



Bama's *Karukku*: Testimony of Agony and Confrontation

Shaista Mansoor

Abstract:

Dalits have the history of being subjected to every kind of humiliation and discrimination on the basis of their caste and financial status. But now with changing time, most of the Dalits are defying the social constrictions fixed on them. They are demanding equality and justice that was denied to them so far. Many Dalits are using writing as the vehicle to express their protest against the prejudice of higher castes. Bama is measured as the one among such Dalits who is fighting back discrimination with her pen. Bama started her literary journey with her autobiography entitled *Karukku*. This book is referred to as the first Tamil Dalit woman's autobiography. In *Karukku*, Bama has presented a genuine depiction of social and economic life style of Dalits: she wanted to let people know about the pain as well as resistance of Dalits, so that those who do not confront their circumstances will also be encouraged to fight against the

brutalities of caste discrimination. The present paper will try to analyze Bama's *Karukku* as testimony of the agony and the consequent confrontation of Dalit women with the ravages of caste system.

Key words: Dalit, Discrimination, Resistance, Caste, Representation, Society, Suppression, Poverty, Subjugation, Marginalized

From the times immemorial, in almost all the countries of the world, people are divided between the higher and lower classes of society. Presence of lower sect of people in any place of the world is inevitable. These modest classes of the society has always been subjugated, suppressed and trodden upon. But quite recently some of such sections of society came to the fore-front to narrate their own tales of agony. Dalits are considered as one such group, they are popularly known to belong to the Indian society. But Dalit, actually is a broader term which can be used to define all socially and economically subjugated people like "Blacks" or "Negros". They can also deliberate to be Dalits as they are marginalized on the basis of colour as are traditional Dalits on the basis of their caste. People belonging to faction of Dalits or to any of its sub-sect like Blacks have lately started taking help of literature to express their plight and confront their subjugation. Literature proved to be one of the most effective tools to empower and strengthen such humble communities. Large numbers of works, especially autobiographies, by Blacks and Dalits have gained prominence in literary scenario. Most of these writers choose autobiographies, so as to depict their life honestly. The idea of marginalization and empowerment coexist in their works. These works are based on representation of their

discriminated life and their resistance towards suppression. In post-colonial literature and theory, representation and resistance are among most important aspects through which a reader judges representation of indigenous people and the reaction towards oppressing societies.

Dalits are people of discrete set low castes, who according to S.M Micheal are excluded on the basis of their extreme collective impurity from the relations with higher beings (both human and divine). “Dalit” word is derived from a Sanskrit term “dal” which means broken apart and fragmented. “Dalit” as a term is said to have been coined by Jyotiba Phule, the founder of the Satya Shodak Samaj, a non-Brahmin movement in Maharashtra. He used this term to describe the people of lowest social order in Indian society, which constituted untouchables and other lower castes who have been the sufferers of caste discrimination and poverty. Dalits make up about 16% of the Indian population which means about 138 million people belong to this set of society. Despite their extensive population, the untouchables in the Indian Caste system are considered too low to be included in elaborate hierarchical social order. Earlier Dalits were known as either untouchables or outcastes but Mahatma Gandhi gave them a new name, “Harijans”, which means people of God. However this name did not improve the condition of Dalits, being called as people of God they were still discriminated on the basis of their caste and financial status. Lately the term Harijan was replaced by the word Dalit. Dalit is originally a sub-caste of Hinduism, it is considered as the lowest caste in Hindu society. Dalits have a history of always being ill-treated by the society, “The deprivation of this group is associated with the historical process of economic and social exclusion and discrimination based on caste” (Thorat 1). They have always been ostracized from the society, they constitute of poor landless class of people who have been made to do lowly odd jobs from times unknown and their place in society has not changed for centuries:

Indian Marxism has always seen the Dalit problem in terms of land and agrarian relationships. It basically defines the Dalit as Choma (hero of Shivaram Karanth's classic Kannada novel *Chomana Dudi* – 1931), the landless labourer. Judging from the reality of rural India, this mode of understanding the Dalit problem is really meaningful and vital (75-76 Nagaray).

Due to the ill treatment of Dalits by the Hindu society, many Dalits tried to seek refuge in other religions like Buddhism, Islam, Sikhism and Christianity, but that step also got in vain for most of the cases as plight of Dalits did not change.

Dalits are socially and economically backward due to which they usually remained uneducated in the past, paving way for more exploitation. But recently they have tried to change their social place by gaining education which has helped many of them to voice their trauma and let their plight be known to the world. Many Dalit writers like Bama, Baby Kamble, Arjun Danglay and O.P Valmiki, came up with their own stories of pain and suffering, narrating the agony of Dalit life in its true fashion. They were eligible for first hand articulation of Dalit trauma to their readers. Dalit men writers were the first to write their ordeals but of late Dalit women have also come into the literary scene. Bama is considered as the first Tamil-Dalit woman who has expressed the plight and predicament of her caste through writing. She started her work with her autobiography entitled *Karukku*.

Karukku is considered as the first Dalit woman autobiography in Tamil. *Karukku* was translated in many languages and got wide readership due to its honest portrayal of the life of Dalit Christians. During and after colonization of India by Britishers, many Dalits converted to

Christianity expecting honorable and respectful life. Christianity believes in equality before God as do most other religions. But in the case of Dalits there is no equality and how can one expect equality for them when they are not even treated as humans. Bama in her autobiography gives her readers a first-hand experience of life of Dalits. *Karukku* does not just describe the traumatic lives of Dalits but it also pronounces their resistance and courage. Bama believes that her work will inspire Dalits to raise their heads and work for their rights. In the second edition of *Karukku*, which was published after ten years of the first edition, Bama is content with the success of her work, she believes her motive to write this book has been efficacious, she added an author's note entitled 'Ten Years Later' to this edition of *Karukku*, where she says:

Karukku, written by wounded self, has not been dissolved in stream of time. On contrary, it has been means of relieving the pain of others who were wounded. *Karukku* has been comfort to many who have been brought low, and who 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 (Bama x).

Bama expresses her traumatic experience and theorizes her pain and anger through *Karukku*. She voices the stories of tears and sorrow of Dalits but along with that she also conveys their resistance and strength. So apart from being an autobiography, *Karukku* is one of the best Dalit testimonies of agony and confrontation. It is the expression of various themes related to Dalits which include their religion, family, education, economy etc. Bama deals with all these themes with uprightness reflecting the discrimination done to Dalits, not only by the upper caste society but even by the Catholic Church. Bama states many examples of this discrimination in *Karukku* like at one place she describes how her grandmother was given leftover food by upper

caste Naicker, they almost threw that food from high distance so that they may not touch hand or utensil of Bama's grandmother. In the same manner Dalits were treated with utter disgust in Churches as well. This discrimination disheartened Bama, who at times was forced to feel that she and her community is destined to suffer pain and injustice:

In this society, if you are born into a low caste, you are forced to live a life of humiliation and degradation until your death. Even after death, caste-difference does not disappear. Wherever you look, however much you study, whatever you take up, caste discrimination stalks us in every nook and corner and drives us into frenzy. It is because of this that we are unable to find a way to study well and progress like everyone else. And this is why a wretched lifestyle is all that is left to us(Bama 26).

Bama says that earlier she used to feel bitter about being born as a Dalit, "And in my heart I have even grieved over the fact that I was born as I am" (Bama 27). This resentment is due to the fact that being born in a low caste one lives the life of struggle. Upper castes look down upon them as if they suffer from some repulsive disease. Even the touch of lower caste is believed by the upper castes to have polluted them. Wherever they go, they suffer discrimination of all kinds. Upper castes usually show inhuman behavior towards Dalits, they make them work as beasts and deny the respect which Dalits deserve for their hard work. They always create hindrance in the way of progress of Dalits, they don't want them to progress and improve. Dalits are exploited everywhere, even if they gain education their plight does not seem to improve. *Karukku* is reflection of this painful plight of Dalits. No doubt many Dalits have somehow put up with their struggle, accepted themselves as lower beings, who are here on the earth just to do menial tasks and be of service to the upper caste. But there are some who refuse to put up with

set social norms of suppression and discrimination and *Karukku* is the testimony of one such Dalit woman, who resisted and wants others to resist as well.

Dalits are considered as the lowest in social order, so Dalit women can be referred to as lowermost as they belong to the bottommost place in the lowest caste of the society. Dalit women suffer discrimination not only at the level of caste but also at the level of gender which makes them doubly marginalized. If we assume the pain of Dalits in general, we can feel that predicament of Dalit women is far more depressing. They work equal to men but are paid less, they suffer at the hands of upper caste people as well as lower caste men but instead of all this, they do not lose their strength and prove themselves whenever needed. Bama attempts to show the courage of Dalit women through an incident when there was a fight between Paraya community i.e. Bama's community and Chaliyaar community, all the men of Paraya community were either jailed or they had hidden themselves in fields, so there was not a single man to be seen in the streets except for patrolling police. At that time instead of crying over their troubles, the Paraya women did all their chores routinely. They went to work and did their domestic errands as well, "As usual, the women went to fields where they worked as day-laborers. On their way, they took gruel to men hiding in the woods, told them the news, and went on. And so the women somehow managed on their own, even without men's earning" (Bama 38). Hence apart from giving its readers the picture of Dalit life in general, Bama laid special focus on the portrayal of Dalit women.

Bama in *Karukku* writes her experience as an educated Dalit woman who decided to enter the Church order, so as to support other Dalits and try to assist them to raise themselves from their social stature. But no sooner did she enter the order than she realized and understood the hypocrisy and double standards of the priests and nuns, who used to teach lessons of equality of

all human beings before God but failed to apply that teaching to themselves. Bama laments the treatment that lower caste people get in religious places like the Church. According to Bama, Dalits were made to do menial tasks like sweeping and cleaning even in the Church, they were treated differently than the upper caste people. Dalits were expected to be patient with such treatment, they were taught that God will be happy by their lowly labour, so they should be happy to do whatever work they were commanded to do. Such discrimination deeply wounded Bama and she left the convent for a better life:

The more I watched this, the more frustrated I felt. My mind was disturbed. My conscience was battered and bruised. At last I asked myself, is this the life for me? I left the convent and went home, utterly weary and dispirited (Bama 78).

Karukku is the depiction of life of Dalit, who are continuously marginalized and unjustly pushed aside by upper caste people. Bama categorizes Dalit people in two groups - one who have accepted their discrimination patiently and who endure oppression and console themselves by believing their ill treatment to be their destiny, while the other group denies to accept their subjugation by others, they resist and make efforts to fight against injustice and display their strength. They try to gain education in order to improve their social and financial position. But upper caste people continuously pull them down and treat them unjustly. 'They seem to conspire to keep us in our place: to think that we who have worked throughout history like beasts, should live and die like that; we should never move on or go forward' (Bama 27-28). According to Bama, people of upper caste never cooperate for progress of Dalits, they don't want Dalits to improve their low social and financial status, as that can be a threat to their powerful position.

Bama says that it is Dalits who have worked like animals for upper caste people and made them powerful and prosperous but what they receive in return is injustice and suppression.

The literal meaning of the word 'karukku' is palmyra leaf, whose shape resembles the sharp two edged sword. Bama used the word as the title of her autobiography because she feels that her life, in fact the life of all Dalits suffers from the deep sharp wound as if cut by the palmyra leaves. This wound is originally the result of social injustice and discrimination. *AsKarukku* also narrates the story of resistance and the quest of Dalits for respect and progress, so term karukku can also be said to have been derived from the Tamil word Karu, which means embryo or newness. In the Author's Preface to the First Edition of *Karukku*, Bama says that:

The driving forces that shaped this book are many; events that occurred during many stages of my life, cutting me like karukku and making me bleed; unjust social structures that plunged me into ignorance and left me trapped and suffocating; my own desperate urge to break, throw away, and destroy these bonds; and when the chains were shattered into fragments, the blood that was spilt- all these taken together (Bama xiii).

Bama expresses her pain and resistance through *Karukku*. She appears somewhat contented in the concluding part of the book as she feels that others are resisting as well. She is glad that Dalits have realized their strength which urges them to claim honorable position in the society. The Situation of Dalits was very miserable but now they are trying to live a life of respect and honour. Dalits are trying to get their children educated so that their future generations can live a better life than they have lived themselves. They are continuously fighting for equality and justice which was denied to them so far:

Dalits have begun to realize the truth. They have realized that they have been maintained as the stone steps that others have trodden on as they raised themselves up. They have become aware that they have been made slaves in the name of God, the Pusai, and the Church. They have experienced a state of affairs where, in the name of serving poor; these others have risen into power while actually treading on the poor. Dalits have learnt that these others have never respected them as human beings, but only bent the religion to their benefit, to maintain their own falsehoods (Bama 109).

Bama leaves a deep impression on the mind of the reader with her true depiction of life as Dalit. She expresses the pain and misery of Dalits especially Paraya community. She shows how the minds of people, even children, are set according to the established social constrictions. They understand the space that Harijans need to keep with the upper caste people. Bama wants to bring a change in all this, she wants equality and respect for her community. She wants their labour to be paid of justly and she wants honourable life for them which they deserve but have never lived. And fortunately things are changing for Dalits now, according to Badri Narayan:

In recent past, however there is a visible upsurge in the assertion of Dalit identity, which challenges the humiliation that they faced for centuries. There has emerged a strong urge among the marginalized groups throughout the country, to assert their identity and self-respect throughout their own cultural resources and challenge the cultural hegemony of upper caste (Narayan 20).

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