Silence Speaks: A Study of Bama’s *Karukku*

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**Abstract**

Bama, one of the first Dalit women writers, articulates the thoughts, aspirations and anxieties, hopes and fears, past and present of her society. This paper attempts to explain the existential predicament of the dalit women and the protagonist’s struggle against patriarchy as depicted in Bama’s *Karukku*. Bama assumes herself to be a bird whose wings have been clipped, yet she desires to live a meaningful life. She feels that for the better survival of women empowerment of women is necessary and it is possible only by irradiating inequality and untouchability, by empowering them through education and employment and by taking pride in their identity. It is in this context that Bama’s *Karukku* becomes relevant.

**Keywords**- oppression; discrimination; gender; patriarchy

Dalit literature is a writing that parallels the revolutionary movement spearheaded by Dr. B. P Ambedkar with a view to bring about psycho social transformations in the minds of the oppressed. Dalit literature, a strong oppositional voice not only raises important questions but also narrate the ability of the people in the margins to fight against all odds and injustices.

Women are always more oppressed and are victims of male domination. The plight of dalit women in Indian society is horrible as they are oppressed on the basis of class, gender and caste. But nowadays women have started protesting against the discrimination, oppression and injustices leveled upon them and are trying to create a female space for themselves. In this context the work of women writers who come out to the mainstream to explore the problems faced by the oppressed women become highly important. There are a large number of women writers in Dalit discourses who brought dalit texts into mainstream visibility. The dalit women have started searching for the root cause of these injustices leveled upon them. Women in these discourses bring their own identification as women as well as dalit. It is in this context that Bama’s *Karukku* becomes relevant.

Born as Faustina Mary in 1958 in Puthupatti village in Viruthunagar district in Southern Tamilnadu; Bama, one of the first Dalit women writers, wrote *Karukku* (1992) which indeed shook the literary world with its unique Dalit theme and language. Bama is one of the first dalit women writers to be read and published. Bama’s life is a process of self reflection and a recovery from institutional and social betrayal. Dalit autobiographies are microcosms that represent the lives of dalits and *Karukku* which brought with it a whirl wind of change captured the immediate attention of the readers. The book describes Bama’s life from childhood to adulthood. *Karukku*
translated into English by Lakshmi Homstrom reflects Bama’s transformation of perceptions; imparts values of self esteem and social consciousness among the dalits and conveys the life they have experienced.

According to Bama Dalit Literature is “Liberation literature like Black Literature, Feminist Literature and Communist- Socialist Literature”. Bama’s contribution to dalit literature is significant in the use of dalit vocabulary. Bama uses a oral folk language, the spoken language of her people which is familiar to her society in her works. According to her “there are traces of the agony and ecstasy of the dalits, the direct and emotional outbursts, the collective identity, the mockery and caricature of the immediate oppressors, the supernatural powers of oracle and the mythical heroism: these are the several elements for the reconstruction of a conscious Dalit literature’(97-98).

The central theme in her works is the condition of dalit women and it is portrayed through the protagonists struggle against patriarchy Karukku was well received by the readers and critics. It begins with the first person narration. The first person narrator articulates the traumatic experience of caste discrimination from the stand point of dalit women. The narration moves from past to present in exploring the various events that happened in her life and that of the dalit in a caste based society. The novel moves from the village to convent with the harrowing experiences of a dalit child and some childhood memories which through light on dalit identity formations within South Indian cultures.

The plight of the dalit women is far more horrible in the Indian society as they are oppressed on the basis of caste, class and sex. They have to be subservient in all areas. Unemployed unmarried women are not treated with due respect. Dalit women have been described as the silent suffering minority in the works of upper caste and dalit male writer. They are denied voice and the dalit women withers away at the margins of such literature. Being illiterate they are the ones most exploited peripheral groups in the society. Dalit women is been sexually exploited, education is been denied to her and there is also caste race bias. Within her own family she is been alienated by the dominant male and are considered as mere objects for sexual satisfaction and for reproduction and are often defined in terms of the other. They have been labeled ugly, sluggish and unintelligent. They have been often asked to identify themselves before others and undergo color test and are never treated with respect.

It is the patriarchal division that defines woman as a marginalized creature. As Simon de Beavior states “It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine”(16). The condition of Dalit women in their society is lowered and they are lowered into mere objects. For Bama writing was to liberate Dalits, the women and children. Bama’s writings celebrates dalit women’s life, resilience and creativity and every where she suffer humiliation each and every time. Karukku becomes the testimony of not only her own life but also the life of dalits. Her decision to become a nun and later realizing the situation that every where the situation of dalits is the same, she walked out of it. Later she questions “Why. Is it impossible for the Harijan to study or what”? (19).

The tension throughout Karukku is between the self and the community: the narrator leaves the status of religious women in order to join another as a Dalit woman. We are given a very full picture of the way in which the Church ordered and influenced the lives of the Dalit Catholics. The major problem for all dalit women is the denial of education. Education is denied t the under
privileged and it is the upper class who decides the quality and quantity of education. According to Periyar’s view, “To empower women, he (Periyar, E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker) believed that she should have information and knowledge of herself and her body (232).

In Karukku we encounter many characters: Ponthan, the thief, Kaaman, the village idiot, with good cooking skills and Oodan, the wife beater. Bama uses confessional conversational mode of narration and focuses on those lives that would be treated by others as trivial and unworthy and it is the ordinariness of her works that captures one’s mind. The narrator and the characters use the non-standardized, spoken dalit vocabulary. Bama’s Karukku, a testimony of not only Bama’s life but also the life of Dalits as a whole; unfolds the various problems which are responsible for the sufferings of the Dalits.

“Literature does not grow in a vacuum, it is given impetus, shape, direction and even areas of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society”, says Ngugi wa Thiong’o in his preface to Home Coming. Political and social atmosphere motivated Bama to write. In the opening chapter of Karukku begins with an introduction of the people and village. Bama traces the geographical details of her village and comments that to the east of the village lays the cemetery. The dalits live next to that and they are treated as dead. The divide between the upper class and dalits is thus in a way maintained. They are denied their identity and history. The evil of untouchability is prevalent there and Bama’s try to oppose it by asserting her identity is highly notable. Karukku also portrays how people are identified by their streets name and discusses the life of a Dalit Catholic Christian women in retrospect and focuses on the caste-based atrocities in her village, experiences of untouchability in the Catholic convent and the final breaking away from the nunnery.

Karukku focuses on two main aspects namely caste and religion which caused great pain in the heart of Bama. Until her third standard in school Bama has never heard of untouchability. She comes to know about her community’s pathetic state by the act of handing over of the sweets using a string to an upper class person by a dalit elder. Bama’s anger against this and her longing to grab that packet and pollute it with her dalit hands throw light at the malicious system of caste divide. Bama’s elder brother shows her right path and tells her that education is the only way to attain equality by which she can prove herself. Throughout her education, Bama finds that wherever she goes, there is a painful reminder of her caste in the form of untouchability. The government offers the financial grants and special tuitions to Harijans. It was more of a humiliation to her as it put forward her caste.

Bama has an ambivalent attitude towards Christianity. Bama insists that she doesn’t wish to imprison Christ in religion. The significant aspect presented in the novel is the oppression of dalit Christians in the hands of the church. Karukku depicts how the dalits are not allowed to sing in the church choir. There were separate schools in the same campus one for the rich, the elitist upper caste Christians and non Christians and the other for poor and dalit Christians.

She portrays the prejudices based on caste leveled upon dalit children through the warden sister in Karukku who could not abide low caste and poor children “these people get nothing to eat at home; they come here and they grow fat”,(17). Bama retreats by saying “Why, is it impossible for the Harijan to study or what?”(19). “I knew I should not touch their goods or clothes. I should never come close to where they are… these were their rules” (46). Sexual exploitation of dalit women, agencies of race, gender, class and caste which repress the sexuality of the girl, the
denial of private space and notion of silence as protest is also portrayed in the novel. By sheer hard work and inspiration from her brother, Bama gains recognition.

Written in autobiographical style Karukku describes how the female narrator comes to understand the various dimensions of her dalit identity. Bama discusses the question of identity crisis and how they are denied identity and a history. Patriarchal societies consider women as unworthy and have always engaged in the task of constructing and deconstructing identity. The context of dalit women should be understood not only from the perspective of a woman but also that of caste. Bama feels herself as a bird whose wings are clipped and she desires to live a meaningful life than with a fraudulent smile. She states “When I saw our people working so hard night and day, I often used to wonder from where they get their strength…”(47) for her this is a community that was born to work. They laughed and remain cheerful even though they had to suffer lots of hardships. Their poverty and their manual jobs do not allow their children especially girls to go to school and receive education.

Bama breaks free from the shackles of unemployment and poverty by educating herself and by becoming a teacher and by educating her people the so called unprivileged. She asked her people to stop working as slaves to the upper class Naickers and Nadars by doing menial jobs like cleaning the lavatories, sweeping and swabbing. The police harassments, beatings, imprisonment shows how the modern dalit has been imprisoned. Every time she went for work discrimination was there “I knew I should not touch their goods or clothes. I should never come close to where they were…these were heir rules” (46). Bama battles against the superstitions and myths around her. Even Roman Catholic church use and abuse dalits and forced them to attend meetings and offer offerings.

Karukku is the narration of painful memories, despair, disillusionment, dejection and the pathetic conditions of the life and culture of people where women are subjected to sexual harassment and physical assault. Incidents are narrated and over narrated and reinterpreted each time to express the oppression of dalits. Bama’s rewriting of self is thus the rewriting of dalit history. Bama explains how the male perspective have been encountered and questioned by feminine perspective. Her works voice the emergence of dalit literature. Karukku which means the searing edges of a Palmyra leaves, is indeed a double edged sword directed towards the reader which highlights the atrocities caused by the gender discrimination, caste and class divide.

Works Cited: