

Karukku: A Classic in Subaltern Studies**Dr. Neha Kanaujiya**Assistant Professor, Dept. of English
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Muftiganj Jaunpur (U.P.)**Abstract**

Karukku is one such book in subaltern studies which won international recognition for Dalit literary circle. It is one of those treasured books in Dalit literature which not only speaks about the pain of its people but also proves its literary worth among the mainstream writings. It contributed a lot towards establishing Dalit literature as a strong and independent medium of expression for those who have been silent for years. The book provides us with a very balanced and accurate view of how a person from a marginalised community lives his or her life in a society which is very discriminating towards them, their day-to-day struggles for survival, their humility, their anger, their frustration, their realization and ultimately, their reaction and fight for dignity, identity and freedom in society.

Keywords: double-edged *karukku*, Dalit literature, Dalit womanism, marginalization.

Karukku: A Classic in Subaltern Studies

If we talk about *Karukku* in the year 2023, it does not need any introduction as it has already completed more than thirty years of its publication and has proved itself time and again, a milestone, a masterpiece of Dalit writings and especially of Dalit feminism or Dalit womanism as Bama calls it in one of her interviews when she draws upon Alice Walker's use of the term 'womanism'. It needs to be elaborated here that the title of the paper does not mean at all that *Karukku* is the only treasured book in Dalit studies, rather it is one of those books in subaltern studies in India, like *Joothan*, *Akkarmashi* and *Baluta*, which brought recognition and force to Dalit movement and established Dalit literature as a strong and independent medium of expression for those who have been silent for years.

The title, at the same time, hints that the book provides us with a very balanced and accurate view of how a person from a marginalised community lives his or her life in a society which is very discriminating towards them, their day-to-day struggles for survival, their humility, their anger, their frustration, their realization and ultimately, their reaction and fight for dignity, identity and freedom in society. It is a must-read book for those who want to study the lives of subalterns in India.

Furthermore, *Karukku* is not the text that stands out as a classic among Dalit writings only, but it has also made its mark by winning the prestigious Crossword award for translation in the year 2001. In the words of Laxmi Holmstrom, “Clearly, though it had made literary history: a Dalit autobiography overtook mainstream writing, perhaps for the first time” (*Karukku* xiii). Although the book was written with a special purpose to champion the cause of suffering community, it nowhere seems to be compromising with its form or stylistic, it brings out its own aesthetic value and establishes Bama’s efficiency as a writer.

The text begins with a natural and geographical description of her village. She introduces her reader with every single detail of a world she lives in. The picturesqueness of her natural descriptions and the poetic quality of her language brings out another dimension of her writing proving the literary worth of her work:

A bright red sun, huge and round, would wake up in the east and climb into the sky. It would make its way, peering between the trees, glowing, its light spilling and sparkling. And in the same way, at evening time, when it went and dropped through the mountains, all the fields roundabout would be luminous with a yellow light. (*Karukku* 4)

Gradually she moves from nature to society and along with the beautiful hills and mountains, she takes us into the world of gross realities where we can see the two different worlds standing on the two different polarities of society- the centre and the periphery. Most of the land in her village is owned by the Naicker community-the upper caste people of the village, and on the outer side of the village, in the most unhygienic conditions, lives the Paraya Community. The Parayans are far from the reach of the basic amenities like the milk depot, big shops, the post office, the Panchayat board, the church and the schools because all these places stand in the Naickers’ street. Bama recollects:

I don’t know how it came about that the upper caste communities and the lower caste communities were separated like this into different parts of the village. But they kept themselves to their part of the village, and we stayed in ours. We only went to their side if we had work to do there. But they never, ever, came to our parts. (7)

Life for the Parayas was not an easy task. They were destined to live a hard life. Bama remembers how people of her community laboured hard to produce grains for the rich upper caste farmers while they themselves went hungry. Social stratifications have been maintained so well in our society that the producers never become the consumers. *Karukku* brings out the trauma and suffocation experienced by the Dalits in our society. Bama feels betrayed by the promise of freedom and dignity as an Indian and more shocking for her was the treatment she got during her stay in the church and the convent.

Karukku is a mosaic of different themes but mainly focuses on three essential aspects namely: caste, religion and gender that caused great pain in Bama’s life. Bama gives us a clear picture of the caste oppression meted out to the Dalit Christians not only by the upper caste society but by the people inside the church itself. Conversion to Christianity has not reduced the sorry state of their condition. The non- Dalit Christians never assimilate the Dalit Christians into their fold. Bama points out, “The upper caste Christians had their own cemetery elsewhere” (29).

Christians also follow the same caste system of Hinduism, resulting in caste hierarchy, caste subordination and exploitation.

Bama, through the course of her personal narrative, reveals the lives of women in her community. Like their men, they also had to work hard incessantly for their survival. The woman too used to go to the fields for different kinds of work such as pulling up the heaps of groundnut plants and then shelling and cleaning them. They had to wake up early in the morning and then they would pour some millet porridge into a carrying vessel, and run to the fields. If any such work is not available for them, they would go to jungle to collect the firewood small children would also go along with their mothers. But collecting firewood was not an easy task. Before they could manage to do that, the twigs and branches would scratch their bodies and their skin would be all torn and bleeding. Every day those poor women had to suffer that pain in order to support their livelihood. To quote Bama:

In those days, my mother too used to go collecting firewood, on one occasion she brought home a bundle of firewood, leaned it against the wall and then began vomiting vast gobs of blood. But it was only by toiling like this, without taking any account of their bodies as human flesh and blood, that people of my community could even survive. (52)

Bama is a strong voice of Dalit feminism, and in *Karukku*, Bama admires the courage and resilience of the women in her community who subvert the power of the upper caste people. The woman would devise plans to rescue their men from the clutches of the corrupt police. Even the police itself tries to exploit the women when their husbands are away and passes vulgar comments, Bama seeks inspiration from the women of her community. During her father's absence, her mother looked after them by picking up some coolie work. Her mother pawned her earrings to educate Bama. This fact cannot be denied that Bama owes her higher education to her mother. Giving away the only piece of jewellery in order to send her daughter to high school is a sacrifice worth mentioning, especially when Bama was not her only child. *Karukku*, in fact, celebrates the rich cultural heritage of the Paraya community and it is women who through their rituals, festivals and day to day household duties prove to be custodians of that rich culture. Bama emphasizes the important role played by Dalit women in their communities.

Bama in *Karukku* deals with some of the most pressing issues among the depressed classes such as the need of education for Dalit children and women. As a result of her own humiliating experiences as a Dalit, Bama realizes that through the right type of education the whole community of Dalits can be empowered, and they would be able to gain human dignity. Bama knew the importance of education because her Annan had already taught her the value of education. As time passed by, Bama herself realized that there were many things which always remained unrevealed and misinterpreted because the people of her community were illiterate and could not understand the things on their own. Since they were illiterate and ignorant, they were befooled easily by the upper-caste people on basic rights. But at the same time Bama mentions the reasons why these poor people always remained uneducated and unaware.

Extreme poverty is the main obstacle in the path of their development. Day and night, they work like animals but still they never receive a payment which is appropriate to their labour. They struggle hard to make two-time meals. So where remains the scope for education. Their main task is to stay alive. Education becomes secondary for them. They are made to work like

bonded labourers as was the case with the natives of Africa who were humiliated and exploited in America and in the other parts of the European countries. Bama goes on describing that it is not only the grownups who have to work hard but even the small children also toil hard in the most unfavourable circumstances to contribute to the livelihood of their families. Bama laments the unfortunate lives of these poor children.

Bama points out that lack of unity is another reason behind the backwardness of the Dalit communities. She thinks that a lack of unity among the Dalits will make it easier for the upper castes to subjugate them. Bama writes “Shameless fellows. Of course, the upper-caste men will laugh at them. Instead of uniting together in a village of many castes, if they keep challenging each other to fights, what will happen to all these men in the end?” (47). Bama gives many incidents in her narrative when she describes how frequently and without no reason at all, the people of her community would be fighting with each other.

Karukku gains significance because it is a book with several messages. Though Bama never mentions the name of Babasaheb in the book, she seems to be influenced a lot by his philosophy- educate, organize and agitate. Bifurcating these three words further, we find that education is the first step towards development and progress, and then unity or organization is the second most important need for the Dalits. These two steps will lead them to the path of success and civilization which will be possible only after a mental agitation that means a change in the thinking of the whole society. It is only through the educated minds that a change can be brought in the society. But no single person can do it alone so now there is a great need for all the educated Dalits to unite together if they want to bring this stirring in the society. Bama’s shared testimonio typically unfolds her growing up story in episodes and throughout she displays indomitable courage, conquering the dominant forces. Bama explains even the minute experiences that she had, throughout her life. She constantly speaks about dying several times within. The feeling of indifference that she received at school, college, workplace, and convent and in the society as a whole, set fire in the heart of Bama and filled it with a conscious desire to fight against the system. She invokes her people:

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. (28)

Not only the content but the language too, is equally audacious and challenges the hegemony of mainstream Tamil literature. She does not write her narrative in upper caste Tamil language rather she intentionally chooses the common place language of Dalits in Tamilnadu. Lakshmi Holmstrom discusses in the introductory section of *Karukku* that Bama has proposed a new kind of writing style through her work. She uses a Dalit style of language. She flouts the established rules of grammar and spelling throughout, and uses the words in a different way. Bama has a definite purpose behind it. Even her writing style too conveys a sense of freedom which has its own aesthetic, and is free from the obligations of the mainstream writings.

Karukku lays stress on the need of a better society with ideals such as justice, equality and love. Speaking from various public platforms, Bama has been raising her concerns for the people of her community. In her interview with renowned writer Geeta Hariharan, Bama advises

the youth of Dalit communities that instead of cutting themselves, they should try to cut through the system like the double edged karukku which can make one bleed if not handled properly but at the same time, it also has the power to cut those people who are ready to exploit them. Bama's experience is representative of her whole community. The account she provides in her literary works brings out the inner strength and vigour of a Dalit woman. Bama emerges as a bold and fearless woman who has the courage to baffle everyone who tries to suppress her. She advocates the life of dignity and freedom for every human being.

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