

Bama's *Karukku*: Reflection of Distress, Humiliation and Confrontation of the Dalits

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Abstract

Since ages we have been hearing about the inequality practiced in our society. Earlier before the time of Indian independence it was the Britishers who were ruling and exploiting Indians. The Indians in their own country were living under a restricted ambience. They were not allowed to enjoy their fundamental rights. Slowly and steadily they started becoming slaves of the Britisher. When everything started getting beyond its perimeter Indians decided to protest against the ill practice of the Britishers and soon they got freedom from them. But the subjugation and mistreatment did not eradicate completely from the Indian society.

Earlier it was the Britishers who had drawn a line between the whites and non-whites but after Independence Indians also like Britishers divided the country between the rich and the poor or the upper caste and the lower caste. Or in other words, the policy of Divide and Rule which was introduced by the whites remained in practice by the Indians. People belonging to the upper strata of the society started humiliating and discriminating people on the basis of their caste and financial status. Dalits are among one such community who were degraded, suppressed, marginalized and were considered burden in their own land. Their prolonged suffering compelled them to raise their voice against the oppressive forces and find a respectable position in the society.

Many Dalit writers came forward to pen down the harsh realities of the weaker section of the society. Bama is among one such Tamil Dalit woman writer who through her first semi-autobiographical book *Karukku* wanted to let people know about the pains and sufferings they had undergone while on the other side wanted to encourage people to fight against the brutalities of caste discrimination. So the present paper will try to analyze Bama's work *Karukku* as the reflection of distress, humiliation and confrontation of the Dalits.

Keywords: Ambience, Perimeter, Eradicate, Humiliation, Dalit, Degraded, Suppressed, Marginalized, Distress, Confrontation.

Since ages we have been witnessing the discrimination made in the society on the basis of class and caste. Earlier when India had not got freedom from the Britishers the society was demarcated between whites and non-whites. The situation of the non-whites was similar to that of the people belonging to the lower caste and class of the present time and the whites used to rule over them just like the upper class dominates over the weaker section of the society nowadays. These meek classes were always subjugated, suppressed and looked down upon by the superior caste. They were believed to be so impure that their presence was considered to be polluting. These Dalits were not allowed to live with other communities so they were allocated separate place to live. Not only this, they were not allowed to draw water from the public well. After experiencing such brutal behaviour they decided to raise their voice against such immoral act. So they took the help of literature to express their pains and subjugation.

This is how Dalit Literature came into prominence and through their narratives they have portrayed the stark realities of the plight of Dalits. It has given a voice to the discrimination, exploitation and marginalization that is experienced by the Dalits in the Indian society. Through this writing these marginalized people want

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to eradicate disparity and expect equality and human dignity. It strongly rejects literary tradition like untouchability and casteism. The content of this writing is a kind of revolt against injustice, brutality and subordination felt by them. Arjun Dangle writes:

Dalit Literature is not simply literature, it is associated with a movement to bring about change. It represents the hopes and ambitions of a new society and new people.

The earlier generation of the Dalits was mostly engaged in meagre works and was not paid high wages. In addition to that they were also not aware about the importance of education so they remained backward and allowed themselves to be exploited by the higher class. But the second generations of the Dalit have heard a lot about the pain and suffering from their ancestors so they decided to put an end to this practice. As a result they started joining the educational institution and acquire high degrees. The second generation of Dalits uplifted their position by getting good job opportunities and made a remarkable place in the society. While some Dalits opted to become a writer, due to this many writers like Bama, Baby Kamble, Arjun Dangle and O.P. Valmiki came into existence with their own stories of distress and suffering. Bama is considered to be the first Tamil Dalit writer who has dealt with the trauma in her work. *Karukku* is one such work through which she has started her writing career.

In the book titled *Karukku* Bama has very beautifully portrayed the realistic picture of the plight of Dalits and a struggle to find their identity. She has used her own personal experience in her writing. The book earlier was written in Tamil but for its worldwide recognition it was translated into many languages so that it could attract many readers. The book was more of an appeal to bring about a change in the society and a plea to consider them equal. Bama says:

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. Those who have found their happiness by exploiting us are not going to go easily. It is we who have to place them where they belong and bring about a changed and just society where all are equal. (Bama, 28)

The change in the society can only be brought through education. But in the case of Dalits they were not given an opportunity to study in an educational institute like the students of other social castes. Bama states:

In this society if you are born into 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 a 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)

They were discriminated in every walk of life whether it is a school or a church. The Dalits or Paraya, other name given by Bama, they were degraded, humiliated and are not treated like human beings. They are made to work like a beast and were given very low wages. Upper caste people do not appreciate their hard work and dedication, instead they use to abuse and treat them in a shameful and degrading way. They believe that these castes are meant for doing such kind of a job and do not have their own dignity and self-respect. The Paraya's are born to become a slave. Dalit believes that "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" (28). Upper caste always comes as a hindrance in the way of progress. They do not want to see them uplifting themselves by providing education. Due to the unavailability of teaching the grip stays in the hands of the superior class and are treated and moulded in whatever way they want.

But slowly and suddenly with the ravages of time people from the Dalit community start coming forward for receiving education. As they have realized that education is the only medium through which they can raise their voice against the exploitation done by the upper caste. But there were also some people who have accepted themselves to be inferior from the other community and thinks that it is their destiny to indulge

in a menial job and work as slaves. Bama has given many such incidences of hardships and biasness faced by Dalit. The Naickers or the upper caste does come in direct contact with the Paraya's as it was in their mindset that if anything is touched directly by the Parayas will become dirty. The author says in her novel like this:

How could they believe that it was disgusting if a Paraya held that package in his hands, even though the vadai had been wrapped first in the banana leaf, and then parceled in paper? (Bama, 15)

Not only this Bama had also undergone humiliation and trauma in a college as a student belonging to a lower sect getting scholarship and wearing same clothes for weeks due to her poor financial condition. The teacher made her stand in front of thousands of students and was ridiculed for not getting enough food to eat at home. The warden of her hostel says:

Look at the Cheri children! When they stay here, they eat their fill and look as round potatoes. But look at the state in which they come back from home—just skin and bone! (Bama, 20)

She was embarrassed and stigmatized for being born in the lower caste. These lower caste people were treated as if they have not paid the fees like everyone. So at last Bama decides to become nun thinking that this would keep her away from all sorts of humiliation which she has faced in her earlier life. But the treatment of the upper caste Christians towards the Dalit Christians was also the same. They did not allow the Dalit Christian to sing in the church choir and also their dead are not allowed to bury behind the church but they were given separate graveyard at the outskirts. So with a heavy heart Bama leaves church and decides to choose some other profession as the motive for which she has converted her religion in order to escape from the old orthodox Hindu behaviour remain futile. "It doesn't seem to matter whether people are educated or not. They all go about filled with caste hatred. Why, even the nuns and priests, who claim that their hearts are set upon service to God, certainly discriminate according to caste" (Bama, 27)

Bama in her novel *Karukku* shares her own personal experience of joining a Church order so that she can help people of her caste to raise their place in the society. But after going there she comes to know the hidden reality of the priests and the nuns who teach equality in the ways of god but fails to practice in real life. According to the author people of the upper caste always comes in the way of progress of Dalits. They do not want Dalits to improve their social and financial condition because if they become strong then it will be great threat to their position. The people of lower caste may stand boldly for their rights and will acquire their position and power.

So we can say that Bama has very beautifully selected the title of the book *Karukku* which means palmyra leaf, whose edges have a shape of the sword and the Dalits have been wounded with this palmyra leaves. But in the context of the book the wounds were of the exploitation and the discrimination made on the basis of caste. These abrasions leave such a deep impression in their minds and hearts that they try hard to overcome out of this but the society does not allow them to escape. Through this autobiographical book she is appealing to her caste that they should be given respect in the society and be treated like human beings. We could not just look at this book as a piece of work which reflects the trauma of Dalits but it is a voice against the ill practice of the upper caste towards Dalits.

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