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**ISSN 2278-9529**

**Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal**  
[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## Resistance to Protest: Revisiting Dalit Feminist Perspective of Bama's *Karukku*

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### Abstract:

This paper attempts to explore the role of Dalit women from past to present. As we know, India is sub categorized in to various castes like Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and shudras .The lowest considered caste is shudras. They are basically regarded as Dalit and the other names for them are untouchables, achool /harijans. Dalit literature is about the suffering of the marginalized powerless classes of the society. Many of the literary figures, social reformers have given their contribution in the Dalit literary movements like B.R.Ambedkar, M.K Gandhi etc. Like in India Dalits, females, poor, eunuch's and many more are at very lower condition, step or class. In this manner women are doubly oppressed, firstly being a woman, secondly being a Dalit. Dalit woman has suffered a lot and still she is suffering .Brutal patriarchy is the foremost problem which is repetitively discussed in Dalit feminist discourses. Feminism in India was started in 1960. It is the pursuit of women rights within the society of India. When we gave an outlook to Dalit women in India we found the similar ill treatment of women in America where black women were marginalized and consideredas weaker section of society being an exponent of Dalit feminism, Bama has found the suffering of Dalit women in Karukku. It recounts her own life experiences being a Dalit girl child of 11 years. Bama has very bitter experiences on caste discrimination in village so she wants new environment that may give her peace and prove her identity. In Karukku, she fights back with social indignities and attempts to empower herself in discriminatory society and wants to serve her community in a better way. She supports the clarions of Dr. B.R.Ambedkar unite, educate and agitate.

**Keywords: Dalit Marginalized, Feminism, Untouchables, Agitate, Oppression, Patriarchal, Dichotomy.**

The term Dalit literature gained its importance in 1958 at the first conference on Dalit literature in Mumbai. Dalit movements have gained a significance place in the history of social movements and in the discourse of social sciences. Literally the Dalit movement was led by Marathas, Gujrat's and Kannada writers under the leadership of Dr.B.R.Ambedkar. Dr.B.R.Ambedkar, a hero, a scholar was the man who had successfully companied against caste discrimination and was a strong advocate of Dalit rights.

An attempt has been made in the present paper to discuss the feminist perceptive in the Dalit literature so feminism in India is a movement which aimed at defining, establishing and defending equal politics economic social rights and equal opportunity for Indian woman. Indian feminist tales seek for gender equality, the right to work for equal wages and equal political rights. Indian feminist also fought for cultural issues within Indian patriarchal society such as the

practice of widow immolation known as sati. The feminism history of India can be categorized in to three phases; the first is the mid-18th century, when the European male colonist speaks against the social evil of sati. Second is phase is from 1950 to Indian independence when Gandhi incorporated feminist movement in to quit India movement and independent women organization began to merge. The third phase talks about post-independence where there is a fair treatment of woman after marriage.

There are a number of writers who contributed in the feminist movement like Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of Rights of Women* (1792), Olive Schreiner's *Women and Labour* (1911) and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949). As Toril Moi in the essay *The Feminist Reader* explains the distinctions between feminist, female and feminine. "The first is a political position the second a matter of biology and the third, a set of culturally defined characteristics" (Barry 117). To the great extent Simone de Beauvoir speaks about the representation of women in literature, "One is not born a woman rather one becomes a woman" (Barry 125). Despite the feminist movement woman living in India still faces many issues of discrimination. Dalit feminist writers are revealing their fury in their writings. They give priority to the liberation of women.

Vemula Ellaiah points out, "Where there is oppression, there is resistance. Oppression in a way is counterproductive. Since Dalit women are oppressed, they will find their own forms of resistance and Dalit feminism is a form of resistance" (Purshotam K. and Bheemaiah J). The male and female dichotomy of polar opposites is that the former always oppress the later and it is set in the minds of all the people that women have always low states due to oppression of women patriarchal. Thus, Women are considered as a weaker section of the population So, we can say that pre independence accepted the sexual divide of labour force and if the woman is Dalit so then she will be more oppressed on each and every ground by the means of sexual assaults at home and rape and are not allowed to live a happy and healthy life due to caste hegemony and patriarchal structure. But the post-independence feminists began to redefine the status and role of women in order to abolish the inequalities not between men and women but also with other power structures such as caste, tribe, language, religion, region, class etc.

Bama Faustina Soosairaj is the most eminent Tamil, Dalit feminist she gained fame with her autobiographical novel *Karukku* (1992) a first Dalit Tamil text which depicts the joys and sorrows experienced by Dalit Christians woman in Tamil Nadu and was translated in to English by Lakshmi Holmstrom. Almost all Dalit writers in whichever genre they write in a similar graph of a Dalit woman's life and carrier. According to KGeeta and KSri latha, "The first of its kind in Tamil, *Karukku* was not only the first only autobiography but achieved a specific identity, having written by a Dalit Christian woman..." As an exponent of Dalit feminism, Bama has found in *Karukku* the rights space to articulate the travails and suffering of Dalit woman... The English translation has enabled *Karukku* to cross linguistic and regional boundaries and reach the global readers. *Karukku* is a reflection of different themes like recreation and education etc. Through these perspectives, Bama gives a clear picture of the ways caste oppression meted out to

the Dalit Christians not only by the upper caste society but more so within the catholic church itself”( Ahmad 144).

Dalit feminist writing anticipates that all women should be respected and treated as human beings irrespective of class, caste and gender. Gayatri Spivak contends that the voice of the subalterns is not heard properly. She says:

It is not so much that subaltern women did not speak, but rather that others did not know how to listen, how to enter into a transaction between speaker and listener. The subaltern cannot because their words cannot be properly interpreted. Hence, the silence of the female as subaltern is the result of failure of interpretation and not a failure of articulation (Nubile 35).

Karukku means Palmyra leaves which within their serrated edges on both sides are like a double edged swords. The book portrays the journey of a Dalit woman who struggles to raise her voice against the suppression faced by her and her community. Dalit woman's sexuality is an important domain in Tamil Dalit literature. Dalit woman are always oppressed by caste hegemony and Dalit patriarchy. Bama through her writing wants Dalit woman readers to live their lives happily and positively and she is protesting through her writing to help the Dalit women. Bama uses confessional and conversational mode of narration in Karukku. She through her novel represents the trauma, pain, resistance, protest and social change of Dalit women. The novel depicts the repression, atrocities faced by the low strata of the society. Bama also suffered such things under dominant Hindu social structures. Karukku is both autobiography and fiction in couple of ways. The protagonist is never named in the novel. She breaks the rules of written grammar and uses colloquial language as a medium for narration so that the Dalit readers should be able to raise their voice against the injustice being done to them on the basis of caste system. The elements of autobiography in the novel remembrances Bama's own background of life in the village. Karukku is a recreation of life which Bama lived in her village. When she left the seminary she was facing hard in order to find her own identity. "I had lost everything. I was stranger to society. I kept lamenting about life and harked back to my happy childhood days in the village"(Tribune). Bama has also used the elements of fiction in this work and this is deliberate. As she wants to give voice to many people who are the victims of caste system in the nation and she has openly revealed in the novel that there should be no caste system. In Karukku, Bama celebrates Dalit women's lives, their wit, their humor, their resilience and their creativity. The book describes the life of Bama from childhood to adulthood. Bama is born in a Dalit Christian family.

Being Dalit she embraced Christianity as she wanted to serve Dalits. Caste is a social category legitimized by religion and unaddressed by political authority. As few incidents have been traced from the novel which depicts Bama journey from resistance to protest, the incidents are as following. Bama in Karukku realizes that being born in a untouchable class or caste felt humiliated when she was in third standard, where she saw an elderly man carries a package without touching it.

...He came along, holding out the packet by its string, without touching it. I stood there thinking to myself, if he holds it like that, won't the package come undone, and the vadai fall out? The elder went straight up to the naicker, bowed low and extended the packet towards him, cupping the hand that held the string with his other hand. Naicker opened the parcel and began to eat the vadais (13)

Bama experiences her life as a school going child, where she worked as a school going child, where she worked as a laborer for daily wages in order to meet her livelihood. At that time there was a double vessel system and they were asked to stay away from vessels. "...I knew I should not touch their goods or chattels, I should never come close to where they were, I should always stand away to one side. These were their rules .I often felt pained and ashamed" (46). Bama's elder brother convinced her that education is the only means to achieve equality. Bama's elder brother says:

Because we are born into paraiya jati, we are never given any honor or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that .But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities. So study with care, learn all you can. If you are always ahead in your lessons, people will come to you of their own accord and attach themselves to you. Work hard and learn (15)

Bama also exposed about the instances that took place in her college hostel, when she made request to the hostel custodian in order to avail the leave for her brother Raj Gautamans communion. Her plea got rejected, but the warden granted the leave to the upper caste students. Being an educated girl Bama argued with the school authorities that why Dalits were always neglected and treated in a bad manner. But due to her strong reaction against that injustice she won the justice and went to her home. "...There cannot be the different rules for different castes, only the same rules for everyone" (19).

Bama focusses upon women identity, Dalit woman has to face strict rules and regulations being implemented by upper caste people. She joined a Christian school as a teacher where the nun's deliberately oppressed the Dalit children. As rich family children was given privilege whereas Dalit children were humiliated there. She left the convent and concludes her journey as nun. She says " Today I realize what an extremely foolish thing I did but at that time I did not understand in the least I was doing .I was like one who was falling into well, blind folded" (Bama105). Bama got disturbed by such bitter experiences: she also realizes that Dalits are the ones who are forced by upper class society to live a life of humiliation, and degradation until death. ... "My mind was disturbed. My conscience was battered and bruised. At last I asked myself, is this life forme? I left the convent and went home, utterly, weary and dispirited" (67).

Bama lost her faith in god due to the bitter experiences which she faced on the basis of gender and caste. She realizes that Dalits have been enforced to live a life of humiliation, and degradation until death. Bama experienced the discrimination in the village, church, bus, nun's convent, hostel, recruitment and the work place. Bama and Dalit populace has very deep



connection .Bama's own personal experiences of discriminations and poverty are the gloomiest experience that structures the core of her autobiography Karukku. Individuality of Bama is not acknowledged by Christian and Hindu institutions. Bama overruled both Christianity and Hinduism which restrained her desires. Bama has come out with a renewed passion after suffering the inequalities and brutality caused by the so called caste pride:

...I feel certain contentment in leading an ordinary life among ordinary people...Those people who stuck with me in my prosperous days have torn themselves away and gone. A few who heard of my present distress have come to me on the pretext of wishing to help and heal , but have merely stirred the wound; they have to left ...I comfort myself with the thought that rather than live with a fraudulent smile, it is better to lead a weeping real tears (104)

Bama's Karukku is an evidence of societal behavior of upper caste people from the angle of caste and changed religion and its belief. Bama recorded her distressed psyche and it is indicating people's psyche. Bama's decision to become nun and later realizing that everywhere the position and condition of the Dalits is the same. Later she questions "Why. Is it possible for the Harijan to study or what?" (19)

In order to conclude, Bama I would like to say that the discourse analysis of selected text (Karukku) suggest that along with caste, gender is another factor along with tentacles of subjugation can comprehend. So caste and class are different societal groups but they are always seems to be active together and in consonance with gender in Dalit literature. Bama's Karukku is the struggle with caste and religion in the South of India. Bama's Karukku is not a linear and chorological narrative, as it is a personal stories in which "The subject who writes and the object of reflection (The Dalit community) are not easily separated" (Pandey, 168).

Bama in Karukku gives emphasis on the relationship between the self and the Dalit community, because she has gone to nunnery very happily but she came back to her native place sadly because of the failure she faced during that time. Although she was educated and bold woman, still she faced a very tough life. Bama proves that education alone is the only medium for the respectability of Dalits so that they can protest and raise their voice against the inhuman structures of the castes that characterizes Hinduism and chooses to a faith that does not recognize such a discriminating structures. She through her autobiographical narrative wants to show that the ones who are suppressing Dalits won't be able to do that so easily. But we need to show them the right place that we all are equal and wants to liberate Dalits from this caste based social structures. The entire progression is the trial of discovery, which makes her a self-made woman. She says:

Each one of us has to wake up from slumber. Instead of accepting out lot as our fate, we should reject this bondage, this unjust system. We must be brave and stand up for ourselves. Break up caste barriers and biases and prove to the world that no man is inferior to another. Those who have prospered by suppressing us

would not give up their hold so easily. But we need to show them their place, show them that all are equal and change this society (23).

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