

Despair in Bama's 'Karukku'

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Abstract- Bama, is a celebrated Tamil Dalit feminist writer whose works engage with various issues prevailing in her society in India. "Karukku" is her autobiographical account that sheds light on her experiences growing up as a Dalit woman in Tamil Nadu. Through this, Bama reclaims her voice and agency, challenging the dominant narratives that have historically silenced Dalit voices. This is not just a personal memoir, but a collective testimony of her community's resilience and strength. "Karukku" is a seminal work that explores the multifaceted oppression faced by Dalit women in India. It not only captures the author's personal experiences but also reflects the intersection of caste, gender, and religion of Dalit people. Dalit women, especially, face social ostracism and are denied basic rights and subjected to humiliation. They hope for their redemption and dreams to have a better and satisfactory life. They not only expect to have their own self- identity and social justice but hope for a better future.

Keywords: Dalit, autobiography, resilience, oppression, humiliation.

Dalit literature emerged as a potent literary movement in India, giving voice to the experiences and struggles of the Dalit community, historically oppressed and marginalized by the caste system. Increased awareness of social justice issues and movements advocating for the rights of marginalized communities have brought Dalit issues to the forefront. Dalit literature often comes directly from Dalit writers, providing an authentic perspective that is both powerful and moving. Readers are seeking stories that reflect diverse experiences and perspectives, making Dalit literature more appealing. Dalit writers and their works are receiving critical acclaim and literary awards, which helps in gaining wider recognition and readership. Authors like Bama, Omprakash Valmiki, and others have become well-known names, drawing attention to the genre. The themes explored in Dalit literature, such as discrimination, identity, and resistance, are highly relevant to

contemporary social and political issues. Many works of Dalit literature are being translated into various languages, making them accessible to a wider audience. Dalit literature's rise in popularity reflects a broader societal shift towards inclusivity, diversity, and the acknowledgment of historically marginalized voices.

Many Dalit writers tried to give their own experiences, through autobiographies. These autobiographies provide first-hand accounts of the systemic oppression and discrimination faced by Dalits in India. These autobiographies give voice to individuals from marginalized communities, allowing them to tell their own stories in their own words. This authenticity challenges the dominant narratives often written by those outside the Dalit community. They offer insights into the lived experiences of Dalits over different periods, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of Indian history. These autobiographies raise awareness about the injustices faced by Dalits and advocate for social change. They can inspire empathy, solidarity, and action among readers from diverse backgrounds.

Basic human rights are denied and Dalits are subjected to many humiliating practices. The caste system, a rigid hierarchical social stratification, has deeply influenced Indian society for centuries. Dalits, often referred to as "untouchables," occupy the lowest rung in this hierarchy, facing systemic discrimination and exclusion. Than Dalit men, Dalit women are often forced into low-paying, menial jobs and are exploited as cheap labour. The patriarchal structures within Dalit communities themselves impose additional layers of oppression on women. They are forced to conform to traditional gender roles and are denied independence.

The writer, Bama's own journey is one of resistance against multiple forms of oppression. Her narrative in her autobiography 'Karukku' is an

evidence to the strength and resilience of Dalit women. As Pramod K. Nayar opines

Indian Dalit autobiography must be read less as an individual's 'life-writing' than as a *testimonio*. Using the first autobiography in Tamil by a woman, Bama's *Karukku* (2000), as an illustrative text, it demonstrates how 'autobiography' as a narrative mode is inadequate to capture the various dimension of such writing. (Pramod, 83)

He praises her way of expressing her thoughts and experiences. Through this book, the writer highlights the importance of collective action and solidarity among Dalit women in fighting for their rights and dignity. '*Karukku*' is a powerful narrative that brings to light the often-overlooked experiences of Dalit women. Bama's work challenges readers to confront the deep-seated prejudices and injustices that persist in Indian society, and throws light on the darker side of Indian neglected community.

Bama, born as Faustina Mary Fatima Rani, is a celebrated Tamil Dalit feminist writer whose works critically engage with the issues of caste, gender, and religion in India. This book is her autobiographical account that sheds light on her experiences growing up as a Dalit woman in Tamil Nadu. The term "*Karukku*" refers to the saw-like leaves of the Palmyra tree, symbolizing the sharp, painful, and transformative journey of the marginalized. This tree is seen in India, especially in South India. Bama's choice of an autobiographical format allows her to blend personal experiences with broader social commentary. Her narrative style is straightforward yet powerful, using her life story as a lens to examine the pervasive caste discrimination in Indian society. She was admitted in a convent school to study. Instead of love and affection from the nuns and priests, which she thought she will get, she was humiliated due to her caste. She narrates her childhood experiences, marked by humiliation and exclusion, and her gradual awakening to her Dalit identity. This process of self-discovery is both painful and empowering, as she learns to assert her identity with pride and defiance.

The most pervasive struggle depicted in *Karukku* is caste discrimination. Dalit women, as part of the lowest strata in the Indian caste system, face systemic and entrenched oppression. This discrimination is woven into the fabric of everyday life, affecting their social interactions, educational opportunities, and economic prospects. Bama narrates her childhood experiences where caste

dictated every aspect of life. In school, Dalit children were segregated and humiliated, forced to sit separately and use different facilities, underscoring their lower status. This segregation extends into adulthood. In her book, the writer narrates an incident rather a bad experience which she encounters as a grown up.

"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. 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 will be polluted, apparently." (18)

The place where Dalit people lived was labelled as cheri. So, when people hear the word 'cheri' immediately they react to it as if they have encountered an unwanted person. Such incidents happened in her life most frequently and she has been humiliated every time. Each time she feels hurt but could not do anything in this regard. She was the witness to many incidents related to humiliation, which she later tried to express it in her writings.

In addition to caste-based discrimination, Dalit women including Bama, faced severe gender oppression. They experience a dual burden of marginalization due to their caste and gender. Bama's portrayal of her mother and other women in her community reveals the daily struggles Dalit people face to assert their rights and dignity. In one such incident, Bama witnessed how her community people were treated by the so called upper caste people,

"saw that all the menial jobs were done by Dalits who were abused all the time and treated in a shameful and degrading way... to see even older people trembling and shrinking like small children, frightened by the power and wealth." (23)

She couldn't understand why her people felt afraid when encountered the upper caste people. Despite the oppressive conditions, women exhibit remarkable resilience and strength, often working tirelessly to support their families and communities. However, their efforts to resist and survive often go unrecognized and unsupported, further entrenching their marginalized status. Bama brings out the pathetic situation about Dalit women who are often confined to low-paying, insecure jobs such as agricultural labourers, domestic workers, and

sanitation workers. She says that women from her community does their job with utmost care. Bama feels that her people cleans the dirt and waste from the upper class peoples' house, but their hearts burdened with lots of waste, that is mean thoughts about caste discrimination. These occupations not only offer meagre wages but also expose women to further exploitation and abuse. Bama's own experiences of working in the fields and later as a teacher illustrate the economic challenges faced by Dalit women. Despite their hard work and dedication, they rarely achieve financial stability or upward mobility. The upper class people take them for granted and made them to do the work as slaves. The lack of access to resources, credit, and economic opportunities keep them trapped in a cycle of poverty and dependence. Bama insists that, these people of so called upper caste, wanted Dalit people to work for them, clean their house and take care of their household and never wanted them to be educated. Since they dreaded that these people could over power them in all the ways and there will be no slaves for them to do the work.

Bama feels that education can act as a tool to overcome all hardship. Even education emerges as a critical theme in *Karukku*, representing both a site of struggle and a beacon of hope for Dalit women. Accessing education is fraught with difficulties for Dalit women, who face numerous barriers including financial constraints, discrimination in schools, and societal opposition. Bama's own journey through the education system reflects these challenges. She was humiliated in the school not by the upper caste children but also by nuns who run the school. She emphasizes the transformative potential of education in breaking the chains of caste and gender oppression. However, in spite of facing many hurdles, she continues her studies, purely driven by a desire to uplift herself and her community. She take it as a challenge to prove herself. Her narrative underscores the importance of education in empowering Dalit women to challenge oppressive structures and advocate for their rights. When she was studying in a convent school, she had bitter experiences. She with a heavy heart says

“They all go about filled with caste-hatred. Why even nuns and priests, who claim that their hearts are set upon service to God, certainly discriminate according to caste” (24)

Bama was hurt and bruised in the convent where she studied and later she went back home. But with courage she acquired her education. She says

proudly “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). Her writing is an assertion of her identity as a Dalit woman and a declaration of her refusal to accept subjugation. This struggle for self-respect is not only personal but collective, as she seeks to inspire other Dalit women to recognize their worth and potential. *Karukku* also highlights the role of community and solidarity in the struggles of Dalit women. Despite the pervasive oppression, the sense of community provides strength and support. Dalit women often rely on each other for emotional and practical assistance, creating networks of solidarity that help them cope with their adversities.

Amidst the struggles, the book inspires a lot with a sense of hope. Bama's narrative reflects a deep-seated belief in the possibility of change and progress. This hope is grounded in the resilience and strength of Dalit women, their pursuit of education, and their efforts to assert their rights and identities. Bama's own journey from a marginalized Dalit girl to an educated, empowered woman symbolizes this hope. She says with courage “For, time being, I cannot see my way ahead. Yet I believe it possible to live a meaningful life, a life that is useful to a few others.” (104) Her success in overcoming numerous barriers serves as an inspiration for other Dalit women. It illustrates that with determination, support, and opportunities, Dalit women can transcend their oppressive circumstances and achieve their aspirations. The writer's own educational journey was fraught with challenges, but it ultimately provided her with the means to articulate her experiences and fight for justice. Her writing itself is an act of activism, raising awareness about the injustices faced by Dalit women and calling for societal change. Even though she faced many hardships she was able to overcome all this and move on in her desired path. She gives hope to the future generation of Dalit people. In her work 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 wounded me with their words and deeds. Yet I know I am moving forward slowly step by step” (104)

The writer not only talks for herself but also for her whole community. She even says that her friends those she have met inspired her to engage in her work deeply with attention and made her to realise her responsibilities, and made her to understand her strength. With a great hope she advises her community “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” (25).

Karukku by Bama can be considered as a powerful testament to the struggles and resilience of Dalit women. Through her evocative and honest storytelling, Bama brings to light the harsh realities of caste and gender oppression, while also highlighting the strength and agency of Dalit women. The novel is not just a personal memoir but a collective voice of Dalit women, calling for recognition, justice, and equality. The hope for change lies in the strength of Dalit women, their pursuit of education, and their efforts to assert their rights and identities. Through education, advocacy, and collective action, Dalit women can transform their lives and their communities, breaking the chains of oppression and building a more just and equitable society.

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