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Chhotu Paswan
Research Scholar, Lalit
Narayan Mithila University,
Darbhanga, Bihar, India

The theme of retaliation for women empowerment in Bama's Karukku

Chhotu Paswan

Abstract

In an era where human rights and awareness of Dalits are pervasive issues, literary depictions of the experiences of marginalised groups of people have gained exceptional importance. The recent explode in Dalit literature is an effort to bring the experiences of caste discrimination, poverty agony, violence and subjugation faced by the marginalised sections. These experiences have been silenced and marginalised as unliterary. The growing corpus of Dalit texts including autobiographies, novels and poetry seeks to ratify this truth while describing the nuances of Dalit cultures. These texts which have for centuries been relegated to the margins, offer a challenge to literary aesthetics, with its Caste and Gender bias, has for long been masquerading as universal.

Bama's revelations in *Karukku* examines the current socio-economic status of Dalit Christians. The paucity of scientific date on the exact level of deprivation of Dalit Christians, however, remains a major challenge to understand the picture at a disaggregated level. Bama is struggling to find herself again. Bama followed a friend's advice and started to write her childhood memoirs. She also created her pen name 'Bama' a blend of different sounds from her Christian name. She completed the book in six months. It consists of nine chapters. This slim volume, a semi-fictional account of the growing awareness of a Dalit, created a stir in literary circles for its uninhibited language and bold vocabulary.

Keywords: Dalit consciousness, retaliation, women empowerment, social discrimination. Caste, poverty, agony. Prejudice, violence, subjugation, suffering and gender bias

Introduction

Bama opines, "Some critics cried out that a woman should not have used such coarse words. But I wrote the way people speak. I didn't force a literary language on myself" (p. 68). The word *Karukku* means the saw-like double-edged stem of the Palmyra leaf. Another Tamil word "Karu" means embryo or seed, which also means 'freshness or newness'. Bama herself in the preface to the book brings the connection between the saw-edged palmyra leaf and her own life. She recalls:

Not only did I pick up the scattered Palmyra Karukku in the days when I was sent out to gather firewood scratching and tearing my skin as I played with them, but later they also became the embryo and symbol that grew into this book (p. xiii).

The embryo Bama refers to is the 'Dalit Consciousness' and the symbol is the new revolution, which aims at bringing a new social order into the Indian society. Apart from 'scratching' and 'tearing', *Karukku* has also other functions: it can help Dalits to regain their lost dignity.

As she writes

There are other Dalit hearts like mine, with a passionate desire to create a new society made up of justice, equality and love. They, who have been the oppressed, are now themselves like the double-edged Karukku, challenging their oppressors (p. xiii).

Thus, *Karukku* signifies both Dalit oppression and Dalit struggle to get out from such an oppressive state. This is quite an appropriate and apt title to her autobiography; Bama adopts various textual strategies which help her tell her life-story in a very special way. For example, she starts her narration describing the surroundings of her village and then goes on to describe her childhood, her education, her Christian upbringing, her joining the Catholic order as a nun and her subsequent disenchantment and her return to her community.

Corresponding Author:
Chhotu Paswan
Research Scholar, Lalit
Narayan Mithila University,
Darbhanga, Bihar, India

Bama tells her stories cryptically at times without much elaboration, whetting the reader's appetite for more. Thus, *Karukku* does not seem to be an autobiography in a conventional sense. In fact, if people take various other considerations, *Karukku* does not seem to be an autobiography at all. If people read it without its Preface, Introduction, and Afterword, they might think that it is a novel or at an anthropological account of the paraya community.

Bama almost all rejects to accept the fact that her account is all about the narration of her autobiographical 'I'. Instead of her individual self -coming to occupy the center stage, she evokes the collective self of the entire Dalit community suggesting that the autobiographical 'I' does not have an autonomous life outside the collective 'we'. Almost all Dalit autobiographers adopt this strategy. Bama deploys several other distinctly different narrative strategies. It is perhaps deliberate that she leaves out the names of people, places and institutions and thus brings anonymity in her narration. For example, she does not mention the name of her village or the names of her parents, brothers and sisters or the upper caste people who exploit her community, or even the school and the college she attended and later worked in she does mention a few names of people in her community but they stand out to be so ordinary and insignificant that they can be found in any Dalit community.

Bama's invoking of larger solidarities seems to have a definite purpose. She wants to draw the attention of the readers towards the various caste discriminations that prevails in the Indian society and takes the parayas, her community, as an instance to illustrate how they have been the worst victims of caste oppression for several centuries. Bama at the very beginning focuses on the different caste formations of her village stating how people meticulously followed caste rules while carrying out their day-to-day socio-cultural and economic activities. Bama recollects, since the parayas were considered to be untouchables they had a separate settlement, far away from the main village. Social interactions between the so-called upper-caste and lower caste communities were strictly prohibited except on special occasions when such interactions were inevitable for both. Bama remembers that the upper castes, "kept themselves to their part of the village and we stayed in ours. We only went to their side if we had worked to do there. But they never ever come to our parts" (p.6).

Bama remembers how people of her community laboured hard to produce grains for the rich upper caste farmers while they themselves went hungry. That the producers never became consumers is due to social stratifications emanating from caste arrangements. Bama draws a list of various types of work which the people of her community have been traditionally doing to this day. In the fields, they did plough, manuring, watering, sowing the seeds, separating the seedlings and planting them, weeding, working on the threshing floors, planning groundnuts, selecting ripe coconuts, etc. at the construction site they dug wells, carried loads of earth, gravel and stone. There were also other odd jobs such as going up to the hills to gather firewood, working with palm leaves or making bricks at the kilns. All the jobs listed above involve immense physical strain. And with no proper food for sustenance, Dalit workers became prematurely old and die early.

Bama makes the only choice possible for her. But she also sees the beginnings of an important change, if not in the

Church's practice, then in the gradually growing awareness among Dalits of their own oppression:

But Dalits have also understood that God is not like this, has not spoken like this. They have become aware that they too were created in the likeness of God. There is a new strength within them, urging them to reclaim that likeness, which has been repressed, ruined and obliterated; and to begin to live with honour and respect and love of all humankind. To my mind, that alone is true devotion (Introduction, p.xvii).

Bama intended to create a new society made up of justice, equality and love. Dalits are the oppressed, are now themselves like the double-edged *Karukku* challenges their oppressors (Author's Preface to the First Edition, p.xxi). Bama's *Karukku*, a text that is a life story that could lay the foundation for a course on Dalit memoirs. Part autobiography, part analysis, part manifesto, Bama's is a bold account of what life is like outside the mainstream of Indian thought and function (Editor's Note to the First Edition, *Karukku*, p.xxv).

Bama writes,

Our village is very beautiful. Even though you don't see much by way of progress or anything like that here, I love this place for its beauty. Although it's only a small village, many different communities live here. But before I come to castes and communities (chapter-1, p. 1).

These are the opening lines of *Karukku*, the childhood life story written in Tamil by Dalit writer, Bama. The opening lines of her literary discourse explain her sense of longing and belongingness towards her native world. This kind of feeling not only in Bama but also in every Dalit writer, they hold similar feeling as they carry a sense of identity and belongingness. *Karukku*, (which in Tamil means the sharp-edged stem of the Palmyra tree) voiced the sorrows and joys of her people, oppressed by upper castes in India.

We were very poor. I was witness too many instances of violence against Dalits. She also saw the humiliation of her mother and grandmother faced in the fields and homes of the landlords. Despite the misery, we had a carefree childhood (p.27).

The statement creates the introspective atmosphere that the caste-based discrimination has been a matter of great discussion in societal and governmental level in India. Several scholars have discussed this matter focusing on how people have been discriminated on the ground of caste in society, and other social and Governmental Institutions. There are also some contributions focusing in particular on how Dalit people have been excluded from education. It has been noticed, however, that women perspectives and voices about their schooling experiences, attachment for homeland has so far not been explored at length. It is true because the other communities at times hold commercial look at the place in which they were born and brought up. The issue of caste divides surfaces itself subtly or overly in Bama's works.

In *Karukku*, Bama highlights the discriminatory practices she braved at school because of her caste and class background. She observes:

The warden sister of our hostel could not abide low-caste or poor Children. She would get hold of us and scold us for no rhyme or reason. If a girl tended to be on the plump side, she would get it even more. These people get nothing to eat at home; they come here and they grow fat, she'd say publicly. And when they returned to school after their holidays she would comment: "Look at the Cheri children!

When they stay here, they eat their fill and Look as round as potatoes. But look at the state in which they come back from home-just skin and bone!" (p. 20).

Bama clearly realized that it is due to the caste hierarchy that the majority of the lower castes are condemned to live a wretched life without any honour or self-respect. She unequivocally condemns the hypocrisy of Hindu society, which advocates caste divisions and keeps a segment of people as lower than animals. Bama's observations on the Indian society are quite apt:

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 study well and progress like everyone else. And this is why a wretched lifestyle is all that is left us (p.23).

Bama is a Dalit writer and activist. In order to bring an end to caste oppression she prepares a long-drawn plan where she calls upon all Dalits to wake up, unite and fight against casteist forces of the country. She dreams of a just and humane society where she believes, everyone will be equal. Bama thus writes:

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 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 (p.25).

Conclusion

Today, the Dalit voice has magnificently registered its presence at both international and national fronts. Its insurgence in modern times signifies the subversive spirit those questions the dominance of Brahminical ideology and this subversive spirit is focused in Bama's works. Bama is the most distinguished Tamil Dalit fiction writers who own the credit to write the very first Tamil Dalit women autobiography. She has produced works of immense value on gender, caste and marginalised sections of the society. Bama displays the subversion of control of the power discourse from the hands of oppressive casteist masters to the Dalit masses. Being a Dalit, she centralises the Dalit issues with a strenuous Dalit Consciousness. The very presentation of literary consciousness by Bama is itself marked by the transformation of the untouchability consciousness into a dignified Dalit Consciousness. It is this subverted Dalit consciousness that inspires other Dalits to create a 'room of their own'.

Bama repeatedly emphasises the importance and crucial significance of education in the lives of Dalits. *Karukku* is an evidence of social behaviour of upper caste from the perspective of caste. Bama urges for the empowerment of her community. In her writings, she celebrates Dalit women's life, resilience and creativity. As a result of her humbling experiences as a Dalit, Bama realises that through the right type of education, the whole community of Dalit can be empowered and can gain human dignity. *Karukku* is

a call to Dalits to liberate them from bondage based on caste, religion and she has a great faith in education as a possibility for deliverance from exploitative social structure.

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