

## **THE BARRIERS SHE HAD TO CROSS: THE STRUGGLE OF A DALIT WOMAN THROUGH HEGEMONY AS IN BAMA'S KARUKKU**

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**Dr Justin James**

University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Sultanate of Oman

Dalit literature came into existence comparatively recently, but it has carved its indisputable place in Indian literature in particular and world literature in general with its unique identity as one of the compelling genres of literature. It is the outcome of growing Dalit consciousness. It is a part of the fourth world literature, which brings to light the marginal position of the so-called 'lower caste' society. The emergence and growth of the fourth world literature are about the economic, social, political, and cultural scenario of the marginalized. Dalit literature chants not only of the sufferings and agonies of Dalits but also of how they have made their way through the antagonism that surrounds and suppresses them. There are not many Dalit writers and among them a very few are women writers. Dalit women's autobiographies are a rare phenomenon, especially in Tamil. Bama's *Karukku* is one such exceptional creation, and it is translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom. Though it talks about the life of its author, it can be taken as the biography of the Dalit community as a whole; it is the voice of Dalit consciousness. This article analyses *Karukku* from social and gender perspectives. To understand the plight of the Dalits, the chapter employs the theories of two great Indian personae who waged war against the caste system and patriarchy—B.R. Ambedkar and E.V. R. Periyar. The application of Western feminist and subaltern theories is consciously and deliberately avoided in this study, as there is always a question lurking in my mind as to whether the Occidental minds can voice out the agony of the Oriental Dalits.

Bama, also known as Faustina Mary Fatima Rani and Bama Faustina Soosairaj, a contemporary Dalit writer and a dedicated teacher, was born into a Tamil Christian Dalit family in the year 1958. She has experienced all the afflictions that a Dalit woman is destined to undergo. Her family converted into Christianity with the hope that they would relish better living conditions. Her father was serving in the military. She had an average life of a Dalit family in her childhood until she reached her adulthood. She had a collegiate education, which was not readily available for the women of the Dalit community. She completed her BEd too. She was posted as a teacher in a school. She resigned from her post and entered into a nunnery as she thought that she would be able to serve the poorest of the poor through the religious order. But there she found that things were not as she imagined them to be. So, she came out of the nunnery and came back into society to live a life of ordinary men. Bama could surmount the difficulties she faced as a Dalit, as a woman, and as a Tamil, emerged as a successful writer and has made her mark in the field of literature. Her books are translated into English. Her success as a writer can also be attributed to the fact that she does not entirely blame society for the subjugation of Dalits. She also recognizes the drawbacks and flaws inherent among the Dalit community itself.

### **II**

Bama rose to prominence as a writer with her autobiography *Karukku* (1992). She can be termed as a feminist, as she touches upon the feminist issues too in her works. Her *Sangati* (1994) is another novel that tells the readers of the everyday life of Dalits. Her story *Vanmam* (2002) reveals how inter-caste rivalry becomes an impediment in the uprising of Dalits. *Kusumbukkaran* (1996), *Oru Tattavum Erumaiyum* (2003), and *Kondattam* (2009) are three collections of her short stories. *Just One Word* is another of her short story collections in which she has depicted

the people she lived with and has placed them in their social context. Her novels and short stories centre on the life and position of Dalits and Dalit women in the patriarchal, caste-conscious society. Her style is powerful with the employment of the real day-to-day language of Dalits.

### III

*Karukku* is the first autobiography of its kind in Tamil Dalit writing. As every autobiography tells the readers the story of its subject, *Karukku* also portrays the life of the writer, Bama. But what is unique about it is the genuineness and simplicity with which it is told and its evolution into a genre as a social discourse in addition to being self-introspective in tone. It is a story not only of the life of the author, but also of her community as a whole and, appropriately, the protagonist is not named in the story. It is a Dalit discourse of discontentment. The lives of the author and her community are intertwined as one. It is an expression of the silenced subaltern experience, anguish, and agony. What Dhawan and Sumita Puri have said in their "Introduction" to *Bama: A Dalit Feminist* is appropriate for *Karukku*.

Writings by Dalit women have emerged as a counter-movement to mainstream Indian feminism, becoming a 'site of resistance.' The journey for a non-upper caste/class Dalit woman like Bama becomes all the more arduous in the construction of the Dalit self. The confessional mode of the autobiography transcends the form of the personal narrative to embrace the pain and suffering of the entire community. (19-20)

*Karukku* portrays the barriers the Dalit women have to cross—social barrier, economic barrier, linguistic barrier, and gender barrier—generalizing what Bama has experienced. A careful and concentrated reading would tell the readers how Bama tries to overcome these barriers and emerge successfully. Bama says in *Karukku*:

*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 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. (x)

The translator Lakshmi Holmstrom says:

*Karukku* was written out of a specific experience, the experience of a Tamil Dalit Christian woman. Yet it has a universality at its core which questions all oppressions, disturbs all complacencies, and, reaching out, empowers all those who have suffered different oppressions. It is precisely because it tells the story of Bama's personal struggle to find her identity that *Karukku* also argues so powerfully against patriarchy and caste oppression. (xiv)

There is not only patriarchal hegemony and caste hegemony, but the basis for these is also economic hegemony. There is social barrier, economic barrier, language barrier, and gender barrier that a Tamil Dalit woman has to cross.

### IV

Dalits are treated as untouchables in the caste-ridden society. In earlier times, caste just denoted the familial profession. But, as time went by, people have begun considering some professions lowly, and even today, the people in these professions are being ill-treated and considered as 'lower caste.' These 'lower caste' people are treated as slaves by the 'upper caste' people. In *Karukku*, the area in which they live is in the centre of the village because the 'upper caste' people find it convenient to have the Dalits at their beck and call. All the government offices, big shops, the church, and schools are in the streets where the Naikers, Thevars, Chettiars, Aasaaris and the Nadars live. These people use the Dalits for menial works and as labourers in their agricultural fields. They give them meagre wages and treat them almost like slaves. The Dalits are aware of what they are, but they take it as their destiny.

Even as a child of eight years, the protagonist has experienced the humiliation as a Dalit. She has accompanied her grandfather, grandmother, and mother, who have been working for Naiker families. She has witnessed how they have been disgraced and affronted. As she grows and gains knowledge and awareness, she becomes skeptical. She reflects:

Because Dalits have been enslaved for generation upon generation, and been told again and again of their degradation, they have come to believe that they are degraded, lacking honour and self-worth, untouchable; they have reached a stage where they themselves, voluntarily, hold themselves apart. This is the worst injustice. ... The consequence of all this is that there is no way for Dalits to find freedom or redemption. (28)

Once, she was accused of stealing a coconut just because she was a Dalit and from Cheri. In her hostel, "The Warden-Sister ... get hold of us and scold us for no rhyme or reason. If a girl tended to be on the plump side, she'd get it even more" (20). The same plight continues in her college life too. There too, she is treated with contempt for her caste.

*Karukku* narrates the spiritual growth of the protagonist. It also describes her beliefs and her efforts to understand the real meaning of the *Bible*. Besides, it portrays her childlike fears about her insignificant 'sins,' her disenchantment, and the final liberation that she seeks. The repeated reading of the *Bible* and the recitation of the hymns helped her form a vision and mission. She gives a trajectory of her spiritual growth. Her inner courage, strengthened by her spirituality, makes her bold.

The most painful moments of Bama's life are during the days of her stay in the convent. On seeing how the nuns treat the poor and the oppressed, she decides to become a nun herself to serve the poor, resigning the job that she was in. All the people whom she knows well warn her against her decision, with no effect. She is full of dreams of becoming a saviour of the poor through the religious order. But all her hopes and fancies are entirely shattered.

Through the protagonist, the autobiography unravels how the Church exploits Dalits. She comprehends enormous deep-rooted contradictions that lie between what is exhibited as Church to the people outside it and what the real Church inside is. The Dalits are not innocent of what the Church is doing to them, and they are not blind to it either. They feel that they cannot do anything against it as they are economically underprivileged. They are aware of what may be happening inside the Church and the convent. When the protagonist discusses with her family about her decision to enter into the convent as a nun, they warn her about the actuality. But she is stubborn in her decision and realizes the truth of their words only when she experiences it. She is aghast by the caste and economic prejudices that she witnesses and experiences there. The nuns in the convent have preconceived notions set about the Dalits and despise them for no fault of theirs. In the convent and the Church, Biblical doctrines are preached, but not practised. The figure of Christ is used as a threat to the innocent commoners to keep them under their control. The protagonist tries to re-read the Bible for its real meaning, not for the meaning given by the Church and the convent. She realizes that neither the Church nor the convent provides the actual and factual context of the Bible.

At last, she is forced to exit the convent fighting against her superiors and questioning the establishment. She comes into the outside world empty-handed, no job to fetch her any earning, nothing to support her family or even to herself. She feels estranged from herself and the world outside. The convent has converted her completely. It has drained her of all her courage, confidence, and veracity. To face the reality of the world, she has to recreate and regain her assertive self, shedding off the present shattered self. She breaks the long-lasting silence about the shameful secrets of the Church.

K. Narasimha Rao, in his article "Teleology of the Differential Imperative: Bama Faustina's Select Works," says, "Dr B. R. Ambedkar upheld a quest for Dalit self-respect as against Gandhian emphasis on Dalit quest for self-purification as a precondition for the eradication of



untouchability” (62). Dalits quest for self-respect, but at the same time, for them, this self-respect is a by-product of the respect that the ‘upper caste’ bestows upon them.

The protagonist understands that it is their economic position that keeps them down to dust. When she sees the ‘upper caste’ people belittling the Dalits, she muses over what they do to the Dalits:

How was it that these fellows thought so much of themselves? Because they had scraped 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. Our people should never run petty errands for these fellows. We should work in their fields take home our wages, and leave it at that. (15-16)

The Dalits remain poor because they are not given due wages for their labour. They are always in a state of poverty, scarcity, and shortage. The protagonist reflects, “How did the upper castes become so elevated? How is it that we have been denigrated? They possess money; we do not. If we were wealthy too, wouldn’t we learn more, and make more progress than they do?” (27). So, they need to find some way out of their present despicable condition and become economically elevated.

In the convent, there is not just caste discrimination; there is linguistic discrimination too. Tamils are mortified. The protagonist says, “... thus far they made us hang our heads in humiliation because of our caste; in this order being a Tamil seems to be equivalent to being a Paraya” (24). In the convent too, her promotion is stopped by a nun just because she does not like Tamil nuns. Her denigrated state infuriates the protagonist.

V

Though in the “Introduction” to *Karukku* Lakshmi Holmstorm writes, “*Karukku* is concerned with the single issue of caste oppression within the Catholic Church and its institutions, and presents Bama’s life as a process of lonely self-discovery” (xvii), Bama touches upon gender issue also here.

In Dalit community, like other communities in India, women are the ones to do the household chores, even after they return home from the hard labour of the day. When the older women go out on work, it is always the girl children who have to look after the household chores. In the workplace, there are no equal wages for equal labour. For the same job done, men are given more wages than women. These are the women who rescue men in times of hardship. In the absence of men, women manage by themselves both the house and the village affairs. They are even smart enough to devise plans to safeguard men and execute their strategies successfully when the men of the whole community have to go into hiding. They are daring enough to fight battles in communal riots. But despite all these, men treat women as their inferiors. Women have to be the outlet for the anger and frustration of their male counterparts. Even in children’s play, “... the husband coming home drunk and hitting his wife” (57).

When the protagonist leaves the convent and arrives at Madurai Bus Stand, she is terrified to stand there even for a few minutes. “If it is so difficult even to find a means of living, there is also another great difficulty, the difficulty I find in moving about in the outside world, alone. If a woman so much as stands alone by herself somewhere, all sorts of men gather around her, showing their teeth” (119). Woman is seen and treated as an entity, a source of pleasure, and in opprobrious terms too.

E.V.R. Periyar, in his book *Pen Yen Adimaiyaanal?* (Why Has Woman Become Slave?) lists out ten reasons for gender oppression. He says the concept of chastity, which is now attributed to women, should be held common for both the genders, and it should not be thrust upon people. There should be laws in favour of women. Women should come out of their ignorance. It is no longer their ornament. He questions the concept of love and insists on the union of a male and a female-only with mutual consent. He encourages women to free themselves from marriages that do not give them happiness and fulfillment. He also promotes re-marriage

for women. He cites examples from religious books and the lives of Gods. According to Periyar, the word prostitution, which is associated with women alone, is contrived to make women slaves. Women should be given a share in the familial property as this will enable them economic independence. Finally, he says that the concept of masculinity should disappear, and only then will there be true liberation for women.

These concepts of E.V.R Periyar, though, if followed, may bring women liberation, are not complete by themselves unless the concept of education for women is imbibed in it. It is only through education that women can be independent—both economically and intellectually. Periyar insists on that too.

## VI

Now the question arises “How the Dalit woman crossed these barriers of hegemony?” All men are equal before God and law. But some are more equal than the others. Dalit women experience this inequality in many forms throughout their lives. As a representative Dalit woman, Bama talks of the myriad forces that push them down and try to keep them under their feet. There are oppressions from all corners that suffocate her. She has to face oppression as a Dalit, as a woman, as an economically backward person, and as a Tamilian. The way she chooses to come out of all these oppressions is education. It is education that helps her to reach the outer world, helps her to aspire to the development and salvation of her community, helps her to liberate herself and raise her voice for her people. From her school days, her brother has been insisting on the importance of education because he sees it as the only solution for their chronic agony. He has experienced the dignity of education once in the library in his village. He tells her, “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” (17-18). She takes it to heart as she is aware of the plight of the Dalits in the society. She also realizes that it is due to the lack of education that Dalits are not able to break these barriers that are in the way of their progress. The Dalits are also very well aware that they are subjugated by the ‘higher class’ because they are economically backward. Money brings not only comfort and luxury but also respect. Education is a means to earn money. Being conscious of this fact, Bama resorts to education for an elevation in life and to enable herself to elevate the lives of the children of the Dalit community. She says:

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... because I had the education because I had the ability, I dared to speak up for myself; if I didn't care a toss about caste. Whatever the situation, I held my head high. And I completed whatever I took up, successfully. ... In this way, because of my education alone I managed to survive among those who spoke the language of caste-difference and discrimination. (22)

She chooses to be a teacher so that she will be able to educate poor children. She enters into a convent and accepts the religious order to serve the poor. When she finds that place to be unfit for her purpose, or rather, when she discovers that it does not allow her to carry out her mission of serving the poor, she leaves it against all the odds. She is not sure what awaits her in the world outside. She is not sure what the future holds for her. She is not sure how her family will receive her. She is not married. She does not possess any job. She has to live alone after her parents. All these challenges are there in front of her. But, still, she stands firm in her decision to leave the convent. The only wealth she possesses is her education. With this in hand, she has become what she is today, a renowned writer and a representative feminist of her community. Her voice, which was not paid heed to, is now listened to everywhere. She, who was insulted and looked down on because she was a Tamil, is now a treasured Tamil writer all over the literary world. She, who was despised because she was a Dalit, is loved by the lovers of literature. She, who was subjugated and dominated by the other gender because she was a woman, is now celebrated as a Dalit feminist. She can achieve this because of her steadfast perseverance, undaunted courage, never-

diminishing determination, enlightening education, unwavering dedication, thirst for liberation, and her love for humanity. She has a positive approach and outlook, which is evident in the opening positive lines of *Karukku*, “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” (1). This positive energy drives her throughout her life.

## VII

*Karukku* is a critique of the socio-cultural subjugation and the gender ‘othering’ of the Dalit women. It is an expression of the collective consciousness of the Dalit community and women. As Bama has said in *Karukku*, it means palm leaf, which has sharp separated edges and is like a double-edged sword. It hurts who holds it. It may also be interpreted as referring to ‘karu,’ which means embryo, a seed—waiting for the befitting and perfect time to sprout, to emerge anew. Dalit women, too, are like an embryo, a seed waiting to bloom, waiting to grow. They are in their breeding period, sleeping under cover of autumn, waiting for their spring, in a while grooming themselves befitting their future, fighting against all forms of subjugation. They stand testimony to Hemmingway’s words, “A man can be destroyed but not defeated” (91).

As K. Sareen Raj has written in his article “Exploring Dalit Christian Autobiography: A Perspective on Bama’s *Karukku*,” “*Annihilation of Caste* written by Ambedkar emphasizes on the need to destroy the religious notions on which caste is founded. Dalits have been deprived of religious, economic, political, and social equality from the beginning. They became untouchables in their own land, succumbing to the onslaught of the repressive system” (75). There are laws in the IPC formed by Dr B.R. Ambedkar for the uplift of the Dalits. There have been so many amendments after that for the betterment of Dalits. There is a separate quota allotted for the marginalized for entry into educational institutions and jobs. But, despite all these, there is still segregation, subjugation, and social and economic oppressions on Dalits and gender oppression on Dalit women as on all women; the Dalit women being oppressed thrice, or even four times—as Dalits, as women, as the poor, and as the illiterate.

Dalits’ battle against oppression will continue until the caste system and gender discrimination vanishes from the surface of the globe. There cannot be a better concluding touch than the words of Lakshmi Holmstrom:

There is, in this writing, a very powerful sense of the self and the community as Dalit, which rejects outright the notion of varna and which, on the other hand, refuses to ‘Sanskritize,’ to evaluate Dalit lifestyle according to mainstream Hindu values. There is also at the same time a powerful engagement with history, of change, of changing notions of identity and belonging. Bama captures a moment that contains a paradox: she seeks an identity, but also seeks a change which means an end to that identity. (xix)

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