

Bama's *Karukku*: A Tale of Resistance and Struggle

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Paper Received on 12-08-2023, Accepted on 17-09-2023,
 Published on 17-09-23; DOI: 10.36993/ RJOE.2023.8.3.243

Abstract:

Dalits have a history of experiencing all forms of prejudice and humiliation because of their caste and socio-economic standing. With the passage of time, the majority of Dalits are resisting the restrictions placed on them by society. They are asking for justice and equality that have previously been withheld from them. Many Dalits use literature as a means of expressing their protest against the biasness of the upper-castes. Bama has been regarded as one of them who is using her pen to combat prejudice. With her autobiography, *Karukku*, Bama began her literary career. This autobiography is considered as the first autobiography of Bama, a Dalit lady from Tamil. The author has provided an accurate portrayal of the societal and economic way of life of Dalit community in *Karukku*. Bama aimed to raise awareness of Dalits' suffering and resistance so that those who choose to ignore their situation will be inspired to fight against the barbaric practices of caste discrimination. Hence, this paper will deal with the study of Bama's *Karukku* as a testament to the suffering and subsequent struggle of Bama as a Dalit, as a Dalit woman among Dalits, as a Dalit Christian and other Dalit women against the ills of the Indian caste system.

Keywords: Dalit, humiliation, Discrimination, Resistance, Caste, suffering, struggle, Society.

“We must dare to stand up for change.It is we who have to place them where they belong and bring about a changed and just society where all are equal.” (Bama 28)

People have been split into upper and lower classes of society since the beginning of time. These lower social classes have historically been oppressed, humiliated, and subjugated by the people of upper castes and others. But recently, it has been observed that people from these groups have begun to speak out and recount their own stories of suffering. Literature has shown to be one of the best weapons for empowering and strengthening such impoverished communities. Numerous Black and Dalit authors, particularly of memoirs, have become more well-known in the literary world. Most of these authors choose autobiographies in order to accurately portray their lives. In their works, the concepts of marginalization and empowerment co-exist. These pieces are based on depicting their lives of discrimination and fighting against

repression. The most critical elements with which a reader evaluates the portrayal of aboriginal people and the response to oppressive communities in postcolonial literature and thought are portrayal and resistance.

Dalits are members of distinct lower castes. They are, in the opinion of S.M. Micheal, prohibited from having relationships with higher people because of their severe collective impurity. The name "Dalit" comes from the Sanskrit word "dal," meaning split up and fractured. The term "Dalit" is coined by Jyotiba Phule, a prominent leader of the non-Brahmin Satya Shodhak Samaj movement. This term was used by him to refer to members of the lowest socio-economic strata of Indian society, including untouchables and other lower castes who have experienced caste prejudice and poverty. About 138 million individuals in India are considered to be members of the Dalit social group, which makes up about 16% of the country's total inhabitants. Dalits, who are considered untouchables in the Caste system of India, are deemed very low in the complex hierarchical social structure despite their large population. Before Mahatma Gandhi, Dalits were referred to as untouchables or outcasts. These untouchables were given a new name, i.e. *Harijans*, meaning '*people of God*'. However, despite being referred to as God's people, Dalits continued to face discrimination because of their caste and socio-economic standing. The word Dalit has recently taken the place of the term Harijan. The lowest caste in Hindu civilization, the Dalit was once a sub-caste

of the Hindu religion. Dalits have a reputation for being consistently mistreated by society, and

"The deprivation of this group is associated with the historical process of economic and social exclusion and discrimination based on caste" (Thorat 1).

They are an impoverished, landless class that has been forced to perform menial odd labour since the beginning of time, and their position in society has not altered for generations:

"Indian Marxism has always seen the Dalit problem in terms of land and agrarian relationships. It basically defines the Dalit as Choma (hero of Shivaram Karanth's classic Kannada novel *Chomana Dudi* – 1931), the landless labourer. Judging from the reality of rural India, this mode of understanding the Dalit problem is really meaningful and vital" (Nagaraj 75-76).

Due to the mistreatment by the Hindu society, many Dalits attempted to find refuge in other faiths, i.e. Buddhism, Sikhism, Islam and Christianity, but most of the time their efforts were fruitless as the fate of Dalits remained unchanged.

Dalits have historically stayed illiterate because of their social and economic disadvantages, due to which they are being exploited. But these days, they have attempted to alter their own social status after they have been educated, which has aided many Dalits in speaking out about their trauma and letting the world know about their struggles. It is well known that "Dalits are nameless and

faceless people in dominant Indian culture” (Satyanarayan 64). Many Dalit authors - Bama, Baby Kamble, Arjun Danglay, and Omprakash Valmiki – have created their own tales of anguish & sorrow in order to portray the hardship of the Dalit way of life in its actual form. They could speak about Dalit pain to their readers from personal experience. Although Dalit women have just entered the literary arena, it is the Dalit male writers who have written about their struggles first. Bama is regarded as the first Tamil Dalit lady to have written about the hardship and situation of her caste. According to her, education is essential for the Dalit community,

“What Bama has attempted in *Karukku* is universalize the struggles and sufferings of the community who live in penury unaware of the power of education which can alter their predicament” (Winny 22).

Karukku is the first Dalit woman autobiography written by Bama in Tamil. Later it was translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom, an award-winning translator. *Karukku's* accurate depiction of Dalit Christians' lives led to its translation into numerous languages and its widespread distribution. Many Dalits converted to Christianity during and after the British colonization of India in the hopes of living a dignified and respectful life. Christianity, like the majority of other religions, affirms equality before God. However, there is no equality in the case of Dalits, and how can they demand for equality when they have not been treated like human beings? The author provides

readers with a first-hand account of Dalit life in her autobiography. In addition to detailing the painful life of Dalits, *Karukku* also declares their bravery and resistance. Dalits, according to Bama, would be motivated by her work to stand up for their rights. Bama is concerned about the success of her work in the second edition of *Karukku*. She believes her motivation for writing this book was successful, and she added a note to this edition of *Karukku* titled "Ten Years Later," in which she states:

“*Karukku*, written by wounded self, has not been dissolved in stream of time. On the contrary, it has been a means of relieving the pain of others who were wounded. *Karukku* has been a comfort to many who have been brought low, and who suffer the pain of caste discrimination, untouchability, poverty, and destitution; it has given them courage and helped them to love life once more. *Karukku* stands as a means of strength to the multitudes whose identities have been destroyed and denied” (Bama x).

Bama's autobiography is a mirror of her life as a Dalit woman and Dalit Christian who belongs to *Paraya* community. She along with the other Dalit community members were converted to Christianity, but her hope and expectations were shattered, for even after their conversion they were not escaped from the clutches of discrimination in the society. This autobiography was written by Bama when she was in a dilemma. She had

entered the nunnery with the intension of serving her poor Dalit community, "...it is in the stubborn hope that she will have a chance to put these aspirations into effect" (xvii). But she found that her mission could not be achieved for the reason that the Christianity she knew is something different from what it is, "She discovers, however, that the perspectives of the convent and the Church are different from hers" (Bama xvii). Hence, she left the convent and joined back to her own community.

Through *Karukku*, Bama theorizes and conveys her horrific experience as well as her anguish and pain. She tells the tales of Dalit anguish and tears, but she also depicts their tenacity and fortitude. Thus, it is one of the best Dalit accounts of suffering and conflict, in addition to being an autobiography. It expresses a variety of Dalit related subjects, such as their family, economy, education, and religion. Bama addresses each of these issues honestly, highlighting the prejudice against Dalits perpetrated not only by higher caste community, but even by the Catholic Church. Bama cites other instances of this differentiation in *Karukku*, including one in which upper caste Naicker gave leftover food to her grandmother. They nearly flung the food from a great distance so that they wouldn't come in contact with her hands or utensils. Churches also viewed Dalits in the same way, with complete disdain. Bama was discouraged by this discrimination and at times felt as though she and her people would always experience suffering and injustice:

"In this society, if you are born into a low caste, you are forced to live a life of humiliation and degradation until your death. Even after death, caste difference does not disappear. Wherever you look, however much you study, whatever you take up, caste discrimination stalks us in every nook and corner and drives us into a frenzy. It is because of this that we are unable to find a way to study well and progress like everyone else. And this is why a wretched lifestyle is all that is left to us" (Bama 26).

As previously stated, Bama appears to be primarily concerned with enacting social change in *Karruku* by bringing change and thereafter challenging the absurd social order that Dalit community is subjected to throughout all social structures and social institutions, including the Roman Catholic Church. In fact, the author's account of her life experiences in the book is a component of her social struggle to raise awareness among Dalits of the oppression and humiliation of the inhumane discriminatory practices that she had seen and experienced, as well as their abilities and the need to bring together and fight for their rights. The worst injustice, in her opinion, is when Dalits accept their servitude without question because of an inherited inferiority. She has emphasized the importance of education, saying that it is only because of the skills she developed through her education that she has the courage to stand up for herself and carry herself with pride. Her ongoing inquiries

on behalf of her community are conveyed in the tale.

“How did the upper castes become so elevated?” (Bama 27) she asks. She wants the Dalits to “dare to stand up for change” and a “...just society where all are equal” (Bama 28).

Bama connects her desire for a fair and equal society with her account of her quest to understand the actual nature of God, who has “the greatest compassion for the oppressed” (Bama 104). The stages in her spiritual development are marked by her account of her life as a Dalit woman Christian who in the beginning followed the established religious ceremony out of fear, her joining to the nunnery, and her understanding of the “lack of humanity” in the confessed loyalty of the nuns and church priests who discriminated against and exploited the Dalits. She comes to know that real meaning of God’s is somewhat linked to that we need to question injustice, which is the genuine goal of her existence as well as the purpose of all Dalits who should be in the likeness of God and “live with honour, self-respect, and with a love towards all humankind” (Bama 109). The realization of this fact by Bama is also for the benefit of her neighbourhood. Bama, after her meditation, is shocked to know that even priests and nuns who claim themselves to be the servants of God, also discriminate against Dalit people, “Why, even the nuns and priests, who claim that their hearts are set upon service to God, certainly discriminate according to caste” (Bama 27). She claims that in the past, she had resentment toward being born a Dalit,

saying, “And in my heart, I have even grieved over the fact that I was born as I am” (Bama 27).

The challenge of living in a low caste is the cause of this resentment. They are despised by the upper classes who treat them as if they had some disgusting sickness. The upper castes fear that even the slightest contact with a lower caste has made them unclean. They are encountered with discrimination wherever they went. Upper-caste members frequently act inhumanely against Dalits, forcing them to labour like animals and refusing to give them the respect they deserve for their dedication to their work. They continuously obstruct Dalit advancement because they never wanted them to advance and get better. Dalits are exploited everywhere, and despite receiving an education, their situation does not appear to get any better. *Karukku* serves as a mirror for the miserable fate of Dalits. Many Dalits, without a doubt, have endured their plight and accepted their status as inferior beings who exist only to perform menial labour and serve the upper caste. However, some people refuse to conform to the established social standards of discrimination and repression, and *Karukku* is the narrative of one such Dalit lady who fought and encouraged others to do the same.

Dalit women are considered as the lowest for the reason that they are last in the Indian caste system, which is why Dalits are the lowest in the social order. Dalit women face prejudice on the basis of caste as well on the basis of gender, which further marginalizes them. If suffering of

Dalits are considered as a whole, we can see how much more terrible the situation of Dalit women is. Despite suffering abuse from both upper-class and lower-class males, working equally hard, and being paid less than men, they maintain their strength and stand up for themselves when required,

“Even if they did the same work, men received one wage, women another. They always paid men more. I could never understand why” (Bama 54-55).

In an incident, men from the Paraya community were either in jail or hidden themselves in the fields. No man was seen in the streets except the police who were on patrol. Bama uses this incident to demonstrate the bravery of Dalit women. The Paraya ladies completed all of their chores on a regular basis during that time rather than shouting out their problems. It is the women who went to the fields and worked as day labourers as usual, and they also performed tasks around the house,

“As usual, the women went to fields where they worked as day labourers. On their way, they took gruel to the men hiding in the woods, told them the news, and went on. And so the women somehow managed on their own, even without men's earning” (Bama 38).

Bama placed particular emphasis on the representation of Dalit women in addition to providing its readers with a general picture of Dalit life.

In *Karukku*, Bama shares her own experiences as Dalit woman who decided to join the convent in order to help other members of the Dalit community; and help

them rise beyond their social status. But as soon as she joined the order, she realized the hypocrisy and duplicity of the church leaders, who used to teach lessons about equality of all people before God but had failed to put those teachings into practice for themselves. Bama deplores the treatment that members of lower castes receive in places of worship like the Church. Bama claims that Dalits were treated differently than members of the upper castes, including being forced to perform menial duties like sweeping and cleaning,

“.....people of my community were looking after all the jobs like sweeping the premises, swabbing and washing the classrooms, and cleaning out the lavatories”

(Bama 25).

Priests taught them that God would be pleased with their menial labour. Therefore, Dalits should be content to do whatever task is required of them, and they were asked to be patient with such kind of behaviour. Bama was extremely hurt by this kind of discrimination, so she discontinued from the order in search of a just and better life.

“The more I watched this, the more frustrated I felt. 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” (Bama 78).

Karukku is a portrayal of Dalits lives, who are unfairly and persistently ignored by upper-caste individuals. The

author divides Dalits into two groups - those who patiently accept their oppression and endure it while comforting themselves by thinking that their mistreatment is their fate; and those who refuse to accept their domination by others, and fight for injustice while demonstrating their strength. They work to further their education in an effort to better their financial and social situation. However, members of the upper caste consistently treat them unfairly and bring them down.

“They seem to conspire to keep us in our place: to think that we who have worked throughout history like beasts, should live and die like that; we should never move on or go forward” (Bama 27-28).

According to Bama, members of the upper-caste never work together for the advancement of Dalit communities because they do not want them to rise from their low economic and social conditions for the reason that their advancement could be a threat to their (upper-caste) powerful position. According to her, Dalits made upper-caste people powerful and affluent by working for them like animals, but what they got in return was injustice and repression.

The palmyra leaf, which has a shape similar to a sharp two-edged sword, is what the word "karukku" means in its literal sense. Bama chose the word as the title of her book because she believes that all Dalit lives suffer from a deep, painful wound that feels like it was caused by palmyra leaves. Initially, social injustice and discrimination caused this pain. *Karukku* can be claimed to have descended

from the Tamil word ‘*Karu,*’ which signifies ‘embryo’ or ‘newness.’ Since, it also tells the tale of resistance and the struggle of Dalit communities for respect and advancement. In the preface of the book to the First Edition of *Karukku*, Bama says:

“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- all these taken together” (Bama xiii).

Through *Karukku*, Bama communicates her suffering and determination. In the book's epilogue, she comes off as quite combative because she believes that other people are also resisting. She is pleased to know that Dalit people have recognized their power, which motivates them for pursuing respectable positions in society. The Dalits used to be in a terrible situation, but they are now attempting to lead respectable lives. Dalits work to educate their kids so that they can live better lives than they did. They continue to strive for the justice and equality that were forbidden to them:

“Dalits have begun to realize the truth. They have realized that they have been maintained as the stone steps that others have trodden on as they raised themselves up. They

have become aware that they have been made slaves in the name of God, the Pusai, and the Church. They have experienced a state of affairs where, in the name of serving the poor; these others have risen into power while actually treading on the poor. Dalits have learned that these others have never respected them as human beings, but only bent the religion to their benefit, to maintain their own falsehoods" (Bama 108-109).

Bama's accurate portrayal of life as a Dalit creates a lasting impression on the reader. She conveys the suffering and sorrow of Dalits, particularly the Paraya group. She demonstrates how people's minds—even those of young children—are shaped in accordance with the norms of society. They are aware of the distance that Harijans must maintain with members of the upper-caste. The author wants to change everything; she wants her community to be treated with respect and equality. She desires fair compensation for their labour as well as the honourable lives they deserve but has never experienced. Fortunately, according to Badri Narayan, things are now changing for Dalits:

"In the recent past, however, there is a visible upsurge in the assertion of Dalit identity, which challenges the humiliation that they faced for centuries. There has emerged a strong urge among the marginalized groups throughout the country, to assert their identity and self-respect throughout their own cultural resources and challenge the

cultural hegemony of upper caste" (Narayan 20).

Bama opposes every form of discrimination against Dalit women as a true feminist. By highlighting her struggles as a Dalit and Dalit woman, a Dalit woman among Dalits, oppressed thrice, the author hopes to shatter all social and cultural barriers. A woman from the Dalit community is a Dalit. She experiences three forms of oppression. Being a Christian Dalit adds to the writer's suffering. She thus experiences caste, gender, and religious oppression. Many questions remain unanswered, and it is a hard trip with an open ending. Writing about religion and education, the author also expresses her painful experiences. It shows how one goes from being weak to becoming strong.

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How to cite this article?

Ramprasad Kujur & Dr Kalpana Paul“ Bama's *Karukku*: A Tale of Resistance and Struggle” Research Journal Of English (RJOE)8(3), PP:235-243,2023, DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2023.8.3.243