

## **A Study of Bama's *Karukku* in the Light of Subalterneity**

**Dr M S Wankhede**

Associate Professor of English

Dhanwate National College, Nagpur (M. S.)

Bama's *Karukku* is an autobiographical sketch of its author's childhood experiences as a female, a Dalit and a Christian. It shows how the author is triple marginalized on caste, gender and religion. Befitting to the genre, it gives realistic picture of caste and gender discrimination. Autobiography, says Arjun Dangle, "is an expansion and extension of a societal description" (Gunasekaran 2009: xv). Linda R. Anderson opines that autobiography is a form of literature that presents the actual lives of authors. It is also a way to organize the story of a life that reflects on the past in order to better understand the present. It gives the realistic picture of its author's life and experiences. These views are apt to the present autobiography, which is the product of the Varna and caste system in India. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivok mentioned in the Subaltern Studies that the traces of the past that are left for the historian are, in fact, generated by the oppressive 'contract'. And it resulted in providing space of institutional dominance of high caste over the tribe, caste or village and same has been experienced by Bama.

Dalit literature itself is realistic; the product of 'lived experiences' of the untouchables and Bama's autobiography presents the social realism. Bama describes the facts in the life of Dalit women through her own experiences as a woman, a Dalit and a Christian. In other words, *Karukku* reflects the author's as well as her community's life. Gail Omvedt (1994) considers that Dalits are all those who are oppressed, all hill peoples, neo-Buddhists, labourers, destitute farmers, women, and all those who have been exploited politically, economically, or in the name of religion are Dalits (*Karukku*:x). Thus Dalit Literature is an umbrella term, which may be

substituted by subaltern studies. “The Dalit movement has emerged in response to the numerous injustices suffered, mostly in silence by Dalits for centuries” (Randhawa 2013:39). The efforts of Bama in presenting her autobiography are the product of her experiences as a Dalit-Christian-woman. In her essay “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography” Spivok says, subalterneity has to be taken “...in relation to histories of domination and exploitation rather than within the great modes of production narrative ...” (Guha 2010:330 Vol. VI). Caste dominance and caste exploitation have been working gravely in the Indian society. Dalit literature describes the factual life of dalits. Hence the Primary motive of Dalit literature is the liberation of dalits who have been the victims of caste system in India for ages. Sharankumar Limbale (2010:25) says, “Dalit writers persisted in writing and making every possible effort to be heard”. Although Dalits found inspiration from the movement of Blacks in the distant land of North America, Dalit Literature and Black Literature cannot be compared, asserts Gangdhar Pantawane, a well-known litterateur and critics in Dalit literature. On caste and Dalit literature, Randhawa says:

“Dalits have been a part of the Hindu society and yet were outside it in the sense in which they were marginalized and inescapably reduced to servitude. This gives the dalit an opportune position to question and critique caste Hindu and Indian aesthetics. The origin of all art can be located in religion and it was religion that was responsible for the most inhuman exploitation of the dalits” (2013:40).

Marginalization of dalits is made on the basis of caste and under the cover of religion and god. Phule, Shahu, Ambedkar’s life and mission provided the intellectual and literary foundation for Dalit writing. Some similarities are there in dalit and Black literature. Limbale expresses, “African-American literature is referred to in the context of Dalit literature. But Blacks are not untouchable. Untouchability is denial of humanity. This makes a big difference between these two literatures (2010:101). African Americans have been badly treated because of their colour but Dalits have been suffering a lot because of caste and untouchability. Dalits are subhuman but not Africans. Dalit ought to be referred as “subaltern”. Subalterneity refers to such people who are socially, politically and geographically outsiders. Dalit literature questions the mainstream literary theories and upper caste ideologies and explores the neglected aspects of life. Ranjit

Guha asserts, "... subalternity was materialized by the structure of property, institutionalized by law, sanctioned by religion and made tolerable— and even desirable —by tradition" (2010:1 Vol. I). Dr. Ambedkar provided opportunity to the dumb-for-ages people to struggle for their human rights. So, shame, anger, sorrow and resolute hope are the substance of Dalit literature. As a result the expressions in this literature are sharp. Dalit literature effectively inspires masses for assertion, protest and mobilization. The emergence of Dalit literature has brought a profound change in Indian society. Limbale says:

Dalit literature is a new and distinct stream of Indian literature. It has contributed to Indian literature fresh experiences, a new sensitivity and vocabulary, a different protagonist, an alternate vision, and a new chemistry of suffering and revolt" (2010:17).

The Caste system in India has effectively blocked the participation of majority of Indians from making significant contribution to many fields and it has been still affecting the 'broken men' even after the constitutional provisions. Caste plays a very cruel role in the stratification of Indian society. Andre Beteille says, Caste, "may be defined as a small and named group of persons characterized by endogamy, hereditary membership, and a specific style of life which sometimes includes the pursuit by tradition of a particular occupation and is usually associated with a more or less distinct ritual status in a hierarchical system" (2012: 45). The roots of Dalit Literature are there in the caste system. Before its emergence there was no representation of Dalit characters in the mainstream literature, just few exceptions. Dr. Ambedkar says that Caste ideology has graded untouchables and placed them at the bottom of a hierarchical 'ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt.' It is caste that has created a unique case of ethnicity that exists nowhere else in the world but in India only. Moreover women are in secondary position as compared to men. In her essay on "The Woman Question: Perspectives and Challenges" Indu Swami says, "The chief argument of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is also that in patriarchy women have been forced to occupy a secondary position in relation to men, a position comparable in many respects to that of racial minorities in spite of the fact that

they constitute at least one-half of the human race (2010: 1). Dalit women are subordinate to Dalit men.

Dalits want to cross all linguistic, religious and cultural differences to form Dalit ethnicity. They want to have certain solidarity for them so that they could show it with each other among all the Dalit communities. Parth Chatterjee says, “It is now widely recognized among social anthropologists of India that the religious beliefs and practices of subordinate caste groups are quite often based on principles that are contradictory to those of Brahmanical religion (Guha 2010:168 Vol. VI). Bama’s writing celebrates Dalit women’s subversive strategies to overcome their oppression. Her writing is an activist intervention. All Dalit writing is to be perceived as political writing, as a strategy of resistance to social oppression. In her essay on “Dalit Women’s Movement: Retrospect and Prospect” Rekha Ojha explains, “Dalit women see their liberation as linked to the solution of caste oppression. Such a conception is based on the community and not individual since the Dalit women feel a part of the community” (2012: 132). Bama’s contribution to Dalit literature is significant in terms of rules. Her use of Dalit spoken idiom as her narrative voice gives a distinct resonance to her writing. The author-narrator and the characters use the same non-standardized, spoken Dalit vocabulary. Bama’s writing celebrates Dalit women’s lives, their wit, their humour, their resilience and their creativity. In his essay on “Dalit Feelings and Aesthetic Detachment” R. G. Jadhav says, “A proper analysis of Dalit literature may not be possible if we start with the prior assumption that social awareness and an aesthetic outlook are present in it in a natural way” (Dangle 2009: 304). The main purpose of Dalit writing is to seek human rights and abolish injustices against them. So Limbale remarks: “Dalit writers see their writing as a means of human liberation” (2010, 35). Dalit literature is not meant for the sake of literature or for entertainment but for the life’s sake so that the world would know the pitiable conditions of untouchables.

The collusion of patriarchy with caste hegemony is a harsher and more unjust suppression of Dalit women is shown in Bama’s *Karukku*. Dalit women are shown as hardworking, courageous

women who work ceaselessly at home and outside and manage the household single-handedly when their men-folk collectively especially the men of a particular family are rounded up by the police over trumped up charges. The community bonding, the solidarity among neighbours in a cheri (Dalit colony) are valorized. Despite dual pressures of work at home and in the fields or workplace, Dalit women are forced to put up with enormous violence at male hands. Dalit men abuse their women no less than the upper caste men. Patriarchy plays a significant role in literatures in India and Dalit patriarchy is an important subject of concern in Tamil Dalit literature, too. *Karukku*, the first Dalit Tamil autobiography by Bama discusses oppression borne by Dalits at the hands of state (police), panchayat council, the upper castes and at the church. The author also highlights how Dalit women are oppressed further by Dalit men at home. A significant aspect of this work pertains to the oppression of Dalit Christians at the hands of the church. Institutionalized religion discriminates against Dalits in direct contravention. Christianity does not recognize caste divisions but church in India is casteist in its dealings. *Karukku* depicts how Dalit Christians are not allowed to sing in the church choir. They are forced to sit separately, away from the upper caste Christians. They are not allowed to bury their dead in the cemetery within the village, behind the church, but are made to use a different graveyard beyond the outskirts. The Paraiyars who converted to Christianity in order to escape casteist oppression at the hands of orthodox Hinduism are shown to be greatly disillusioned as they are not able to escape cabinet oppression within the church-fold. *Karukku* points out that the church distorts the real image and teachings of Christ and preaches docility, meekness and subservience to the faithful while suppressing the radical, liberal teachings of Jesus. Bama requests Dalits to educate themselves, read the Bible themselves and recognize Jesus as a defender of the oppressed. Dalit writers experiment in terms of genres and expand the limits of literary language to include spoken, conversational, earthy vocabulary of the marginalized. Their use of folklore, legend, myths, swearwords render their narratives closer to everyday life. The violence that pervades Dalit lives invades their literary expression and they trounce hegemonic, traditional, mainstream literary and aesthetic parameters and surge ahead to formulate a fresh, alternative, innovative, radical literary idiom.

Dalit literature is always marked by revolt and negativism. It is intimately linked with hopes for freedom of a group of people who as ‘untouchables’ are unfortunate bunches of social, economic and cultural inequality. Dalit literary movement therefore is just not a literal movement but is the logo of change and revolution. Dalit literature is nothing but the literary expression of this consciousness. Dalit literature is the forum and the medium of expression of the experiences of the communities that have been excommunicated, marginalized, exploited and humiliated for ages in the Indian caste-ridden Hindu society. Dalit literature reflects Dalit experience and sensibility, attempting to define and assert Dalit identity from a primarily Dalit point of view. An important issue in Tamil Dalit literature is dual oppression of Dalit women on the basis of caste and gender. Dalit women are doubly marginalized. This self-reflexivity of Dalit discourse stands out as a distinctive mark of Tamil Dalit literature and *Karukku* is no exception to it. Even poets, play wrights, short-story writers and novelists repeatedly foreground the gender-caste intersection in Dalit lives in their respective genres. In all genres Dalit women characters are portrayed as lively, vibrant, earthy, witty, hard-working women who have inner strength to face crisis and work tirelessly at home and outside. Dalit women are always victimized at home as well as outside. Their songs, dances, community cooking at weddings bring out their innate talent. Dalit women’s sexuality is an important domain of creative or critical concern in Tamil Dalit literature. Partha Chatterjee quoted in his essay “Caste, Subaltern and Consciousness” that “Common sense is not something rigid and immobile, but is continually transforming itself, enriching itself with scientific ideas, and with philosophical opinions which have entered ordinary life” (Guha 2010:171 Vol. VI). Bama’s very ordinary life depicted in *Karukku* has made her a woman of high importance.

*Karukku* achieved a specific identity having written by a Dalit-Christian-woman. Dalit movements dominated mostly by men had a tendency to sideline issues concerning Dalit women who were compelled to voice their misery doubled up due to caste and gender discrimination. The result was the rise of Dalit Feminism. As an exponent of Dalit feminism Bama has found in *Karukku* the right space to articulate the travails and sufferings of Dalit women. *Karukku* means

Palmyra leaf and Bama finds many congruities between her strife filled life and the saw-edged karukku. In short, *Karukku* narrates what it is to be a Dalit and a woman. Bama shows how a Dalit woman is a Dalit amongst the Dalits. She is thus doubly oppressed by her caste and gender. In her case her position is further endangered by her existence as a Dalit Christian. Hence *Karukku* focuses on three essential forces that cuts across and sears Bama's life, namely— caste, gender and religion. Bama describes her bad experience: “When I went home for holidays, if there was a Naicker woman sitting next to me in the bus, she'd immediately ask me which place I was going, to what street. As soon as I said the cheri she did get up and move off to another seat. Or she did tell me to move elsewhere. As if I would go! I did settle into my seat even more firmly. They did prefer then to get up and stand all the way rather than sit next to me or to any other woman from the Cheri. They did be polluted, apparently. This happened to me several times” (18). Bama felt much pained for this experience. This clearly indicates that upper castes do not want to have any touch with the Dalits. Even at school, the class teacher or PT teacher would ask all the Harijan children to stand up at assemble or during lessons, was a very humiliating experience. The term coined for untouchable by Mahatma Gandhi as ‘Harijan’ is certainly very humiliating and derogatory for the Dalit community.

Bama herself confesses that there were many significant things that she chose could not recall in *Karukku*. She herself was the witness to many violent incidents related to caste conflicts. But she left them out from her first book because she felt that would deviate from the issues that she wanted *Karukku* to focus on. Veena Das in her essay “Subaltern Perspective” argues, “However the consciousness of ourselves as colonial subjects is itself modified by our own experience and by the relation we establish to our intellectual tradition” (Guha 2010:310 Vol. VI). Colonial life provided an opportunity for the Dalits to take education. The religious institutions, Varna and caste had denied education for Dalits. The story narrated in *Karukku* is not Bama's story alone but it is the depiction of a collective trauma of her community. She just tries to freeze it forever in one book so that there will be something physical to remind people of the atrocities committed on a section of the society for ages. When she returned from the convent she had a very difficult

time. She was facing all sorts of problems. She was treated like an outcaste. She faced poverty, apathy and even scorn from near and dear ones, too. In *Karukku* Bama depicts the wrongs done in the name of caste and the meaningless violence that it instigates. Bama thinks that Dalit consciousness can be illustrated by people from other castes. There is no hard and fast rule. But their narratives can be of sympathetic attitude and not the outcome of direct experiences of Dalits. They cannot experience the pains of untouchability. In the past literature was the personal field of a few from a particular segment but Dr. Ambedkar's movement brought about some changes and emerged Dalit literature. Bama suggests that casteism is everywhere even among writers and academicians. Many people talk about casteism, write about it, attend seminars and lecture about removing it but rarely has anyone shown any genuine intention to remove it.

Bama is one of the finest contemporary Indian writers and a powerful voice of Dalit consciousness. She won the crossword prize in 2000 for *Karukku*. Her father worked as a sepoy in the Indian Army. Therefore they were little better-off than other Dalit households who still live in extreme penury. Bama has other identities as writer, teacher, woman, Christian, Tamil but her Dalit self shapes and brings together all her other identities. Her mother, an illiterate *coolie*, supported her with sensitive advice. Her brother encouraged Bama to reach for everything almost impossible for a young Dalit woman. The afterword added to this autobiography is a kind of suggestion that suggests her zeal for liberation of Dalits and her sympathy for them. She says, "I have met several people who work with zeal for the single objective of Dalit liberation. And it has been a great joy to see Dalits aiming to live with self-respect, proclaiming aloud, 'Dalit enrdu sollada; talai nimirndu nillada': Say you are a Dalit, lift up your head and stand tall" (106). Bama opines that women writers have another tale to tell as Dalit women writers have double marginalization to narrate. India is a male-dominated society and accepting woman as an equal to man surely hurts the ego of males. She feels that Poona Pact has done a great harm to Dalits and women. This could have given them an opportunity to become the instrument of change. The purpose of Bama's writing is to liberate Dalits, women and children. Bama regrets that although many Dalits became Christians, but their caste did not go off. Even today Dalits are not allowed



to sit with other castes inside the churches in Kanchipuram district and even the graveyards are separated on the basis of caste.

In spite of triple marginalization and subjugation, Bama advises all her community members to hold their heads high to achieve respect they deserve as human beings. After centuries of silence, when the Dalit writers felt the need to express themselves, they could only turn inward and talk about their own experiences. Autobiography thus became a fitting vehicle for this expression. The portrayal of the life of the Dalit individual was representative of the entire community. ‘A public rather a private gesture, ‘me-ism’ gives way to ‘our-ism’ and superficial concerns about ‘individual subject’ usually give way to ‘the collective subjection of the group.’ Dalits no longer consider themselves inferior to the members of the other caste and feel equal. Dalit writing has placed the Dalits on the tracks of self-realization and equality. Bama faces lot of problems because of lower caste but she fights courageously: “Anyway I finished there and went to a different college in order to take a B. Ed. degree: It was the same story there too. Yet because I had the education because I had the ability I dared to speak up for myself: I did not care a toss about caste. Whatever the situation, I held my head high. And I completed whatever I took up, successfully” (20). Throughout her life Bama has been struggling hard. She says: “If you are born into a low caste every moment of your life is a moment of struggle” (23). In the last part of the autobiography, Bama describes her sadness and sorrows. She retorts:

Now, many thoughts come crowding to me I am like a bird whose wings were broken. After its wings have been broken it is protected only if it stays within its cage, but if it comes out it can only flap its wings uselessly unable to fly. And that is the state in which I am now (104).

Bama is not frightened and hopes to fly again like a bird. She expects that there would be strength in her wings. She says:

I don’t know when my wings will heal and gain enough strength so that I too will be able to fly again. Just as people throw sticks and stones to wound a wingless

bird, many people have wounded me with their words and deeds. Yet I know I am moving forward slowly step by step (104).

Bama presents sorrows and pangs not only of her but also of her community, Parayar, an untouchable caste in Tamil Nadu. It eschews the confessional mode and avoids a linear narrative. Bama narrates, “I have met many friends during the course of life’s journey. They have shared my sorrows and helped me in all things. They have inspired me to engage in my work with close attention, with an awareness of my responsibility, and an understanding of the community’s needs. They have helped me to identify my own strengths, and made me put them to use. Many Dalit women, for whom toil is their very life-breath, who lead vigorous lives in spite of all their weariness and anxieties, have been a great inspiration as well as a constant help to me. I have been restored by the love, friendship, support and advice of all these people, and enabled me with fresh courage and resolution” (106).

*Karukku* is a painful journey that is open-ended and many questions are left unanswered, though it is not a “complete success story”, like a conventional autobiography. It is a revelation of the bitter reality of the social ills confronted by a Dalit woman and her community. *Karukku* is a reflection of different themes like caste, gender discrimination, religion, recreation and education, etc. Through these perspectives Bama gives us a clear picture of the caste oppression at the hands of the upper castes and within the Catholic Church. Bama becomes a nun to fulfill her aspirations by devoting her life for the cause of the uplift of the Dalits and salvation of them from all sorts of oppression. But soon she realizes that the Catholic institutions are filled with caste prejudice and hatred. The narrative tells us Bama’s inner quest for self-discovery and the resultant courage which forces her to move away from the life of a nun to live “the life of a Dalit woman.” Bama did not care for anyone who supported her or deserted her during her painful days. After the publication of *Karukku*, she was a target of criticism from her own people as they felt that she has revealed their ugliness to others and degraded them. She could not go to her village, as they were in a mood to beat her but she felt “I have courage; I have a certain pride” and “a desire that I should live”. This shows her optimism. She could not take the resistance that

came from her own people. A few Dalit boys understood *Karukku* correctly. Those Dalit boys explained to those who were unable to read *Karukku* and those who misunderstood it. Then they really got into the spirit of the book and felt that their lives should be written and heard by everybody. Bama's *Karukku* is original Tamil autobiography translated into English by Laxmi Holmstrom, which provided opportunity to the readers all over India and the world to know the status of Dalits. This suggests that India is not free from caste and gender discrimination.

Bama's village has beautiful mountains, tanks, fields and woods but all this is not just "nature" but it is the hard business of making a living of Dalits. The fields are there to be worked in and the mountain woods to be searched for firewood. The village which extends just up to the bus terminus, "as if our entire world ended there", is divided into clear pockets of caste. There is the settlement of Nadars, who climb Palmyra palms for a living. There are the Koravars who sweep streets. The leather-working Chakkiliyars, the Kusavars, who make earthenware pots, the Pallas, the Thevars, the Chettiyars, the Aasaaris, the Udaiyaars and Bama's own community of agricultural labourers, the Parayas have their settlements. The clear division of castes existed there in the village of Bama. Wherever Bama went, she knew what untouchability was! The Naicker women would pour drinking water from a height of four feet into their cupped hands, eating leftovers from the Naicker kitchens were all examples of caste discrimination for Bama. Even she was being taunted, on the streets or in school, as a Paraya. She knew what it was like to be thought of as contemptible as a "Harijan". As a child at school Bama was burning with anger when she "saw that all the menial jobs were done by Dalits who were abused all the time and treated in a shameful and degrading way" (23). She was also pained "to see even older people trembling, shrinking like small children, frightened by the power and wealth that the Sisters had, burying their pride and self-respect, running to do the menial tasks assigned to them" (23). It is apparent that Bama is not only marginalized as a Dalit and as a woman but as a Christian. She was shocked to know that the caste factor worked there in the convents. She says, "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 somewhere" (22). This surprised Bama

with shock that “this convent was not without its caste division” (22). With pain Bama says, “because of this one issue of caste alone, we are forced to suffer pain and humiliation” (24). Though Bama studied hard, yet no change occurred there in the eyes of the teachers or the hostel-warden or the people in the bus or the village. Even if she got the best marks in class, even if she was determined to earn respect, she was only a Paraya. It is indicative that *dharma* and caste is above *karma*. Perhaps it was this growing realization that Bama would never “transcend” her identity as a Dalit woman though she embraced Christianity and became a nun. This is nothing but the influence of the caste system in India that has affected Christians who came into contact of this system. Bama hoped to teach in a village school to make Dalit children aware of their subhuman status so that they would revolt against this injustice. But the religious order had other plans for her and all her thoughts seemed to be useless because of caste as she found the caste discrimination in the church. After seven years’ stay in an unreal world Bama left the convent, with a question “how to live”. Then she had to live in isolation for some period she had to do something that would help her to survive. She began writing about her childhood; about being Dalit. Her intention was to bring change in the life of Dalits by seeking their human rights. *Karukku* refers to a double-edged stem of the palm leaf that represents the life of Dalits in Indian society. The serrated edges of the leaf recalls Bama not only the “social cuts” people like her got every day, but also how they had to cut through this oppressive system. When Bama was invited to the village for the erection of an Ambedkar statue, she became aware of the Ambedkarite philosophy that helped her know her life’s mission to fight against the “worst injustice”. Bama got a philosophical message from the Buddha and Babasaheb to become the instrument of change. She knew that none would come forward to bring change in the life of Dalits, they themselves have to do it following the Buddha’s message: “Be thy own light”. She affirms: “We who are asleep must open our eyes and look about us” (25). Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar advised the oppressed to revolt against injustices. Likewise Bama tries to encourage her people saying: “We must not accept the injustice of our enslavement by telling ourselves it is our fate, as if we have no feelings; we must dare to stand up for change” (25). This argument by Bama supports for the liberty and equality in addition to humanity. Further she adds,

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 or 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 (25).

The institutions called ‘caste’ and ‘Verna’ are more harmful than terrorism. Terrorism kills few innocent or culprit people but caste has been killing humanity for ages. So Bama, like the Buddha, wants to tell her community “liberty, equality, fraternity and justice” which can create an ‘ideal society’. Bama’s anger is quite visible from these words: “Are Dalits not human beings? Do they not have common sense? Do they not have such attributes such as a sense of honour and self-respect? Are they without any wisdom, beauty, dignity? What do we lack? They treat us in whatever way they choose, as if we are slaves who don’t even possess human dignity” (24). If Dalits want to get answer to these questions, they have to peep into themselves. They have to struggle to bring change in their life. They must not rely on anyone for their prosperity and happiness. It sounds like the message of Dr. Ambedkar who used to say ‘make the slaves aware of their slavery so that they would be ready for revolt.’

The caste factor in Indian society works for degradation. Caste is so attached to man that even after death it does not get annihilated. The cemetery in Christianity has the label of caste too. It is very astonishing for Bama so she says, “The upper-caste Christians had their own cemetery” (25). This indicates how the caste affects the world of others than the world of the Hindus. Bama’s experiences as a Dalit, a woman and a Christian make the account of her autobiography, *Karukku* as on all the three counts she has suffered a lot. She narrates her experiences. All girl children in Dalit community had to do all sorts of work. “It was always girl children who had to look after all the chores at home” (45). She adds: “When I was studying in the third class, I hadn’t yet heard people speak openly of untouchability. But I had already seen, felt, experienced and been humiliated by what it is” (11). During her schooling she had bitter experiences but she somehow “managed to survive among those who spoke the language of caste-difference and discrimination” (20). About her experience in the convent Bama very shockingly expresses:

“They all go about filled with caste-hatred. Why even the nuns and priests, who claim that their hearts are set upon service to God, certainly discriminate according to caste” (24). Caste becomes apprehensive when it comes in the contact of all those who never knew anything of caste. Bama was quite comfortable in the convent so far material facilities were concerned. “Yes, there was every comfort and convenience there. One could have stayed there comfortably, with enough to eat, clothes to wear and the chance to travel to different places. But I began to think, soon after I entered the convent, Chi, is this all there is to the life of renunciation? Is there an understanding of poverty here?” (67). Bama was battered and bruised in the convent so she “left the convent and went home, utterly weary and dispirited” (67). She was upset for some time. When she left the convent, there was nothing for her— no job, no clothes to wear and nothing to eat. She was in a conflict for some time but she gained courage. She says:

For, 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 (104).

Bama felt that it was better to lead a life of hardship with shedding tears than wearing a deceitful smile. Mini Krishnan says that *Karukku* is “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” (v). Bama has exposed certain aspects of Indian society revolving around Caste. All her life experiences make Mini Krishnan say: “Dalit art forms grow out of an ideology of freedom from oppression and they need wider recognition and understanding” (v). All the critics of Dalit literature should take a note of it. “Dalit literature is life-affirming literature. All the strands of this literature are tied to life. It is the clear assumption of the Dalit writer that: ‘My literature is my life, and I write for humanity’” (Limbale 2010:105). It becomes clear that Bama discards one religious community to join another ‘religious’ community. In short Bama narrates in *Karukku* her life experiences as a woman, a Dalit woman and a Christian. All her experiences are related to caste hegemony, patriarchy and gender discrimination, which can give her readers

a message to fight for their human rights. She gives voice to the experiences of exploitation, humiliation and starvation of the Dalits.

**References:**

- Agnihotri, S. Lata (2012). *Dalit Women in India*. Delhi: Navyug Books
- Ambedkar, B. R. (2014). *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches* Vol. 1, 3, 5, 7 & 11. New Delhi: Govt. of India
- Bama (2000). *Karukku*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. New Delhi: Oxford University Press
- Dangle, Arjun (ed.) (2009). *Poisoned Bread*. Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan
- Guha, Ranjit (2010). *Subaltern Studies I & VI: Writing on South Asian History and Society*. New Delhi: OUP
- Limbale, Sharanhumar (2010). *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*. New Delhi: OUP
- Ojha, Rekha (2012). *Dalit Women in India*. New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House
- Omvedt, Gail (2008). *Dalit Vision*. New Delhi: Orient Longman
  
- Randhawa, Habir Singh (2013). *Dalit Literature*. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons
- Zelliott, Eleanor (2010). *From Untouchable to Dalit*. New Delhi: Manohar