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A Critical Reading of Bama's *Karukku* in a Postmodern Perspective

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Abstract:

Dalit is a symbol of change and voice. During the nineteen nineties much of the Dalit women's writings found its voice, but there was no long-lasting effect on the public. But with the emergence of the Dalit writers like Sivagami and Bama, it was a sort of counter-discourse to the masculinist discourse. In Dalit writing, Bama's *Karukku* creates an enduring space with a positive attitude. *Karukku* of Bama has created a readership spectrum across the globe. The critical scrutiny of this tale defies a simple and narrow approach. This paper seeks to examine the book from the angles of postmodernism and feminist perspectives. The conclusion is that it is a story of eternal, timeless nature belonging to the age-old problems of Indian society which could have been told five centuries earlier and may hold true for five centuries later too.

Keywords: Alienation, Oppression, Marginalization, Humiliation.

Helene Cixous asserted that writing by a woman has reflected her individual and productive space in society. If it occurred, there could be a great change in the lives of women in the social and cultural domains. Bama has made Cixous' idea on the source of the uplifting position of women true through her mission of writing. Mainly, Bama has shown both dark and bright facets of marginalized women in Tamil Nadu. With the aid of her writings like *Karukku*, *Sangati*, and *Vanmam*, there is a lot of scope to the Dalit women to revisit their lives and able to comprehend their strengths and weaknesses. Even there is much scope to these women to cherish their strengths to free from seen and unseen fetters of oppression.

Here are the glimpses of events that move around oppressed or people from marginalized society.

Ostracized Christian missionaries had the tacit support of the British raj. However, the Hindu elite maintained an excellent relationship with the rulers from the days of the

Plassey battle. Their main objective was to keep the Muslims at bay and develop the financial base. It was Mir Jumla, a Persian Noble of Aurangzeb, who suggested port cities to develop with minimal Mughal control. The port cities of Madras, Calcutta, and Bombay drew the Chettiars, Marwaris, and Parsis to support the British. In light of the above, the converts of Christian banner with low-class background were only treated contemptuously. Even the British could not ensure freedom from age-old discrimination, originating from the Hindu castes system. Ram Mohan Roy's Brahmo Samaj did combine the best of Hinduism and Christianity but could not go to the lower strata for alleviating the pains of the new Christians who underwent conversion to end poverty and inequality. Into such a family Bama was born. However, her father got posted in the army perhaps due to a friendly and loyal mindset of a converted man. This improvement in family status does not find much mention in her writings. However, her boldness and writing habit surely can be traced to her father.

The book is not exactly an autobiography. It is also not at all chronological. What stands out is the series of * anecdotes whose intensity varies depending on the scar it has created in her young mind. It is almost a random ensemble of such harrowing experiences, even some are repetitions of the previous part only either amplified or reduced in colors.

Bama in her "Preface" to the book discusses the symbolical and intimate relationship between *Karukku* and her life. She writes :

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 desperate urge to break, throw away and destroy this bonds; and when the chains were shattered into fragments, the blood that was spilled then; all these, taken together (*Karukku* xiii)

Her love of nature has linkage with her statement that "Dalits are not Hindus, they worship nature". This is linked even with the Adivasis and Girijans of Bihar- Odisha belt where dual allegiance prevails. While half of the family goes by Christianity, the other half by Hinduism. For outside it is Hinduism, but at home, it is Christianity with food habits including beef consumption. Love for nature is synonymous with the worship of nature. Basic Dalit Christian seem to differ from the idol-worshiping Hindu counterparts.

With very noble intentions, she has avoided being dubbed as a Christian Dalit woman. She would prefer to remain as only a Dalit woman hindered by caste and gender. Christianity is a bone factor in terms of education. Linkage & similarity with Hindu Dalits has compounded the problem of social status. It is easy for the missionaries who failed to

redeem the pledge of liberating these families who turned to Christianity as savior. Although they have got benefit in the spheres of education and financial matters, for centuries, they could not avoid the tag of the lower class and even subjected oppression. Bama has declared that the role of religion by the Dalits for purely to sustain their lives and supposed solace or identity and this paradox was realized by Dalits themselves. In her own words, it is as “...to maintain their own falsehoods.” (94)

Though her maximum disappointment has come from the church as a nun, the reality would be that her expectation was high and so the disenchantment was accentuated compelling her to speak out. Otherwise, why should a beneficiary talk against a benefactor, however, ugly, sick and dirty it could be? When she turned into sisterhood her imagination was of a heaven where the affliction of society experienced by her would vanish and a new brave world would emerge to install her in the land of “God thy kingdom come”. It didn’t happen somehow. The ghost of the upper class and lower class tussle troubled her. She found too many anomalies in sermons and reality. She decided to quit a financially comfortable niche to venture into unknown and novel paths for the rest of her life.

It is at this juncture that her father’s inheritance must then have prompted her to write down her feelings only to set relief from the pangs of heart and soul. To get liberated from the nightmares, she returned to writing and publishing, though she did not want to publish it in the beginning. But today millions would relish what she wrote in a narrative style, having the flavor of the streets, mud of the land and darkness of painful nights.

In her pious intention of penning down her trauma, angst, self-pity, and despair, she has had no mood to become famous as she is today. Her childlike frankness may be construed as the outpouring of a rebel. It is not so. It is the innocence of the soul that has been stirred with a pint of poison. She has not been able to digest the experience of individual and communitarian humiliation. It is as if God has spoken through her to undo the wrongs of the society, either now or in the next century. But surely some of her pints would be vindicated and the ills of society which she has pointed out would be eradicated so that the abominable happenings under the cover of our street democratic tradition would not be swept under the carpet as being done today.

In a series of handicaps she has faced, she has been in the deplorable condition due to caste, gender, religion and also being a single woman to fend for herself in the jungle of the society in which we all are thriving but not really living.

As of today, Dalit literature has become a trademark. It helps to tell the stories. It helps to sell books. It helps to say that we are sympathetic if not in action but at least in

words. The so-called elite of the country has the pleasure of research, reading, discussing and often doing chest-beating in sorrow in private and in public. The present story is from a person who has been oppressed, depressed and kept under check at every stage of life. Often feeling helpless against the almost insurmountable problems. Even the constitution of India has failed to guarantee a place of honor for the Christian Dalits being treated as quasi-alien in the country of birth. A Hindu Dalit has the privilege of being treated as Scheduled Caste but not a Christian Dalit.

Often, the reviews have conducted that it is feminism she is focusing well, she has talked about the slavery of her mother and grandmother. She has talked about the helplessness of a woman being beaten up by a drunken husband. However, these are part of the national and even international psyche that women cannot be matched for men. It is not out of place to record that Hillary Clinton lost the presidential election partly because she was a woman. Even in the USA, the great champion of liberty and equality could not ensure her the place she deserved making way for a person who is just escaping impeachment by a whisker.

Feminism is something that she has discussed. However, it is not the center of gravity of the story, which hinges on the societal errors in placing the people wrongly just because of a place of birth. This is a more fundamental problem than what the role of women could cause. If feminism is a ripple or even a strong wave, the degradation due to birth is a cataclysmic story that the child understands pretty soon as she hears and learns the alphabet. That "their art demand" you have to live in the hell for all your life. You are sentenced to a dog's life.

It is at this point of analysis that it is pertinent to analyze if the label of postmodernism can apply to the work of Bama - Postmodern literature is usually characterized by unreliable narration, metafiction, intertextuality, and self-reflexivity. It has set the style of writing in the post-world war-II period. The novels of Vonnegut and Pynchon are important indicators of this type of literature. Of course, architecture, films TV's and various other allied areas have been affected by the postmodern concepts. It is an action to the assumed certainty of scientific or objective effects to explain reality. Modernist thinking revolves around the search of an abstract truth of life whereas post-modernist thoughts believe that there is no universal truth, abstract or otherwise. Moreover, modernist view constructs a coherent worldview while the post-modernist angle tries to remove the difference between high and low

Critics of postmodernism are of the opinion that it is meaningless and promotes obscurantism and uses relativism to the extent of crippling most of judgment calls. Often postmodernism is understood as a representative of obscurantism and dubious knowledge.

According to Simon Malpas - if postmodernism was a space for debate, then the debate had moved elsewhere in the 2000's. Hutcheon feels that postmodernism is over by the 2002 period. The only similarity of Bama's writing with postmodernism seems to be the timing- both are of the same period. Otherwise, the differences are far too many. Bama's writing cannot be clubbed under unreliable narration. Rather its account is a hundred percent truth. She has to be congratulated for bringing the real stuff into life by declaring that there is little to imagine while the pages are full of colloquial Tamil.

Ambedkar was a scholar par excellence. His sense of Social Justice brought him to the debating podium versus Mahatma Gandhi. Their Poona pact that reflects how close Mahatma treated his legal exponent in a matter of polemics. Still unsure of the fate of his followers, Ambedkar toyed with the idea of conversion. Finally, after evaluating the suitability of many religions he and his followers embraced Buddhism which even now claims intellectual superiority and over Hinduism. His discussion with Periyar had an impact in Tamilnadu(then Madras presidency). As of today, he has been the icon of the lower classes, depressed groups broadly labeled under the umbrella of Dalit. Natural to the geographical affinity, the influence of his isolationist movement did have an initial base in Maharashtra later within few decades his Pan-India image has become established.

It remains to be seen what could have unfolded if he had heeded the advice of peers and remained permanently in the confines of the Hindu framework. His powerful personality could have been helpful in overall integration. However, driven by sort of Identity crises he took a rather hasty step and created a Neo- Buddhist followers who have got a separate identity and the political niche but not been able to be integrated with the mainstream.

When an intelligent and powerful personality like Ambedkar who struggled for many solutions for Dalits did not succeed in its purpose could the writings of Bama be considered to have the potential to have the impact? If it is worth noting that people have a short memory of the movements. Literature is different. It records the thoughts of writers more accurately in appealing tones so that the readers' mind gets deeply etched regarding the contents and imageries. A dry political thought is no match for a colorful soul affecting poignant story depicting the trauma of being down trodden and the denizens of this mad Jungle of Castes. Like Bankim Chandra's *Anand Math* in Bengali which has survived many generations of Indian leaders, the content of Bama's book has the potential of being read and re-read and

being passed on from generation to generation as a tale so realistic that one would like to see that this never happened to anybody, anywhere and anytime.

It is heard that we can form an opinion on whether the Ambedkarian movement will survive the book or vice versa. Both have same direction same tenor, same fervor against the Chinese wall of untouchability and caste factor. Yet, Ambedkar fought seriously against Untouchability, Casteism and the politics of emancipation, whereas Bama stands on the forefront and fought on behalf of a marginalized and double marginalized community.

The kind of publicity had generated and the spectrum of reader comments that the story can ensure and is going to last longer. An indication is that when the caste moments were going on in the days of Periyar, Gandhi, and Ambedkar, the incidents were rampant and common. As of today, incidents have surely reduced. Hence, this singleness of the writing could be the outstanding factor why it would inflict deeper scars in our minds such that any reader once come across these writings would always recollect its impact lucidity, the vividness of discussions and perspicacity of vision.

The authors of famous books are generally of two types. Someone born rich who have the pleasure of visiting many places and meeting many persons to have an anecdote ready. Some others have seen struggles who came from economically disadvantaged backgrounds in which survival was itself a question. Balzac a prolific writer in French had the maximum pecuniary problems.

.He had written to live and to survive. He wrote in autobiographical ways regarding exploiting rich and elder women. It claimed that what Napoleon could not do with a sword, he would do with his pen. In a way, he is the father of European novels having had a lead over the British novelists like Charles Dickens. In India Tagore is an example of the first variety of writers who had a surplus to even talk about their books abroad.

In this final analysis Bama, of course, does not belong to the category of Tagore but can come close to the class of Balzac in some aspects. However, the comparison is not exactly as she did not write to make money to live, while Balzac did. The intensity of deprivation trauma and frustration may have been similar but not the cause. Bama's intentions have been idealistic. She wrote to relieve her pain, to cover her wounds and to come back to her world. She did not write for publicity and money or with any other purpose.

Instead of suspected undertones of postmodernism the book *Karukku* has an unmistakable strain of alienation. As seen in Kamala Markandeya's novels or Anitha Desai

stories this talks about socio-economic and cultural turmoil leading to a certain kind of alienation. A Nun who is sort of “ostracized” would certainly feel alienated in her own home space-own home land. As the initial expectations were high, the degree of alienation would be considerable. In the final run, however, the feeling of alienation does get less when she seeks solace in the framework of her own house and society to get back to her moorings atlast.

Karukku is seeking to get the age-old evils of the society out. It is talking about the truth. It does not know if reforms would ever happen. It, however, is sure that the book would be a record of many humiliating incidents happening in the framework of her birth.

The book appears to have some influence on Ambedkar's thoughts as well as the Christian exterior. Behind this veneer, one can sense the Gandhian touch and Hindu ambiance. This is as a validity of timelessness. Though persons from lower classes have risen upon exceptional quality bases in this country, the problems due to humiliation, particularly the feeling of untouchability, of the shadow polluting a higher caste person are unique wrong features of Hinduism.

On one hand, it is a liberal faith having no restrictions on how one prays, on the other hand, it tends to classify people based on the caste. Evengreat Mahatma's concept of “Harijan” has not been able to ameliorate the overall conditions. Evenover fifty years of independence have done nothing to eradicate age-old practices – the root cause, the genesis of the pint up anti humiliation thoughts of Bama. So, timelessness is one feature that gives a more apt label. One is reminded of AlBeruni's India written after the raids of Mahmud of Ghazani. The writings of those days have a fresh look even today. The story of those days matches with even today's life. This could happen to Bama's complaint as expressed in “Karukku”. It appears to be postmodern in approach.

Subjectivity and Skepticism are the key elements of Post Modernism. Bama constructs a subjectivity for herself by addressing others. She speaks of the distinction between victims and affected. Through her personal experiences, Bama narrates the atrocities and sufferings of her community. She highlights the complicity between class and caste in post-independent India. Her Karukku remains as the testimony of voice, which reflects the voiceless. Bama declares about the painful existence of her community as “...they who have been oppressed, are now themselves like the double-edged Karukku.” (p.13)

Postmodernism pursues truth and advance human progress and considers all knowledge to be relative and established by groups based upon the beliefs of their own

culture. Bama succeeded in bringing out the transcendent realities, unequal power relationships, and exploitation, she pleaded for the Dalit cause, social reform, and change. Through her writings and education, she is away from alienation. *Karukku* is significant as it exhibits the public domain shameful events. Bama's ethics made her break the aesthetic of silence around issues of caste oppression, social inequality, and biases of the legal system.

Devoid of all the external factors including adjectives like Christian, Roman Catholic the tussles of Pariyaand opposing caste can as well be the story of Bihar, Odisha, or Bengal or Uttar Pradesh with caste name being changed. Extrapolating this Bama could be a bold lady in another part of the country calling a spade as spade speaking her mind, crying her heart out and still maintaining singlehood in personal life to perhaps convey another message, that she is feeling complete even alone or that she is afraid of again being humiliated by marriage partner having the gender upper hand.

Once again, we need to understand that the frame of her story is entirely in India. It has happened in India; it can happen not in India and it may happen again after centuries also- but only in India. Translated, transplanted, transliterated, transferred, to another area with layers, it can have the same belongingness the story has to be in Tamilnadu. On the other hand, if we take a cynical view the book would not have got the publicity it has if it didn't have the Christian color if it didn't have the translation of Holmstrom's. The international term roman catholic is sufficient to open up eyes and ears in the western world justifying greater readership and consequent following.

This analysis, however, does not undermine the immense strength and popularity the book has generated on its own. One can, of course, see that if it was written in Hindi, set in the hinterland of Hindi and talked regarding some Benaras Hindu establishment, the interest could have been much less. Overall, the impact the book has had is quite immense. The issue it has raised is virtually unsurmountable. The problem may last for a few more centuries. The book has a clear message for all. It is above the religion, caste, gender factors it is supposed to highlight. It transcends itself to be an eternal tale of the suffering of some distinct section of mankind (Nay, woman kind). It is an eternal timeless story not about her alone but of a sizable populace.

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