Pedagogies from the Margin: Reading *Karukku* as a Dalit Feminist Intervention in Education

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Abstract- This paper examines how Bama's *Karukku* (1992) reimagines education thought the real life experience of a Dalit Christian women. While educational institutions are often considered a place for empowerment and social upliftment, but this autobiographical narrative seeks to reveal the ways in which caste and gender discrimination have come to be embedded in the places of schools and convents. Rather than reading *karukku* as an autobiographical novel, this paper approaches it as a text that challenges dominant structures of knowledge through the use of author's life experience. Bama constructs her narrative around the lives and histories of people who have been excluded from formal academic discourse and this narrative disrupts the normative, upper caste and patriarchal ways of knowing within education. By analyzing selected sections of *karukku* like schooling, religious training and self realization, this paper examines how the writing of Dalit Women exposes contradictions within the spaces that claim moral and intellectual authority. Including Dalit Women's narratives in higher education classes makes an intervention that changes the ethical and epistemological base of those classrooms. Overall, Karukku provides an opportunity to think about education as a space where critical consciousness is nurtured and developed; rather than simply a place where students advance in an institutional sense.

I. INTRODUCTION

In India, Educational institutions are often portrayed as neutral spaces that offer merit, mobility and empowerment. Access to higher education was celebrated as an example of social progress in case of women. However, the narratives that surround educational systems often mask the deep structure of inequality that exists within educational systems. For Dalit women, education is more than just a pathway to advancement; it is also a field fraught with caste humiliation, gender discrimination and institutional exclusion. And Bama's *Karukku* provides one of the most compelling autobiographical accounts of these experiences. Bama, a Dalit Christian woman, spent part of her life in a convent. Her story describes the caste-based discrimination she faced in both secular and religious schools.

The text also highlights how caste operates in subtle yet very real ways within systems that present themselves as having both moral and spiritual authority. This paper argues that Karukku should be understood as both an autobiography and a pedagogical intervention. The text challenges dominant epistemological structures which exclude Dalit knowledge through its demand that people know their lived experiences. This study uses Dalit feminist standpoint theory to investigate how Bama's narrative transforms education into a space for developing critical awareness instead of institutional certification.

II. CASTE, GENDER AND EDUCATIONAL SPACES

Education in India has been shaped by caste hierarchies for a long time. Although constitutional rights ensure equality, sociological studies show that discrimination still exists subtly within schools and colleges. Dalit students' participation in class, their interaction with peers and teachers attitude towards them is often affected by caste bias. In Karukku, Bama shares her early experiences in school where caste is visible and also accepted. She even tells a story where an elder from her community delivered food to the

upper caste people without making physical contact and this act reinforced the idea of untouchability. Even though this incident happened outside of the school, it created a lasting impression in her mind and her views on caste and its impact on education. To her the school does not serve as a place separate from social reality but it reflects the same hierarchies. The text thus highlights the gap between institutional ideals and lived realities. By documenting these experiences, more than revealing the discrimination, Bama elevates everyday incidents to a critique of institutional structures.

When Bama writes about silence, humiliation and resistance, she questions the system that differentiates people based on caste bias. Because of this writing, karukku becomes a part of Dalit feminist discussion as it challenges instiutions like school, church and society that pretends to maintain equality but ignores caste discrimination.

2.1. Gendered Dimensions of Caste Oppression

One of the significant point karukku foregrounds is that how women get affected differently due to the prejudice. It highlights how women and girls get affected by both caste and gender. Dalit girls are pressured to meet social expectations imposed upon them such as not to be obedient and silent, not to question others or speak up for themselves. They voices are suppressed and are forced to face societal pressure along with their economic hardships. School becomes a confusing place for Dalit students where education becomes a battleground as their aspirations exist along with humiliation. By sharing these experiences, Bama turns personal sufferings into a shared awareness paving way for critical reflection and social change.

III. A DALIT FEMINIST STANDPOINT

Dalit feminist scholar provides us a framework for understanding the epistemic significance of Dalit texts in university syllabus. Sharmila Rege (1998) argues that Dalit women "talk differently" because their experiences of caste and gender provide different type of knowledge. Rege also insist on the theoretical value of experience. Experience is not just personal story or subjective but it itself can produce theory. Similarly, Gopal Guru (2002) critiques mainstream social sciences for treating Dalit experience as mere data while granting theoretical authority to upper-caste scholars. If the theories are written by upper caste scholars by considering the Dalit experience as just a data, then Dalits become subjects and not theorists. He also argues that Dalit does not get a chance to interpret and calls for recognition of experiential knowledge as theory in its own right. These interventions are crucial for reading *karukku* more than an autobiography.

In Bama's narrative, experience is described not just as a passive suffering but it was analysed, interpreted and connected to the broader social structure. She insists on the standpoint epistemology – knowledge emerging from the marginalized people and their experience, and this standpoint does not claim universal neutrality. Instead it acknowledges its position within caste and gender discriminations. The power of *karukku* lies in the rootedness of it in Dalit women's life rather than pretending to be neutral.

IV. *KARUKKU* AS PEDAGOGICAL INTERVENTION

Reading *Karukku* as a pedagogical text rather only as a literary text can transform how students think about education and society. Drawing on Paulo Freire's, education should be a process of developing critical consciousness instead of transferring and depositing information into the student's minds. Although Freire wrote it in a different context, his focus on dialogue and raising consiousness aligns with Bama's approach. Through storytelling, Bama exposes the harsh realities of caste discrimination and invites the readers to confront them. When taught in the classroom, this text challenges the assumptions about meritocracy and neutrality in education. It also challenges linguistic hierarchies. Bama's use of everyday colloquial language in her texts resists the idea of literary elitism in literature and affirms community speech as a legitimate expression. This linguistic choice becomes a form of pedagogy showing that marginalized voices are valid and meaningful. In this sense *Karukku* acts as a teaching tool and including it in university curriculum does more than expand the literary canon. It encourages

students to rethink how knowledge is defined, whose voices are considered legitimate and how caste, gender and education are interconnected.

V. REIMAGING HIGHER EDUCATION

If education is seen solely as credential acquisitions, *Karukku* may appear as a tale of disappointment and struggle. However, if education is viewed as fostering critical awareness, the text itself becomes an educational experience. At first Bama accepts discrimination without questioning and later start questioning caste, religion and institutions. This transition from blind acceptance to questioning awareness represents transformative learning. Higher educational institutions committed to inclusivity should place this text as the centre of the curriculum instead of adding as supplementary, as they bring forward perspectives that have long been absent in academic discussions. By bringing attention to the voices that were historically ignored, texts like Karukku make institutions reflect on their own structures. It does not mean romanticizing marginality; instead, acknowledging that knowledge production has not been equal in society and some groups had more power to produce knowledge while others were excluded. Therefore, these texts should be seen more than a story of suffering – a powerful educational texts that brings critical awareness about caste and inequality. Including Dalit women's narratives in universities helps challenge traditional hierarchies of knowledge and move toward epistemic justice.

VI. CONCLUSION

Karukku reflects how these institutions claim that they stand for moral authority yet still maintain caste hierarchies. It highlights the contradictions in educational and religious institutions. Through writing her experiences of humiliation, inequality and resistance, Bama analyzes how institutions misuse their powers. From a Dalit feminist perspective, Karukku contributes to academic discourse by emphasizing experience as an acceptable form of knowledge. By revealing the realities of caste dis, she exposes the gap between institutional ideals and the real life experience of the Dalit people. Dalit literary texts are important because they change how people think about education, authority and inclusivity. When read and taught in academic spaces, these texts motivates students as well as educators to analyze deeply about how caste and gender affect education till date. Such engagement can foster students to reflect and understand more deeply that knowledge should rise from many different voices, not just from elite scholars. This leads to more inclusive knowledge production.

Reimagining higher education requires more than policy reform. It requires creation of new definition of knowledge by including the voices of those who are not normally recognized as being intellectually valid and their narratives should be recognized as theoretical contributions and pedagogical knowledge. It shows that Dalit women's experiences are valuable sources of knowledge and theory. When taught in universities, the text encourages critical thinking about caste, gender and inequality in education.

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