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Critiquing the Dalit Psyche in the Marginalized literature with special Reference to Bama's Novel "Karruku"

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Abstract:

Bama Faustina Soosairaj, also known as Bama, holds the distinction of being the first Dalit Feminist writer. Her autobiographical novel "Karukku" has a special place in the realm of Dalit literature. She with this work has exposed the triad of exploitation for the Dalits namely caste, class and gender. The intersectionality of the social handicaps leading to the discrimination and oppression of the Dalits are the main focus of her works. Karukku, especially is an epoch-making work as it tells about her lived experiences as a Dalit woman in a society where systemic marginalization is a norm rather than being an aberration. The work brings to light the subjugation of the Dalits in the hands of upper caste elites, it also depicts the patriarchal hegemony and the subsequent agony and suffering experienced by the Dalit women in the society. The work not only talks about the gloomy and dark conditions of the lives of the women belonging to the Dalit community but also offers tools for their liberation like solidarity. According to Bama reclamation of the lost dignity is only possible thorough education.

Key Words: Dalit Feminism, Marginalization. Intersectionality. Caste, Patriarchy

The autobiographical novel Karukku is a fascinating memoir of the events in the life of the author Bama. The narration is sketchy and doesn't always follow the chronological sequence of the events and happenings. Still it stirs the sentiments of the readers by sheer dint of its honesty and expression of the personal emotions like pain and suffering. Her pain becomes the embodiment of the millions like her giving them sustenance in the hour of distress. In the forward of the novel the author herself writes about the purpose of "Karukku" in this way,

"Karukku, written by a wounded self, has not been dissolved in the stream of time. On the contrary, it has been a means of relieving the pain of others who were wounded. Karukku has been of 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. During these ten years, it has reminded its readers not only that Truth alone is victorious, but that only the Truth is the Truth, Karukky has enabled many to raise their voices and proclaim, 'My language, my culture, my life is praiseworthy, it is excellent'" (Bama, x)

Autobiographies have been known to be the embodiments of the author's inflated egos, flashy things written for posterity so that they can create for themselves an impressive aura. There is always a temptation on part of the writer of the autobiographies to fall for pseudo image building by falsifying and mythmaking these objectives are often achieved. "Karukku", Bama's autobiography is utterly devoid of such machinations. It is a truthful and honest attempt at reliving

the atrocities committed against her and her Paraiya community by the state, the Church and the Upper Castes.

It is an extraordinary autobiography as it makes the personal calamity a plea for the empowerment of the dalit women. Talking about the uniqueness of this work, Laxmi Holstrom the award winning translator of her works states in the forward to her work *Karukku*,

“*Karukku*” is the first autobiography of its kind to appear in Tamil, for Dalit writing in this language has not produced the spate of autobiographies which have appeared, for example, in Marathi. It is also in many ways an unusual autobiography. It grows out of a particular moment; a personal crisis and watershed in the author’s life which drives her to make sense of her life as a woman, a Christian and a Dalit.” (Holmestrom, xv-xvi)

Karukku, palmyra leaf with double edged serrated edges, becomes a metaphor, as the incidents and occurrences in the author’s life are deeply etched in her memory as well as her soul that is bleeding because of the humiliation she had suffered. Bama says in the Preface to the first edition of *Karukku*,

“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 suffocation; 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, xxiii)

Instead of self justification and glorification Bama had a clear purposefulness in writing *Karukku*. No matter what she wants her work to be the leading light for millions like her, languishing in suffocating circumstances of the society, trying frantically to find a way out of the quagmire of casteism, untouchability and discrimination. “In order to change the state of affairs, all Dalits who have been deprived of their basic rights must function as God’s word, piercing to the very heart. Instead of being more and more beaten down and blunted, they must unite, think about their rights, and battle for them.”(Bama, xxiv). Bama aims at making her work instrumental at ushering freedom from oppression and bringing about recognition and understanding for the Dalits.

The structure of *Karukku* is very interesting: instead of choosing the tried and tested linear chronological narrative Bama has chosen to write a scathing critique of the society in rather sketchy strokes. The thematic exploits in this work are bound and held together in one thread of reminiscence where the protagonist stays in the background. Laxmi Holmestrom's views as expressed in the foreword of this novel

It eschews the ‘confessional’ mode, leaving out many personal details. The protagonist is never named. The events of Bama’s life are not arranged according to a simple, linear, or chronological order, as with most autobiographies, but rather, reflected upon in different ways, repeated from different perspectives, grouped under different themes, for example, Work, Games and Recreation, Education,

Belief and so on. It is her driving quest for integrity as a Dalit and a Christian that shapes the book and gives it its polemic. (Holmstrom, xvi)

The conflict in this work is primarily between the individual and the community. The community around the Catholic Church and its allied institutions was abandoned since the protagonist felt estranged and compromised. The way the Church had influenced the lives of the people of her community presumably promoting the values of equality, social justice and love towards all, prompted her to enroll herself in the religious order but to her dismay she felt that the Catholic church was found wanting on spiritual as well as religious grounds. The reality was very different from what was being preached during the sermons.

The first chapter of the book is primarily concerning the introductory details of the protagonist. The scenic beauty of the village, surrounded by mountains and inhabited by different communities who tend to have unsympathetic attitudes towards each other. The rift between these communities is deep and clearly demarcated. Most of the elites like Naickers are land owners and the rest are farm laborers. The chapter sets the tone for the entire work by bringing out the sharp contrast in the lives of the Paraiya's and the Upper Castes's lives; at the one hand the upper castles have access to all the amenities of life fields with boundaries, dug wells and plenty to eat and on the other the who neither have land nor the amenities and who could not afford nice and square meals. The outcast's lives are marred by perpetual poverty and untold hardships.

The various communities like the Nadars, the Koravars, the Chakkiliyars, the Kusasvas and Pallas along with the Parayas maintained distance in terms of settlements and any trespassing into the other's territories was strictly prohibited. These outcasts used to go to the upper castes settlements only if there was some work to do but the upper castes never ever came to the lower caste settlements. The only school in the vicinity was for upper caste children. As far as the children of the pariah community are concerned they are used to loitering in the streets bare-bottomed, usually doing nothing and waiting for the church bell at twelve so that they can get their free meal.

The description of the funny names of the people and children are equally interesting; one child was called '*Munkovam*' the short tempered, a woman was called Midday-Massala, another child was called Murugan-spring pig, a girl was called "*Medenda*" or the floater, '*Kaakkaa*' the crow chaser, Black ant, '*Mancchi*' flat nose, '*Uzhamuki*' running nose Needle-bum, '*Kalkundaan*' bolder, '*Kaaman*' Jack of all trades, Bondan Snatcher, Naadodi wanderer and half ear etc these names tell about the apathy towards the fellow human beings, a practice that was prevalent in the paraiya community

The realization of the apathetic behaviour of people against the Paraiyas was not merely limited to the degrading names these people were given. In the second chapter the protagonist came to know about the curse of untouchability and the ensuing humiliation associated with it. To a third standard student it is perhaps the first taste of the bitter concoction of casteism that was yet to unfold in its disgusting glory. The incident she witnessed one day when an elder of her street was bringing some eatables for an upper Naicker caste in a packet held by a string so that he

doesn't touch and pollute the eatables. This not only made her sad but also indignant at the humiliating treatment her community members received from the upper castes.

The deep rooted discriminations shook her. Then she started thinking about the whys and the hows of such incidents. She describes the unjust and unequal treatment meted out by people of her community. She recalls bitterly, "Both my grandmothers worked as servants for Naicker families. In the case of one of them, when she was working in the fields, even the tiny children, born the other day, would call her by her name and order her about, just because they belonged to the Naicker caste. And this grandmother, like the other labourers, would call the little boy Ayya, Master, and run about to do his bidding"(Bama, 16); "The Naicker women would pour out the water from a height to four feet, while Paatti and the others received and drank it with cupped hands held to their mouths" and further, "My other paatti was the same. As soon as dawn broke, she would go to the Naicker houses, sweep out the cowshed, collect up the dung and dirt, and then bring home the left-over rice and curry from the previous evening, and for some reason she would behave as if she had been handed the nectar of the gods."(Bama, 16)

The protagonist is appalled by the magnitude of the humiliation of the above-mentioned incidents she witnessed and asks her paatti (grandmother) why she accepts such behaviour. Then she is told that these upper caste people are maharajas or kings who provide them their supply of rice and grains that is why they should supplicate to them and also that this has been the system for many generations in the past and so it cannot be changed! The fatalism and utter resignation among the pariahs regarding the lopsided social system is gravely insulting and the protagonist was deeply perturbed. The incident involving her elder brother's encounter with a Naicker also brought to light how people of her community are looked down upon.

Her soft and innocent mind was frantically seeking rectifications to the existing situation; the rescue came from her brother who said, "Because we are born into the Paraya Jati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that. But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities. So study with care, learn all you can. If you are always ahead in your lessons, people will come to you of their own accord and attach themselves to you. Work hard and learn." (Bama, 18) These words showed her the path she was looking for. She devoted herself diligently to her studies then afterwards and she found that leaving out of caste stigma is only possible with proper education. Education, according to her, has the mitigating effect on the problems of casteism and untouchability.

But ironically education didn't come to her easily as the school premises as well as the classrooms were infested with people who were totally biased against her because of her caste. The petty incident involving her accidentally picking a green coconut in front of the school led to her expulsion from the school. She had to summon all her courage and effort to seek the approval of the priest in order to have that expulsion revoked. She went to high school to pursue her studies there. Though the new school was a bigger and much better one she soon found that the warden-sister was not too kind with the low-caste and poor children and she treated them with apathy. These children were constantly humiliated for their low-birth, "All the same, every now and then. Our class teacher, or the PT teacher would ask all the Harijan children to stand up, either at

assembly, or during lessons. We'd stand. They'd write down our names, and then ask us to sit down again. We felt really bad then. We'd stand in front of nearly two thousand children, hanging our heads in shame, as if we had done something wrong. Yes, it was humiliating"(Bama,20)

Despite the strong opposition from the members of her family and close acquaintances she joined the convent in order to become a nun. The lofty ideals of helping the poor and lowly was the primary motive of joining the convent. Besides, she wanted to circumvent the stigma of being a Paraya, as she thought that the convent would be a place free from discrimination. She found all her dreams of ideal society, equality and justice were thwarted during the training. She recalls, "In a particular class, a Sister told us that in certain orders they would not accept Harijan women as prospective nuns and that there was even a separate order for them" (Bama, 25) she came to regard the fact that discrimination is all-pervading and even people like priests and nuns who proclaimed to follow the Godly path of pity and altruism are prone to it. The very thought that the convent too was the place where discrimination prevailed was repulsive to her. And later she came to conclude bitterly, "I lamented inwardly that there was no place that was free of caste" (Bama, 25)

The author used to think that the Catholic Church was a place for altruistic Priests and Nuns who would eventually tend to the needs of the poor, the needy and the downtrodden. To her it was obvious that the people who have set their hearts unto the God would definitely be sympathetic towards the cause of the hapless children, since she herself wanted to help the needy children born in her community she joined the religious order but she couldn't have been more wrong as later she realized, "But I understood, after I entered the convent, they treat the people who suffer from poverty in one way, and those who have money in their pockets in a totally different way"(Bama, 77)

The author's experience in the convent among the so-called God people taught her many vital lessons. The ignominy and deprivation suffered by Dalits in the society made her suffer immensely and led her to ask, "Are Dalits not human beings? Do they not have common sense? Do they not have such attributes as a sense of honour and self- respect? Are they without any wisdom, beauty , dignity? What do they lack? (Bama, 27)

These are the very questions that address the core of the untouchability and discrimination in the society. These questions go unanswered. Everyone who has faced discrimination tends to wonder whether his whole existence is a sham. Identity and recognition are the two things that every individual thrives upon. a society that honors every individual irrespective of one's birth and parentage equally remains an illusion. The author eventually states the harsh truth, "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."(Bama, 26)

The protagonist feels that the society is to to be blamed for the apathy and discrimination but the Dalits are somewhat responsible for their predicament. As these people have been exploited and enslaved for many generations, they themselves have come to regard their degradation as their fate instead of fighting it courageously they have accepted this injustice, enslavement and

humiliation as their lot. They have come to accept that their situation is hopeless and beyond redemption. But the protagonist says,

”We who are asleep must open our eyes and look about us. We must not accept the injustice of our enslavement by telling ourselves it is our fate, as if we have no true feelings; we must dare to stand up for change. We must crush all these institutions that use caste to bully us into submission, and demonstrate that among human beings there are none who are high or low. Those who have found 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.’(Bama, 28)

The survival of the Dalits amidst the unjust and chaotic circumstances remains one of the major triumphs that is both amazing and inspiring. The stirring details of the life coming out of the novel which Bama the protagonist and the people of her community lead are heartrending. Irrespective of their gender they have to work tirelessly as “pannaiyaal” or bonded labourers for the land owner upper castes. But such is their exploitation that they never manage to earn more than a few rupees even if they work from dawn till dusk. The staple food for such hardworking people is ‘broken grain gruel’. The times when there is no work on the fields these people have to go in search of firewood in the forest in the steep mountain bleeding amidst the twigs and thorns and also bribing the ‘Guarder’ with few annas. They are often swindled by the Nadar tradesmen during the exchange of goods that they have managed to gather with great difficulty from the fields and forests. Bama seems resigned to the fate of the people of her community when she says, “But it was only toiling like this, without taking any account of their bodies as human flesh and blood, that people of my community could even survive’(Bama, 52)

The hardships and difficulties with which their lives were infested is reflected in the games and recreations in which the children of this community played. There were games that depicted the inferiority of the Dalits to the upper castes. “There were a few games that we played most frequently. Two or three boys would play at being Naicker. The rest of us would call them, ‘Ayya, Ayya’, and pretend to be their pannaiyaal. These boys would act as if they had a lot of power over us. They would call out to us, ‘Yeppa, Yeppa’, humiliate us, and make us do a lot of work’.(Bama, 56) It may seem innocent but at its core it has the shadow of generations of enslaved mindset that these Dalits carry with them.

The children also played certain games that showed the inferiority of women to men in the community, “Then we played at being married and setting off on a bus journey; the husband coming home drunk and hitting his wife, the police arriving and beating him up’(Bama, 57) The game had a deep symbolic meaning it indicates an inherent disparity in the Dalit society between the men and the women.

The Dalit women’s predicament is even worse than the Dalit men as she has to suffer caste as well as gender discrimination. These women have to work harder, have to accept lower wages and have to face sexual and physical abuse by the male members of their family. They have to get up early to cook and cater for the family members before putting something in their mouths before

they go out for ceaseless work in the fields. On returning home once again they have to ignite fire in the hearth so that the children and family members get something to eat. Their chores last till late night but still they cannot rest as they have to give in to the sexual needs of their men before finally getting some time to sleep. The same vicious cycle is repeated day after day throughout their lives. Failing on any one of her 'duties' she has to bear the consequences, she is beaten black and blue, punched and kicked around with no one ever to help her.

The games for the girl child of the community stops abruptly as she has to take care of the household in the absence of her mother; cooking, cleaning and taking care of younger brothers and sisters. Or she will have to go to work in the nearby factories to earn for the family. When she comes of age she will be given away without her consent in a marriage to someone who will ill treat her for the rest of her life. She will have to work from dawn to dusk, without proper food, she will be beaten and abused by her husband, she will bear children and take care of them without any complaint. The life of a woman in the pariah community is full of degradation and deprivation; at times she is treated worse than the animals on the street, yet she is supposed to hold the family together, be submissive to the male counterpart.

Equally interesting is her spiritual journey that is revealed in "Karukku"; her faith in God, her belief in religion underwent a quiet metamorphosis over the years. She, like every normal child, received her first lessons in devotion at home by family members and teachers and she believed everything she was taught. She never missed the morning service. She performed well in the catechism class. She received her confirmation when she was in class three. Her mind was preoccupied with the stories of the devils that the nuns used to tell them. Her tender mind was always torn between what is good deed and what is sin. She did everything possible to remain in the good books of God. As a kid she used to be a part of "Baalar Sabai", the Holy childhood Movement. She was a devout God fearing Christian.

"Nowadays, now that I have left the order. I am angry when I see priests and nuns. Until I actually entered the convent, I truly did not understand their approach, nor any of their procedures. It was only after my sojourn with them that I understood the lack of humanity in their piety. They speak in an empty way of devotion, renunciation, the Holy Spirit, God's vocation, poverty, chastity and obedience; they lead lives which remind me only of the Pharisees, Saducees and High Priests who appear in the Bible. If Jesus were to appear today he would question them much more sharply and severely than he did before. And even if he were to do so, I am not sure whether they will understand".(Bama, 108)

The above remark is a scathing criticism of the catholic church and only a brutally honest person like Bama could have said so. She found that the people in the ranks of the Church never talk about the suffering of the people but all their talks are confined to materialistic goals leading to the gratification of the senses. The talk never ever nears the purpose of becoming nuns or priests and the power to mitigate the pain and agony of the poor and the lowly. The apparent high idealistic moral ground of these people associated with church has nothing to do with the suffering and upliftment of the oppressed and the needy. She became more and more disillusioned with the ways

of church, eventually she had to decide her own course of action of leaving the religious order for good.

The decision to leave the convent was a brave one as the world outside was by and large unknown to her. The realization that at least she had forgotten penury and need for some time within the walls of the convent. She used to eat well, there was a warm and comfortable bed to lie down and rest, the everyday struggle with the heartless society was nonexistent. The convent was a sanctuary away from the squalor and filth of her village and the backward people of her community. After leaving such a cozy and safe place she will have to manage her affairs all by herself as going back to her family and near and dear ones was a difficult option as she has not listened to their suggestion of not joining the convent as a nun. Now after the fiasco how would she face them and their questions.

It speaks volumes about her courage when she took the decision of leaving the religious order. She knew very well that she would have to start her life afresh and that was a very difficult proposition. She could have stayed in the comfort of the convent but she was too much of an idealist to have compromised her ideals for the sake of safety and comfort.. Despite all these she had a firm resolve not to retract her decision, as she concludes her extraordinary narrative with these lines, "For the time being I cannot see my way ahead. Yet I believe it is possible to live a meaningful life, a life that is useful to a few others. I comfort myself with the thought that rather than live with a fraudulent smile, it is better to lead a life weeping real tears.(Bama, 122)

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