). Thus, Bama's Karukku takes on Brahmanic philosophy and its assaults on Christianity, Hinduism, and the Varna system.

The social connection of Dalits with the higher caste was restricted because of contamination concerns. This included eating, sitting, and attending the temple or school. According to Brahmanical philosophy, any violation of the above laws may contaminate the higher castes. Thus, the untouchables were pushed to the margins of society, denied education, and prohibited access to temples. In Bama's writing, this Hindu Brahmanic mentality seems to operate in Christian institutions since minority children are handled partly.

Untouchability, The worst social rigidity in India today, is a result of Brahmanic doctrine. It lowers a person from the

lowest social strata to nothingness, evoking Wordsworth's famous remark, and it dramatically grieves my heart to consider what man has made of man. Bama points out that the treatment meted out to Dalits should threaten all rational people.

Kurruku frequently raises concerns about religious identity and leaning in our lives and how it generates tension. Why do people suddenly turn adversarial when they used to behave like siblings? In Bama's autobiography, Paraiya converted Christian suffers from powerful Hindu Nadar. Though she exposes religious dogmas and condemns religious misunderstanding, she personally loves Christ and appreciates religion. Consequently, she inspires and promotes Dalits to get educated, study the Bible, and identify authentic Jesus who protects the underprivileged. This demonstrates how upper caste people maintain all significant institutions in their areas and get privileged while Paraiya and lower caste people are deprived of good education and other facilities. As part of the prevailing ideology, this physical layout reinforces the belief that they should be kept apart from the mainstream and that higher caste Naikers have a right to privileged access to these institutions.

Bama remembers the higher caste ladies on the bus who refused to sit next to the Paraiya females. The embarrassing episode made her conscious of her childhood Paraiya identity. From infancy, they are imbued with a sense of inferiority. This inferiority complex is established in favour of dominants to rule over lower castes and maintain them in subhuman conditions by convincing them of their inferiority and superiority to the dominant caste. Hegemonic culture manipulates people in this manner via identity politics.

Bama's anguish and indignation are evident when she adds; I pondered why we should have to get and carry for these individuals. Adults and women, even youngsters, suffer in equal measure at school and become despised in the eyes of everyone. They are utilised at schools for inexpensive labour like as transporting water to the teacher's residence, watering the plants, and doing other school-related tasks. They are chastised for no apparent reason. They are also responsible for sweeping the grounds, swabbing and cleaning the classroom and restrooms. The upper castes people speak ill about the lower castes and do not consider them human beings. Bama writes:

"According to their notions, low-caste people are degraded in every way. They think that this can never be changed. To aid us like helping the cobras. They speak with such words without even thinking all time. Moreover, I sat there like a lump of tamarind listening to all this and dying several death within" (Bama 26).

The same notions and thoughts were thought proper even by lower castes. Psychologically, these youngsters are imprinted with the notion of being humiliated. They are taught that they were destined for this line of employment and that no matter how hard they study, their destiny cannot be altered. Bama depicts all this from a kid's viewpoint, demonstrating how their mind develops from infancy to maturity. This kind of injustice become very part of their life as Bama says:

Because Dalits have been enslaved for generations and repeatedly taught of their degradation, they have developed an ingrained belief that they are degraded, lacking in honour and self-worth, and untouchable; they have reached a point

where they actively set themselves aside... This is how even tiny infants are trained (Bama 28).

Verbal and physical abuse at the hands of high caste masters become a form of subjection for this subaltern. Their minds are ingrained with terror, and they lose their bravery to speak and become subservient. Their poverty and low rank serve as a justification for it. They assume that since they subsist on the assistance of these individuals via employment in their industry and at home, listening to these abuses is part of their job. As Dalits are being exploited and oppressed based on their caste in the social hierarchy, African Americans are being tortured based on their colour and race.

Conclusion

Dalits experimented with many types of writing, including poetry, theatre, fiction, and memoirs. Bama recounts an incident from her youth. As she passed through her neighbourhood one day, she saw an older guy from her village carrying a tiny packet of vadai, the name of a sweet. He was walking, holding the package by its thread without touching it. "The older guy approached the Naiker directly, bent down, and extended the packet towards him, his other hand cupping the one that carried the cord. Naiker unwrapped the gift and immediately started eating the vadais" (Bama 15). Bama saw the incident amusingly and relayed this amusing information to her older brother. "However, Annan was not amused," he (Annan) informed the guy that he was not amused by carrying the item. He said: Everyone thought Naiker was of the superior caste and could not touch Paraiyas. They would get contaminated if they did so. He was compelled to transport the parcel by its thread (Bama 15). This enrages Bama, who comprehends the barbaric idea of caste, diminishing man's dignity. The concept that they are low caste people who are supposed to be filthy and should not touch things belonging to high caste people is imprinted in their minds, and as a result, they are afraid to touch the object.

Most tales told in various kinds of writing are autobiographical in some sense. The rationale for this writing was that they were fully aware that their experiences and exploitation could not be shared with people born into different castes or races. Hence, the only method to depict their horrible existence was to write their life tales. Such writing causes others to see the experiences and sentiments revealed in Dalit autobiographies as unusual and weird, making it difficult to accept the typical autobiographical style.

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