

Broken world of bama in *Karukku*

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Abstract

The origin of Dalit literature is in regional literatures in the late nineteenth century. Dalit literature doesn't follow any particular literary conventions and they have created their own localized languages that created a unique writing style. Real incidents are revealed in their languages. Dalit literature expresses the Dalit's knowledge of themselves as oppressed people and enables them to demand liberation through a revolutionary transformation of the system that oppresses them.

Faustina Mary Fathima Rani writes under the pen name Bama. She has published four full length works of prose: her autobiography *Karukku* (1992). She is hailed as the first Dalit woman writer in India. *Karukku* highlights the oppression borne by Dalits at the hands of the police, the Panchayat, the upper castes and the church. Bama also highlights how Dalit women are oppressed further by Dalit men at home. The practice of patriarchy along with caste hegemony is a highly unjust suppression of Dalit women as shown in the works of Bama. *Karukku* discusses various forms of violent oppression of Dalits, specifically on the paraiyar caste.

The important aspect of this work is that the church too oppresses the Dalit Christians. The series of incidents that took place in the life of Bama enabled her to discover herself as a woman, Dalit and Christian. Bama, as a Dalit encountered many problems in her life; as a woman she is rejected; faced the cruelty from her childhood and caste bias taught her the meaning of shame. This paper discloses the harshness faced by the dalit community and the perilous situations they live in. The most striking thing about the paper is that it reveals the oppression in the modern form and the unchanged attitude of the so-called forward-thinking society.

Keywords: dalit, karukku, oppressed class

Introduction

The larger function of literature is to teach morality and to probe philosophical issues. But the question is that whether the literature at present is teaches morality or ideas of higher degree. Literature reflects the society which is more corrupted and contaminated with many issues. The so-called forward society still denies to widen its horizon when it comes to caste and gender. As the time period has modernized, the troubles put forward for the marginalized community has also gained a modern version. The community of dalits is still facing hardships from the hands of brutal oppressors. The irony is that the human values and concerns are talked by those brutals at many instances. This falsity that lingers everywhere in the Indian society is unveiled in dalit literature that gains the limelight in the recent years. The paper discusses the real human concerns and its false prevalence in the society.

Dalit literature is a literature of protest and rejection. "Dalit (oppressed or broken) is not a new word. Apparently, it was used in the 1930 as a Hindi and Marathi translation of 'depressed classes' a term the British used for what are now called the scheduled castes" (*Contemporary Dalit Literature* 1). The term 'Dalit' forcefully expresses their oppressed status. It comes from the Sanskrit root 'dal', which means to crack open, split, crush, grind and so forth and has generally been used as a verb to describe the process of processing food grains and lentils. Dalit Panthers defined this word in their 1972 Manifesto as: "A member of Scheduled Castes and Tribes, neo-Buddhist, the working-people, the landless and poor peasants, women, and all those who are being exploited politically, economically, and in the name of religion."

(Holmstrom xviii-xix) Noted Dalit Laureate Pantawane Gangadhar writes: "Dalit is not a caste; Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution. The Dalit believes in humanism. He rejects the existence of god, rebirth, and soul, sacred books that teach discrimination, fate, and heaven because these make him a slave" (Who Are Dalits?)

To root out the caste system we must understand its origin and development. The caste system that is present in India for more than 3000 years is a shameful system of social segregation which works on the principle of purity and impurity. B.R. Ambedkar writes: "Purity is rich and white or whitish, impurity is poor and dark. Hidden powers of wealth can be easily traced in every feudal Brahminical concept of the ideal. Material setting of purity and beauty and prominence and command and comforts is also wealth. Economic division is reflected in the social classifications. But it should not be registered that caste is racial or economic" (Ambedkar 49).

The practice of untouchability was legally abolished by the Constitution of India in 1950. But even today, the Dalits are still subjected to extreme forms of social and economic exclusion and discrimination, physical and mental torture. When they try to fight for their rights, they face tortures and threats from the higher castes which results in cruel rapes, massacres, and other atrocities.

The origin of Dalit literature is in regional literatures in the late nineteenth century. Although many of the pioneering works have been produced in Maharashtra and Gujarat, Dalit literature has also been published in a variety of Indian languages such as Kannada, Tamil, Hindi and Malayalam. A

large number of these texts are also available in English translations for a wide audience. Dalit literature does not follow any particular literary conventions and these writers have created their own localized languages that created a unique writing style. Real incidents are revealed in their languages. Dalit literature expresses the Dalit's knowledge of themselves as oppressed people and enables them to demand liberation through a revolutionary transformation of the system that oppresses them.

Dalit literature in Tamil has received critical attention since 1990. Tamil Dalit writing came into existence nearly two decades after Marathi Dalit literature came into being. When compared to Marathi and Kannada Dalit literature, Tamil Dalit literature started late but has achieved a lot in a short period of time. Novels, poetry, autobiographical narratives, short stories, critical essays, and plays in Tamil written by Dalits are often published by Dalit publishing houses or in little magazines edited and published by Dalits. The emergence of Dalit literary writing in Tamil is often traced to the publication of Sivakami's novel *Pazhiyana Kazhidalum* in 1989. It discusses "the issue of Dalit leadership and points out the pitfalls inherent in an imitative model wherein Dalit leaders duplicate corruption and the manipulative politics prevalent among empowered, upper caste politicians" (*Contemporary Dalit Literature 108*). Bama's autobiographical narrative *Karukku* brought out in 1992 is also crucial to the emergence of Tamil Dalit literature.

Faustina Mary Fathima Rani, a Tamil Dalit woman from a Roman Catholic family, writes under the pen name of Bama. She has published four full length works of prose: her autobiography *Karukku (1992)*. She is hailed as the first Dalit woman writer in India. Bama now works as a teacher in a school in a small village of Uthirameroor near Kancheepuram. *Karukku* means Palmyra leaves, with their serrated edges on both sides; they are like a double edged sword.

Karukku highlights the oppression borne by Dalits at the hands of the police, the Panchayat, the upper castes and the church. Bama also highlights how Dalit women are oppressed further by Dalit men at home. The practice of patriarchy along with caste hegemony is a highly unjust suppression of Dalit women as shown in the works of Bama. *Karukku* discusses various forms of violent oppression of Dalits, specifically on the paraiyar caste. The important aspect of this work is that the church too oppresses the Dalit Christians.

Karukku depicts how Dalit Christians are not allowed to sing in the church choir, are forced to sit separately away from the upper caste Christians, and are not allowed to bury their dead in the cemetery within the village, behind the church, but are made to use a different graveyard beyond the outskirts. The parayars converted to Christianity in order to escape the caste oppression at the hands of the orthodox Hindus. Bama points out that the church distorts the real image and teachings of Christ and preaches docility, meekness and subservience to the faithful while suppressing the radical, liberative teachings of Jesus.

The works of Bama in Tamil exemplify the emergence of Dalit writings. She is hailed as the first Dalit woman writer in India. *Karukku* means Palmyra leaves. With their serrated edges on both sides, they are like a double edged sword Bama herself describes in the preface of the book:

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 (*Karukku xxiii*).

The first autobiography by a Dalit woman writer and a classic of subaltern writing, it is a bold and poignant tale of life outside mainstream Indian thought and function. Bama narrates the rough treatment given to Dalit women in the following lines: "In North Street, while they were beating up Maariappa's son, it seems a five rupee note fell out of his pocket. It seems his mother stooped to pick it up, weeping all the time. At once a policeman put his boot against her stomach, kicked her aside, and took the money himself" (37). Even the local parish priest sides with the upper caste people and does not hesitate to betray the Dalit people who belong to his church.

There are much more humiliating experiences faced by Bama. She shares her pain and anguish through these incidents. Young Bama once sees an old man who carries the vada and a bhajji that he bought from a tea shop in a string. She wonders seeing the old man and finds it ridiculous. Then she narrated this incident in a comic tone to her elder brother, but he kept mum. Her brother explained the situation to young Bama: "Annan told me the man wasn't being funny when he carried the package like that. He said everybody believed that Naickers were upper caste, and therefore must not touch Parayas. If they did, they would be polluted. That's why he had to carry the package by its string" (*Karukku 15*).

After she heard this from her brother, she felt terribly sad. This incident left an imprint in the mind of young Bama. She could not resist her anger toward the inhuman acts done to them. Her rage is clearly expressed in these words: "The thought of it infuriated me. How was it that these fellows thought so much of themselves? Because they had the scarped four coins together, did that mean they must lose all human feelings? What did it mean when they called us 'Paraya'? Had the name become that obscene? But we too are human beings. We should work in their fields, take home our wages and leave it at that" (*Karukku 16*).

Karukku does not present the events that have taken place in the life of Bama in a chronological order. The events in the life of Bama are grouped and depicted under different perspectives. The series of incidents that took place in the life of Bama enabled her to discover herself as a woman, Dalit and Christian. It was very hard for her to face politics and caste bias inside the convent. In a place of sanctity, she could neither show her anger nor withdraw herself from the place. She was made to live a kind of artificial life in the convent. They showed indifference not only towards the nuns but also towards the school pupils. Wealthy pupils were left to study and Dalit students were asked to do all the menial jobs: "...people of my community [Paraya] 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" (*Karukku 25*).

Bama, as a Dalit encountered many problems in her life; as a woman she is rejected; faced the cruelty from her childhood and caste bias taught her the meaning of shame when she was in her seventh standard itself. She is knocked down to the

earth. Her life was in a miserable condition then. Seeking a cure for her wounded heart, she indulged herself in spiritual development. She decided to join a nunnery to dedicate her life to serve God and the society. She was shocked to see the caste discrimination to prevail even in the place of so-called holy people.

Bama have given us anxious novel to read and reflect. All the Dalit writers want their readers to reflect on their writings. They expressing views about caste discrimination and about all the social issues that be it Marxist ideologies or child labour. Dalit literature is not only considered as a marginalised literature but also the voice of freedom for every denied group regardless of the caste.

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