

Casteism, Religion, and the Issue of Othering in Bama's *Karruku*- The Subaltern Speaks

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Abstract

The phenomenon of suppression of the upper castes can be subverted through subaltern voices like that of Bama. Her novel *Karukku* first published in 1992, becomes an expression of protest against the odds done to her community. Bama depicts the hypocrisies of religious institutions which claim to regard everyone as equal in the eyes of God. She shows the plight people had to face in their daily lives through her works. She pinpoints the fact that Dalits and especially Dalit girls are deprived of education. The overall marginalisation and subjugation faced by the Dalit communities come to the surface through her works. Though she wrote in Tamil, however, her works are translated into various languages. Her writing style is hailed by scholars to have defied the mainstream approach and is rooted in soil. Thus the metaphorical connection between the word Dalit (Marathi meaning is rooted in the soil) and her works is evident. The issue of repression and poverty amongst these communities also comes to the forefront. This book, therefore, becomes the testimonio of a collective struggle experienced by a community. The exploitation and oppression of Dalits can be explored through various instances Bama documents in her testimonio.

Keywords: Marginalisation, caste, oppression, testimonio, subaltern voice,

Introduction

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 wisdom, beauty, dignity? What do we lack?" (Bama 24)

The discussion of the marginalised section, the Dalits has taken up momentum in the past couple of decades. The situation of Dalit women is furthermore grave. Race, caste, class and gender become the parameters of labelling someone as the "other" and critical areas through which people are subjugated. In India, Dalits are marginalized because of the *varna*

based on the caste system that has existed since time immemorial. Bama Faustina Mary Fatima Rani popularly known as Bama is a celebrated Dalit author who expresses herself and her experiences through her writings. Bama's autobiographical novel *Karruku* is the story of a girl's lived experiences and survival. The English translation is by Lakshmi Holmstrom which was published in 2001. Her other works include *Sangati* (1994) and *Vanmam* (2002). Born into the Paraiyar community in Tamil Nadu, she mirrors the plight of the people right from the soil. She was a nun for around seven years but the sorry state of affairs left her shocked. She felt the widescale oppression against both in the nunnery and later on in the convent school she taught. The separate behaviour of higher caste Christians and lower caste Christians left her anxious. Encouraged by a friend she started writing about her experiences. She wrote in a dialect of Tamil which is exclusive to her community. This drew criticism from a segment of society; however, her choice of language and the particular dialect has in turn subverted the norm. The winner of the Crossword Book Award, *Karukku* captures the ostracism in its core. Her works focus on discrimination based on gender and caste. Bama talks about gender oppression within the Dalit community explicitly in her novel *Sangati* (1996). Dalit women are also often forced into prostitution, further, Dalit women are more sexually harassed in police stations when compared to their upper-caste counterparts. Bama's works deal with the sexual exploitation of Dalit girls as well. In India, Dalit feminist writers like Anna Bhai Sathé, Baby Halder, Baby Kumble etc, have also contributed to the domain.

Dalits are a union of castes in the lowest rungs of social hierarchy that stand condemned as untouchables. Despite the guarantee of rights and laws to prevent atrocities against them, the Dalits continue to be the victims of social discrimination and oppression across the country. They often get ignored, deserted, unnoticed, and treated with indifference and apathy. A few decades ago, the situation was much worse and the Bama's works explore this aspect of women's subjugation. Bama says, "Many say that Dalits are supposed to live like this and that. Dalits are impure people. They are drunkards. They have no culture. Any interaction with them will defile the body and souls". (Interview in Outlook) It is important to look at how women negotiate their identities of the "other" inside and outside their groups in the context of gender and within a patriarchal society. The historical suppression of people based on their caste and race assume a paradigm of gender discrimination. Women's quest for identity and liberation has been some of the key areas around which such movements revolve. They have been exploited sexually innumerable times and the crimes against Dalit

women often do not get reported. The men of their community often fail to acknowledge their rights and contributions to the struggle against oppression. Moreover, economic issues have also added to the struggles of underprivileged women and have differentiated Dalit feminists from upper-caste and urban feminists in India. Bama's works focus on the oppression, subjugation and exploitation of Dalit women. Dalit women are easy targets of non-Dalit men for sexual harassment, and mental torture. She deals with this enigma of coming to terms with fake notions and beliefs that are often thrust upon the girl by the dominant caste. She also holds up the mirror to the fundamental issue of the kind of education made available for the girls from the oppressed section of society, the price paid to be educated and the need to overcome the manipulative male-dominant society by devising an alternate history. Very often the girl comprehends the world around her, in silence. As she grows up into a woman, she recoils into her silent alcoves to mark her protest. In the context of Tamil Dalit literature, Bama attempts to question, certain upper-caste mainstream ideas. Acclimatizing these ideas and enforcing them in her works, she voices not only herself but stands as an expression of subversion through her philanthropic works as well.

Casteism, Religion and the Other in *Karukku*

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...If you are born into a low caste, every moment of your life is a moment of struggle" (Bama 26- 27)

Living life is a challenge in many ways for Dalits, be it any aspect of life. They never enjoy freedom in its right sense. Dalits are always under the massive weight of caste. Aggressive attitudes of the upper castes are rampant even in some parts of present-day India. Bama shows through her work that the church and its activities play an important role in the community life of Dalits in modern India, especially in Tamil Nadu. Dalit life is agonizingly aching. Burnt by experiences to the deepest chores of their hearts; the Dalits did not manage to find a room in peace in their world. Bama's *Karukku* discusses various forms of violent oppression of Dalits, especially the Paraiyar caste. A significant aspect of the work is the oppression of Dalit Christians at the hands of the church. Surprisingly Christianity a foreign religion to the Indian soil intermingled and adopted the casteist aspect of Indian Society. A

religion which is supposed to consider everyone equal in the eyes of God discriminates against Dalits which directly opposes what any religion believes and preaches. While Christianity unlike Hinduism does not recognize caste divisions, churches tend to be pro-caste in their dealings. *Karukku* depicts how Dalits are not allowed to sing in the church choir. The book surfaces instances of marginalisation and depicts the hollowness of society. People from such communities were forced to sit separately, away from the upper-caste Christians. They were not allowed to bury their people in the church cemetery within the village. They are compelled to make different arrangements for themselves outside the periphery of the village and were made to perform their rituals in that graveyard. Time and again Bama has talked about these instances. In an interview, she reiterates,

When foreign missionaries came to India they treated us equally. Things took an ugly turn after the Indians took over. So we became Christians, but the caste did not go off. Even today Dalits are not allowed to sit with other castes inside the churches in the Kanchipuram district. Even the graveyards are separated. The Paraiyars who converted to Christianity in order to escape from the caste oppression in Hinduism were greatly shocked to experience the oppression within the church. Further, reservation benefits were not granted to Dalit Christians as theoretically, Christianity does not recognize caste. The government's reservation policies fail to take into account the gap between the belief and practice and Dalit Christians face the brunt of it. (Bama Interview in Outlook)

Bama expresses dismay over the excruciating and tormenting state of the Dalits. Some might have converted to Christianity to escape the ostracism of casteism, however, conversion did not ease the painful situation of the Dalits. The non-Dalit Christians never assimilate the Dalit Christians into their fold. In India, casteism is deeply rooted, and hence the religion might get converted however caste system prevails in the social hierarchy. These further increase caste subjugation and exploitation. *Karukku* brings to the surface the biases a Christian priest shows towards Dalit Christians. In an instance, he harps that the Dalits did it and not an upper caste child. Bama recalls and says, "The priest's first response was to say, "After all you are from the Cheri (Dalit neighbourhood). You might have done it. You must have done it". (17) Through her book Bama gives many instances of public humiliation that is rampant against Dalits and the stark insults they face due to their identities. She asks for the

betterment of these societies and ushers any form of assistance for the education of these downtrodden people. However, Bama, personally, is against the reservation system. She says,

Reservation actually dehumanizes us rather than solving our problems. It aggravates our situation. We are objects of contempt in public places. People say, he or she doesn't have any talent or merit. He or she has found a way in through a quota set aside for him. It shocks us to be addressed as scheduled castes and not as Dalits, as the former is derogatory." (Bama, Interview in Outlook)

A testimonial of the whole community- the Subaltern speaks

"Testimonio narratives are at once personal and public, singular and collective, autobiographical and biographical." (Nayar 239)

Testimony is sombre evidence as to the truth of a matter. The words "testimony" and "testify" both have a root in the Latin word 'testis', which is normally translated as "witness". Testimonio Literature comprises published narratives, autobiographical in nature, either oral or written and published. These are usually first-hand experiences of violence in war, victims of human rights abuse, oppression under dictatorships or similar situations of social subjugation. The Spanish term "testimonio", originated from Latin America, particularly in Chile and Argentina. Frederick Douglass's autobiography is widely considered as one of the earliest significant works in this genre. Testimonio literatures become the bridge between different histories and experiences of the marginalised experiences. It also serves as the canvas for portraying the suppression concerning race, ethnicity and nationality, gender and sexuality, age, class and other markers of varied identities and communities. Bama's *Karukku*, apart from being her autobiography, becomes the testimonio of a community. Armstrong writes, "Bama's shared testimonio typically unfolds her growing up story in episodes, and throughout she displays indomitable courage, conquering the dominant forces. (6)

Her personal experiences reveal the life that a Dalit has to lead in a caste-ridden society. It does not confine itself to the oppression and the harsh realities faced by Dalits. It elaborately describes the daily life, language, naming conventions, religion, culture, festivals, food habits, entertainment, games, teasing songs and kinship in the Paraya community. *Karukku* doesn't forget to focus on two essential aspects namely: caste, and religion that cause great pain in Bama's life. Bama has bitter experiences at school. One day Bama and her

friends were playing at school in the evening. At that moment somebody had stolen a coconut. The charge of theft falls on her. Everyone says that it was Bama who had taken the coconut. However, she was not guilty of doing it, but the headmaster bashed her severely. He scolded her in the name of caste. When she protested, the headmaster told her: “You the people of low caste like the manner you have...we cannot allow you inside this school. Stand outside” (Bama 16). The incident had left a scar on Bama and nerved her to the core. She has been embarrassed and insulted in front of all the children. Following the incident, she gets suspended from school. Noticing her sobbing, a teacher advised her to meet the Church priest for an apology letter. When she re-enters the classroom with the recommendation of the priest, the entire class strangely looks at her. She expresses, “When I entered the classroom, the entire class turned around to look at me, and I wanted to shrink into myself as I went and sat on my bench, still weeping”. (Bama17) It was a very humiliating incident. She was utterly shocked by listening to the caste name, particularly when she was not mature enough to understand why people called her names. Until that day she never felt the hegemonic structure of the caste system so intensely. She had never heard of untouchability until her third standard in school. That was the first time she comes across her community’s pathetic state. Hereby Bama decides to look out for means to uplift herself and her community from this existence of humiliation.

Bama, in *Karukku*, discusses the issue of education by presenting the harsh realities of the education available for a girl and highlights the heavy price they had to pay to be educated. She stresses the need to discard mainstream history that is thrust on marginalized groups. This can be looked at as an act of subversion from the dominated class. Bama portrays the poverty-stricken rural Dalit families that cause hindrances in the girl’s education. Through this book, she reveals the corruption involved in the educational system. Her personal experiences both as a nun and as a teacher get documented in her works. With *Karukku* she pens down the lived experiences of her community and this is how this work becomes a testimony of the community. She explores this book as her childhood memoir as well, which voices the joys and sorrows of her people. The book reflects the various events of her life. Born into a poor Dalit family, her grandmother and mother worked in the fields and in Naicker landlords’ households. She writes,

Both my grandmothers worked as servants for Naicker families... 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 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).

Despite the misery, she had a carefree childhood, for example, her brother, Raj Gauthaman, a celebrated writer, introduced her to the world of books and inspired her to write. While in college, she used to write poetry, but later turned to writing about her experiences in fiction. As a schoolteacher, Bama documents the oppression Dalit students and teachers faced. Bama, at the age of about 26, joined the nunnery to devote her life to the welfare of others. However, both in the seminary and later in the convent, Bama realized the grim truth concerning the education of Dalits and the frequent humiliation and oppression they face. Thus, after working for seven years, in 1992, Bama walked out of the convent. Her autobiography serves as a document which reveals the harsh realities of lived experiences of the Dalits of her community. Further, we can say that religion has had an influence on such communities. Though looked at as a way to escape from the caste hierarchy, Christianity and religion at large is unable to discard the age-old discrimination done to marginalised communities. Bama shows these conflicting issues in her work and initiates a saga to interrogate these complex issues. As a Subaltern, Bama depicts the marginalised community, the oppression she and her community faced. The work speaks volumes about the gender discrimination of Dalit girls and how women are neglected and deprived in such communities. She brings to limelight the social sufferings and injustices done to these sections of the society. Her testimonio can be looked as a social recognition that the society could not ignore.

Conclusion

Therefore, to conclude, we can say that Bama draws inspiration from the experiences of her life and attempts to universalize the experience of women as a whole. She expresses her anguish at the whole scenario. She draws sharp pictures which present the harsh realities that a Dalit girl faces and how often she is reminded and re-reminded of her being the “Other”. Bama’s primary focus has been to mirror the problems relating to the Dalit girl belonging to the deprived section of society. She tries to question her society for all the wrongs that have been done to her and her people. She showed immense courage in breaking this label of “Other” by attacking caste, religion, gender, and society as a whole. Further, a search for identity can also be traced in her work. She refused to let family, religion, caste or gender

muffle her voice in categorising her as the “other”. She is a more determined woman who loves telling her stories in her language and in her style. Bama through her work depicted various aspects of “Othering” a human being as well as a community. Through her writing, the subaltern speaks unabashedly and unapologetically!

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