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Unravelling Social Hierarchical Dominance and Hypocritical Christianity: A Critical Analysis of Bama's *Karukku*

Suresh Kumar

Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Govt. College Indora, 176401,
Kangra, Himachal Pradesh, India.

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Abstract:

Human beings are social animals. Social norms determine their behaviours and existence in society. This research paper aims to showcase how the hierarchical social order privileges the upper castes and deprives the lower ones. It focuses on revealing the real face of the Convent, Church or Christianity by exposing the hypocrisy they practice. In addition to this, this paper traces the development of the mind and character of the protagonist, Bama through her empirical experiences from her childhood into maturity as she finally prefers justice, self-esteem, and contentment of her heart instead of the job of a teacher in a convent school.

Keywords: hierarchical dominance, convent, Church, Christianity, empirical experiences, justice, self-esteem, contentment.

The novelist asserts that deprivation is caste-specific generally, which means the lower caste people starve in the Indian socio-cultural milieu and if a lower caste surpasses this condition, he/she is made to feel humiliated by realizing his/her caste by the upper caste people. Set in the villages of Tamilnadu, *Karukku* presents the world through the eyes of the protagonist, Bama who shows the deprivation and helplessness of the lower caste parents' who feel compelled to send their children to work in place of school:

At the crack of dawn, even before the Madurai bus makes its appearance, these days the van from the matchbox factory will arrive. These tiny, crab-like children pour their kuuzh into their carriers half asleep, totter along to the van, climb in and go off to work. They work at sticking on matchbox labels; they make firecrackers and use chemicals; and they

return home exhausted, at seven in the evening. At an age when they should be going to school, studying like everyone else and playing about in the evenings, they are shut up inside the factories instead. There are two or three schools available for the children nowadays. But these little ones' fate is the smell of matchbox solution, not the smell of knowledge or learning. How can they afford to study, when it is such a struggle even to fill their bellies? (55)

In other words, these children are forced to share the burden of their parents and suffer the loss of the golden phase of their life. When the lower caste rises above deprivation through wealth or education, the upper caste people attempt to make them feel inferior by tracing out their caste relations or more aptly imposing their caste identity. Bama shares that once her elder brother, Annam who was studying at University comes to the village, seeing him for the first time, one of the Naicker men, Thambi attempts to enquire about his caste aiming to insult him (17) and a similar case happened to Bama when she was coming back to her village.

Although the Constitution of India abolishes untouchability through Article 17 of fundamental rights (Bakshi 55), it becomes an irony in Christianity as Bama asserts. Bama portrays the instances with minute details exhibiting discrimination based on caste in society and how caste holds a strong grip on the minds of people of educated people. Generally, untouchability or casteism has remained the most sensitive issue in Hinduism, and finding the same in Christianity through Bama dumbfounded me as a sensitive reader. Mulk Raj Anand, Omprakash Valmiki and Sharankumar Limbale delineate it in *Untouchable*, *Joothan* and *The Outcaste* respectively and show that the discrimination is more overt and straightforward without any hypocrisy in Hinduism. There is no gap between words or preaching and their practice; therefore, discrimination is discrimination whether overt or covert. Here, Hinduism acknowledges the discrimination. But whatever Bama's experiences express is the utmost hypocritical nature of Christianity. Religious agencies like the Church and convent preach equality and uniqueness of every soul or individual overtly but the existence of the practice of discrimination based on caste is prevalent covertly, and the most important thing is that they do not accept this. Thus becomes more dangerous for humanity.

While giving examples of untouchability from society, educational institutions and religious institutions, Bama also shows how the very idea of caste consistently remains in the

minds of upper-caste people. Bama says that everyone considered Harijan children contemptible (18). Her parents had admitted her to the ninth class in a school in a neighbouring town where she stayed in the hostel. During this period, she used to go home for holidays. She writes to share her experiences:

When I went home for holidays, if there was a Naicker woman sitting next to me in the bus, she would immediately ask me which place I was going to, and what street. As soon as I said, the Cheri, she'd get up and move off to another seat. Or she'd tell me to move elsewhere. As if I would go! I'd settle into my seat more firmly. They'd prefer then to get up and stand all the way rather than sit next to me or to any other woman from the Cheri. They'd be polluted, apparently. This happened to me several times. (20)

As Bama shares such episodes with her mother, the latter advises her not to show her caste or tell some upper caste in order not to feel humiliated, but she does not agree to pretend herself as someone else and feels extremely agonised. More humiliating Bama feels when her PT teacher tells all the Harijan students to stand in front of about a thousand students, the memory of which still humiliates Bama (21). Everyone in the Convent becomes curious to know her caste when she was under training to become a nun and in a particular class a sister tells that in a certain order, the Convent would not accept Harijan women as prospective nuns but there is a separate order for them somewhere. She further shares about the school attached to that Convent:

In that school, attended by pupils from very wealthy households, people of my community were looking after all the jobs like sweeping the premises, swabbing and washing the classrooms, and cleaning out the lavatories. And in the Convent as well, they spoke very insultingly about low-caste people. They spoke as if they didn't even consider low-caste people as human beings. They did not know that I was a low-caste nun. I was filled with anger towards them, yet I did not have the courage to retort sharply that I too was a low-caste woman. (25)

Further, Bama presents the idea that children do what they see around them and, therefore, choice of the children's games functions as the miniature of the society they live in. She says about the frequently played games during her childhood:

Two or three boys would play at being Naicker. The rest of us would call them, 'Ayya, Ayya', and pretend to be their pannaiyal. These boys would act as if they had a lot of power over us. They'd call out to us, 'Yeppa, Yeppa', humiliate us, and make us do a lot of work. We'd pretend to work in the fields all day, and then collect our wages and go home. (56)

Other games include playing shopkeeper and customer spending the hard earned money, playing potters shaping dolls, pans, and pots of clay, playing dancers, nuns, and priests, playing a newly married couple and practising scenes of domestic violence, playing kabaddi, hop and catch, and fishing in the nearby lake (57). Apart from these games, Christmas, New Year and Easter days used to fill the hearts of the children with curiosity as the elders of the village would set loudspeakers. Children rush to say hello-hello by putting their mouths in the speaker showing their excitement for the technology (59). In addition to this, during such gatherings, the boys used to smoke the thrown stubs in secret to copy the elders of society. In short, Bama presents childhood as a blissful phase of life without worries seeking pleasure in everything that appeals to their heart. A tendency to imitate elders is a universal feature of children. Therefore, Bama imparts a message for the elders to observe their words and actions as they form the next generations.

Thereafter, the novelist emphasizes how the hierarchical social structure patterns and strengthens unethical behaviour in society. Bama writes:

Both my grandmothers worked as servants for Naicker families. In the case of one of them, when she was working in the fields, even tiny children, borne the other day, would call her by her name and order her about, just because they belonged to the Naicker caste. And this grandmother, like all the other labourers, would call the little boy Ayya, Master, and run about to do his bidding. It was shameful to see them do this. (16)

Such behaviour of the children results from the practices of the family and society they live in. The children are the cultural product of a family and society and, therefore, they represent the moral values of society with its goods and evils.

Bama possesses a reservoir of varied experiences through tales or direct experiences of other characters. Naicker women's pouring water from a distance of four feet and Bama's grandmother drinking it with cupped hands (16), characterization of Bondan Mama who is an apt

example of the survival of the fittest (5-6), the state of extensive malnutrition (8), the suicide of a woman along with her five children for self-esteem and justice (11-12), the corrupt attitude of the police (40), the practice of bonded labourers (48), instances of domestic violence in forced marriage (61), and hunting of wild animals leading to socialization (63-64) all reveal social influence influencing other factors like police administration, economic conditions and behaviours of individuals in society.

Furthermore, Bama brings out the practice of discrimination based on gender in the novel. She presents that such discrimination can exist only in a patriarchal society. She finds discrimination at two levels with the Dalit women. In the first place, they were discriminated against being the lower caste and were forced to overwork as per social structure. Secondly, being women they were considered second citizens and were given lower wages than men even for the same work (55). Bama does not understand the rationality behind this practice. Thus, Bama exposes the real face of society where completely irrational practices are sheltered.

The Church and the Convent function as ideological apparatuses in the novel in the Althusserian sense. Ideology remains a key term for Louis Althusser who defines Ideology as a system (possessing its logic and proper rigour) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts according to the case) endowed with an existence and a historical role at the heart of a given society. In his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" Althusser says that to bring desirable changes in the society or state uses either repressive structures or force i.e. police force, army, prison, law courts etc. or ideological structures like schools, churches, family, art, media literature and so on. If the former uses power or force the latter wins the consent of the masses. (Bary 157-58). The Church and the convent train the behaviours of the adherents with their consent. Whatever they preach becomes an irony when it comes to practice. Thinking about the liberation and upliftment of the lower caste children of her village, Bama decides to become a nun and joins a Convent, she writes:

There was a desire in my heart to help other children to better themselves, as I, born into the same community, had been able to do, because of my education. I really wanted to teach such children. But I understood, after I entered the order, that the convent I entered didn't even care to glance at poor children, and only wished to serve the children of the wealthy. In

that convent, they really do treat the people who suffer from poverty in one way, and those who have money in their pockets in a totally different way.

Before they become nuns, these women take a vow that they will remain in poverty. But this is just a sham. (77)

Bama says that the nuns are required to make three vows: poverty, chastity, and obedience. They teach that these vows liberate them and enable them to live around ordinary people. But, in reality, these vows become a means of control and enslavement. About Church Bama writes:

When I look at the Church today, it seems to be a Church made up of the priests and nuns and their kith and kin. And when you consider who they are, it is clear that they are all from upper castes. They are the ones who are in the positions of power. Yet when you consider the Christian people as a whole, most of them are lowly people and Dalits. These few assume power and control the dispossessed, and the poor by thrusting a blind belief and devotion upon them, and by turning them into slaves in the name of God, while they themselves live in comfort. (108)

Besides, Bama says that her generation or her people have always been taught that God is loving, kind, gentle, patient, tender, humble, obedient, and the one who forgives sinners. No one ever insisted that God is just, righteous, angered by injustices, opposes falsehood and one who never countenances inequality. There remains a great deal of difference between this Jesus and the Jesus who is made known through daily pieties (104). Therefore, Bama interrogates the adjectives which describe the nature of God to enslave the believers. She questions the injustices practised in the name of God or Jesus. Bama, thus, strongly resists the dual and hypocritical attitude of the Church and the convents that work as ideological apparatuses to programme the minds of the people for their gains. While revealing the gap between teachings and practices, she satirizes such attitudes of Christianity to correct them and to save society from their clutches.

In addition to these, Bama's personal empirical experiences prove a catalyst in revealing the ways of the world she lives in. Description of the village exposing the physical boundaries of casteism (7), Bama's grandmother bringing leftovers from the homes of Naickers, the upper caste people (16), references to cemetery issue (29), discrimination based on class (77) and caste in

school (19), hostel (21), convent (115), the writer's realization of her father as a symbol of shelter, protection and happiness (71), her desire to become a nun for the sake of the liberation of the oppressed ones and leaving the convent after her encounter with the bitter reality as it does not practice what it preaches (116), her state of happiness despite being jobless (121) and her release from the order showcase her poignant voyage resulting in disappointment exhibiting failure of the institutions like the Church and the convents for the real cause they were meant for. Moreover, social division remains an integral part of Indian Christian society.

Ultimately, through her lifelong experiences, the novelist realizes that education is the only tool that can liberate the oppressed in such a hierarchical socio-cultural milieu. It is education that can enable an oppressed individual to voice his/her stand against the injustices inflicted against him/her. Thus, emancipation of the downtrodden is possible through education alone.

The above analysis shows that religious institutions play a very significant role in Christianity. Socio-cultural hierarchical structures of society are maintained and strengthened advertently or inadvertently by the religion, Christianity in this context. Once such structures are accepted by the lowest strata of society, the deterioration of the oppressed ones starts worsening. As a result, the division of the natural resources, landscapes and separate settlements based on caste becomes a common phenomenon. Lower caste people suffer from starvation and are compelled to hard work to fulfil their basic needs. Exploitation and deprivation become an inseparable part of their lives. If they overcome these by empowering themselves through wealth or education, they are made to feel humiliated by making them recall their castes by the upper caste people. Even the children imitate the events of society while playing their games and internalize these structures. Besides, the institutions of Christianity in India like the Church and the convents do not adhere to the values and ethics they preach, rather do just the opposite of these. Henceforth, they practice hypocrisy. Therefore, in such a socio-religious culture the helpless, the poor, and the powerless get oppressed. Moreover, Bama reveals the domination of the hierarchical socio-cultural structures of society and also exposes the hypocrisy of Christianity in the second half of 20th century India. However, Bama emphasizes the value of education in respect of the oppressed ones through which every deformity of society can be rooted out.

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