

Negotiating ‘New Woman’: A Study of Bama’s Karukku

Trisita Karmakar

PhD scholar at Sidho Kanho Birsha University

Abstract: An eminent dalit feminist writer, an effeminate novelist and efficient teacher Bama, also known as Bama Faustina Soosairaj gets her wide popularity with her autobiographical writing *Karukku*, which watersheds on her personal crises and chronicles the joys and sorrows experienced by a dalit Christian woman in Tamilnadu. Bama, is the most celebrated contemporary Dalit Woman writer, has given a prominent visibility in Dalit aesthetics which has previously lacked in this literary genre. Her most famous work *Karukku* breaks the barrier of all traditional boundaries and depicts the most bold and poignant tale of life outside the mainstream Indian thought. Revolving around the main theme of caste oppression within the Catholic Church, *Karukku* portrays the tension between the self and the community, and presents Bama’s life as a process of self reflection and recovery from social and institutional betrayal. Breaking the silence that has been lasted for more generations they gather courage and venture their voice against the caste rigidity, suppression of gender inequality and create a bold account of their actual need of life. The awakening consciousness and challenging representation of dalit woman as ‘other’ is very delicately imbibed in *Karukku*. The ordinary autobiographical incidents of her life is the embodiment of the social changes and awakening of social consciousness, their urge for change, their voice of mind, crave for position compels the society to rethink. The ‘new woman’ was thus born. The concept of “new woman” that first emerged in the late nineteenth century can be taken as an iconic change in gender norms and caste stigma. This new woman had a privilege to enjoy greater freedom to chase and perform public roles and rejected the conservative gender roles assigned to her. Debunking and rejecting the age-old roles performed by the females, these women made modern choices in order to express their autonomy and individuality. In this paper an attempted has been made to analyze the evolving zeal of the ‘new woman’ among the Dalit females in Bama’s *Karukku*.

Key words: ‘new woman’, dalit feminism, subjugation, emancipation, identification, resurrection.

*The stone that all the sullen centuries,
With sluggish hands and massive fingers rude,
Against the sepulcher of womanhood
Had sternly held, she has thrust back with ease,
And stands, superbly arrogant, the keys
Of knowledge in her hand, won by a mood
Of daring, in her beauty flaunting nude,
Eager to drain life's wine unto the lees.
So she shall tempt and touch and try and taste,
And in the wrestle of the world shall lose
Her dimpled prettiness, her petals bruise;
But molding ever to a truer type
She shall return to man, no more abased
His counterpart, a woman, rounded, ripe.*

-by Arthur Henry Adams

‘The New Woman’

In the words of Henry Adams the transition of woman position is beautifully presented. They have transformed from beauty to brain, from meek to massive, from submissive to excellence. They are no longer concern only for her rosy cheeks and dimpled prettiness but they have learned to ‘the wrestle of the world’ by her superbly arrogant eyes, key of knowledge in her hand and also by her mood of daring; ‘they are now molding into a truer type eager to drain life’s wine unto the lees’. And thus the new woman was born. This concept of new woman is also gradually imprinting in dalit woman as we see in Bama’s autobiography *Karukku*, that instead of silently accepted their inhuman position of caste and gender discrimination, all the dalit women of her community including Bama have a revolving zeal to change their societal position. And that is the ‘new’ about these dalit women. In this paper an attempted has been made to analyze the

evolving zeal of the ‘new woman’ among the Dalit females in Bama’s *Karukku*.

Dalit literature is growing out of an ideology of freedom from oppression and they need wider recognition and understanding. The concept of Dalit Feminism specially emerges from the oppression of caste and gender as well. Dalit female writers get the upper hand of their emotions to express their unheard stories by them selves. Among the most of the Dalit woman writers Bama gets a wider recognition and her autobiography *Karukku* placed a renounce position in the genre of dalit literature. Bama was born in 1958 in a Roman Catholic family belonging to the Paraiya community in Madras, Tamilnadu. She rose to fame with her autobiographical novel *Karukku* written in 1992, also wrote two more novels, *Sangati* (1994), and *Vanmam* (2002) along with three collections of short stories: *Kusumbukkaran* (1996), and *Oru Tattvum Erumaiyum* (2003), *Kandattam* (2009). Her works are mainly focuses upon caste and gender discrimination among dalits women, their struggles, their pains on the one side, evolving zeal, inner strength, and undaunted rigidity on the other sides:

“We who are asleep must open our eyes and look about us. We must not accepting 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...” (37)

The idea of Feminism has been derived from the Feminist movement of 1960s which aims to define the established political, economical, personal and social equality of sexes. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her lecture “We Should All be Feminist” defined that “a Feminist is a man or a woman who says, yes, there’s a problem with gender as it is today and we must fixed it, we must do better”. And she ends her lecture by declaring her brother Kenny as the best feminist as he is a kind, good-looking, lovely man and he is very masculine. So basically, Feminism is not about female only its all about equality. Virginia Wolf , Kate Millet, Simon De Beauvoir are major thinkers of Feminism and their works *A Room of One’s Own*, *Sexual Politics*, *Second sex* creates a major demarcation in this theory. As

Feminist theory deals with women in general, Dalit feminism talks about oppression of Dalit women in particular. Dalit females are not only discriminated by gender inequality but also caste oppression plays a pivotal role in their life. Just like the feminist movements creates a general awareness among women; they accept their femininity and celebrate it. Similarly dalit women have started to accept their identity as it is and by reclaiming her identity she acquire her social position and social prestige. This awakening consciousness among these Dalit women creates something ‘new’ in their identity.

The concept of “new woman” that first emerged in the late nineteenth century can be taken as an iconic change in gender norms and caste stigma. This new woman had a privilege to enjoy greater freedom to chase and perform public roles and even flaunt of her need. She defied and detested the conservative gender roles assigned to her and thus met with hostility from men and women who opposed to the public presence of women and gave this a reason for the decline in morality. Debunking and rejecting the age-old roles performed by the females, the women made modern choices in order to express their autonomy and individuality.

Is there anything ‘new’ about this Dalit woman who has been suppressed across several ages? The most prominent change was increasing creative vibrancy and vitality of education; reconstruct realities of caste and gender make them awaken of their existence. Whereas previously the lives of most of the dalit women are involved in scavenging, toilet cleaning, leather work, agricultural labour and other manual works of inferior grade that task makes them ‘untouchable’. Besides, in their home they have to involve in domestic servants and slaves to their male members. They are mother to their child, wife of their husband slave to the upper class and sexual aster to the society. Half of the cases of sexual violence have not been FIR in India every year. But it is new of their position that they have voice to their tongue, confidence of education, anger and brimming question of their right do change their position form slave to servility. They step out from the social bondage and get a

dignified position in political, business, literature as well.

Karukku grows out from a personal crisis of Bama and watershed in her own life which derives her to make sense of her life as woman, as Christian and as Dalit. The title of this work *Karukku* itself has a wide significance of awakening consciousness among these dalit women. The word *Karukku* means 'Palmyra leaves', which, with their serrated edges on both sides are like double-edged sword; on the one side society cuts them and on the other sharpen edge they should have to cut through the system. *Karukku* is concerned with the issue of caste oppression within the Catholic Church. In the name of god they actually rob people, deceive them, "these people who declared all the time that god is loving, there was no love for the poor" they are so much difference between their words and work that Bama says, "I become completely confused in my head about the place of belief and devotion in all this. There seemed to be one God within the church and another outside. I was extremely bewildered by all these different versions of God."(105)

As a part of this institution Bama notices that even the dalit women accept their superiority and recognize them as the representative of God, they are indifferent about their caste discrimination and accept all kind of humiliation as it is. Even this humiliation and injustice is not only confined with in these religious institutions but in the society also. They are constantly dehumanized by the upper caste Nikker, it seems that if they touch their food it will be poisonous, if they touched their water it will be polluted. All the dalit women are just as an object to be celebrated by the all men even the protector of low; the police also sexually assault them. They have neither justice nor religion; they are just like beasts waiting to be saved and civilized by someone who belong to the so called 'upper class'. Yet, Bama also sees the beginning of an important change, a gradually growing awareness among the Dalits of their own oppression: "But dalits have also understood that God is not like this, has not spoken like this. They have become

aware that they too were created in the likeness of God. There is a new strength within them, urging them to reclaim that likeness which has been repressed, ruined and obliterated; and to begin to live with honour and respect and love of all humankind."(106)

Bama is gradually exploring a vivid change in Dalit identity. There is in this writing, a very powerful sense of the self and the community as Dalit, which rejects outright the notion of Verna and rejects the idea of 'Sanskritization', to evaluate Dalit life-style according to mainstream Hindu values. Dalit women have passionate desire to create a new society made up of justice, equality and love. Instead of being more and more beaten down and blunted, they must unite, think about their rights, and battle for them.

Though Bama starts her autobiography with a very pleasant and placid description of her village; beautiful mountains, rivers and ponds with its different names strongly connected with her own. But this pleasant description swiftly transforms into a pathetic one while she talks about her school memory. "I wanted to shrink into myself" this statement is enough to describe the mental trauma of a school going little child. When they should burst into the playground, she wants to shrink; when they should vibrant of their presence, she compromises her identity as a Dalit Woman though she is not able to understand the meaning, she had already seen, felt, experienced and been humiliated by what it is. She says, "Everyone seemed to think Harijan children were contemptible. But they didn't hesitate to use for cheap labour. So we carried water to the teacher's house; we watered the plants. We did all the chores that were needed about the school."(28)

In spite of struggling with such kind of caste discrimination from the very early age of her life, she never ever dejected and dispatched her study. Besides, she study in such a way that she was awarded a prize for standing first among all the Harijan in her district which suddenly pops up an overbrimming honour and respect for herself and for her family. She always remembers her Anna's

words which actually teach her to fight, to struggle and to snatch the required position from the society that is *“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 as we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities.”*(27)

“The result is that although I try to forget my caste, it is impossible to forget. And then I remember an expression that I heard somewhere: what comes by birth and can't be cast off by dying- that is caste.” These words of Kumud Pawade are very truly associated with Bama's life. How intensely she wants to cast off the caste discrimination, it struck with her more and more. She becomes a teacher to create a better possibility for the oppressed dalit children and to make education available for them to access easily. But she finds that this discrimination is mainly grounded from the religion connotation, as a result of which she aimed for herself to become a Nun. After becoming a nun she is forced to hide her identity as a dalit, otherwise she will not be considered as appropriate to get an upper caste position of a nun. As a result of this she has to digest all the atrocities which she actually wants to omit. *“I felt burning anger when I saw that all the menial jobs there were done by Dalits who were abused all the time and treated in a shameful and degrading way. I was pained to see even older people trembling, shrinking like small children, frightened by the power and wealth that the sister's had, burying their pride and self-respect, running to do the menial tasks assigned to them. If ever I told them that there was no need for them to die of fear, they need only do their work well, collect their wages and go their way, they would reply that it was all very well for me to say that.”*(35) Not only has the caste but class discrimination also mattered in these religious institutions. People who serve with fancy gifts and immense wealth, they make much of that person and if not, nobody took the slightest notice of whom and what you are, nobody bother to come near you. She finds a huge gap between reality and her actual ambition. Basically she has to watch, listen and sit there just like a 'lump of tamarind' and dying several deaths within. At last

her struggle ends with her resignation. She can struggle for justice but can not compromise with her won ideologies which fuel her to struggle through her life. Instead of living with a fraudulent smile, she chooses to lead a life of weeping real tears.

CONCLUSION

Apparently it seems that Bama fails but actually this failure is the stepping stone to success. Each new wound creates new understanding, each new struggle teaches new lesson, and each new experience leads sufficient mental strength to rise up even from the edge of defeat. She finds her life in many healthy contradictions, in one hand she faces the brutal, frenzied and ugly face of society, and on the other hand she experienced a life of simplicity, serenity and sublimity. In between these contradictions she finds the actual possibility for these Dalit women. Instead of blindly follow everything that society has said everything that is fabricated, every mannerism and mechanism which suggests that this is the actual way meant to be for Dalits; there is no possibility of change and because of this they seemed to accept everything as their fate. For those who console themselves as a sufferer of destiny, they can never see the change of the caste they were born into, nor the poverty that is part of that caste, nor indeed the humiliation. Although they are few in numbers who have started to understand that this is neither their fate nor their destiny behind their humiliation, they are making efforts to challenge these atrocities. This has definitely made a change; created a new identity, new existence of these dalit women. Thus the new woman is born who is like Tennyson's Ulysses, *“To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield”*.

REFERENCE

- [1] Adams Henry Arthur, *“The New Woman”*. New Zealand, Australia Maoriland: and Other Verses. (1899)
- [2] Bama, *Karukku* Trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. Print. 2005.
- [3] De Beauvoir, Simone, *“The Second Sex”*. Reprint Harmonds-worth England: Penguin.1949.

- [4] Ruth Manorama, “Dalit Women in Struggle: Transforming Pain into Power.” & “Life as a Dalit: Views from the Bottom on Caste in India”, edited by Subhadra Mitra Channa and Joan. P.Mencher. SAGE, pp. 255-267.2013.
- [5] Ganguly, S,(2009). Finding Frames for the ‘new woman’: Transforming Nashtaneed into Charulata. Muse India, 27.
- [6] Mankekar, Purnima. (1999).“Women-Oriented Narratives and The New Indian Woman. In Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India” (pp. 104-162). Durham, NC: Duke UP.
- [7] Tennyson Alfred “*Ulysses*” (1842). [http. poetryfoundation.org](http://poetryfoundation.org).
- [8] Adams Henry “The New Woman” 26April 2012. <https://www.poemhunter.com>.