

A TRAILBLAZING NARRATIVE OF CASTE, CLASS, AND IDENTITY IN BAMA'S KARUKKU

Dr. A. Thenmozhi *

Introduction

Literature mirrors the essence of human existence, deeply influenced by prevailing social and economic issues. It acts as a transformative vehicle, driving revolutionary change and adapting itself to meet the needs of society. A pioneering genre within this literary landscape is Dalit literature, which fearlessly articulates the experiences of humiliation, exploitation, marginalization, and resistance faced by the oppressed sections of Indian society. It stands as a pragmatic manifestation of the struggles endured by the exploited classes, born out of their afflictions. We are examining below the literary and social significance of 'Karukku' novel written by Bama.

Through the ages, caste-based discrimination in Indian society has left certain segments vulnerable to repression and anguish, with their subsistence under constant threat. Amidst this caste-driven milieu, the downtrodden have suffered immensely, leading some members of this segregated segment to raise their voices through the medium of Dalit literature. This literary form serves as a powerful medium to shed light on their prolonged suffering and to demand justice and equality for their marginalized communities.

'The driving forces that shaped this book are many events occurred during several 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 own desperate urge to break, throw away, and destroy these bonds; and when the chains were shattered into fragments, the blood that was spilt - all these taken together. (Author's Preface)'

Bama's preface to her autobiography, Karukku, reveals the essence of her memoir through her own words. Her heartfelt expressions and feelings about

* Associate Professor, Department of English, Government Arts College, Dharmapuri -636705-Tamil Nadu, India.

the book offer an insightful view into her personal journey. Although the book is rooted in the specific experiences of a Tamil Dalit Christian woman, it speaks to a universal audience, addressing various forms of oppression and inspiring those who have faced different forms of discrimination. Through *Karukku*, Bama shares her personal struggle to establish her identity, while also challenging systems of patriarchy, religion, and caste oppression.

In this literary masterpiece, Bama narrates her personal journey from an early childhood marked by the scourge of caste discrimination to her emergence as an empowered and assertive woman. Bama's narrative reflects not only on the caste-based discrimination prevalent in society but also the intersecting factors of class and gender. She poignantly depicts how caste-based oppression often intersects with economic disparities and patriarchy, magnifying the challenges faced by Dalit women. *Karukku* remains a trailblazing work as it provides a firsthand account of the lived experiences of Dalits, challenging societal norms, and dispelling stereotypes. Bama's courageous and unapologetic narration confronts the prevailing caste-based hierarchies head-on, inviting readers to introspect on the injustices embedded in Indian society.

Objective of the study

The objective of this study is to critically examine and analyze Bama's groundbreaking autobiographical work, *Karukku*, focusing on the themes of caste, class, and identity. The study aims to explore the significance of Bama's narrative in the context of Indian society, literature, and feminist discourse, and shed light on the following key aspects: Caste and its Impact, Intersectionality of Caste and Class, Formation of Identity, Feminism and Gender and Literary significance.

Methodology

The research utilized a qualitative approach, employing literary analysis and critical theory to dissect the themes and narratives presented in *Karukku*. Primary data will be drawn from Bama's autobiographical account, while secondary sources will include scholarly articles, reviews, and critical works on Bama's writings and Dalit literature.

By analyzing Bama's novel *Karukkuth* through the lens of caste, class, and identity, this study aims to offer valuable insights into the experiences of Dalits in India and the challenges they face in their pursuit of social justice and equal rights. Moreover, the research seeks to emphasize the importance of literary narratives as powerful tools for social change and empowerment.

Discussions and findings

A Trailblazing Narrative of Caste, Class, and Identity in Bama's *Karukku* has sparked significant discussions and critical analysis in the realms of Indian literature, social activism, and identity studies. The autobiographical work, authored by Bama, a Dalit woman writer, presents a powerful account of her life and experiences, offering a unique perspective on the intersectionality of caste, class, and identity in Indian society.

Bama, also known as Bama Faustina Soosairaj, is a prominent Dalit writer from Tamil Nadu, India. Born into a Dalit Christian family in 1958, Bama faced discrimination and oppression from a young age due to her caste and gender. Despite the obstacles she faced, Bama pursued her education and went on to become a teacher, working in government schools for several years. Her experiences as a Dalit woman in India deeply influenced her writing. Her work often deals with issues of caste, gender, and poverty, and she is known for her frank and powerful portrayal of the lives of Dalit women. Her writing is characterized by its honesty, simplicity, and directness and her works have been praised for their ability to give voice to the experiences of marginalized communities in India.

Bama's most famous work is her autobiography, *Karukku*, which was published in Tamil in 1992 and later translated into English. The book is a powerful account of Bama's childhood and adolescence, and it documents the discrimination she faced as a Dalit Christian in a predominantly Hindu society. *Karukku* was a groundbreaking work in Indian literature, and it helped to bring issues of caste and gender to the forefront of public conversation in India. Today, she is recognized as one of the most important Dalit writers in India, and her work continues to inspire and empower marginalized communities around the world.

Challenging Caste Hierarchies

Karukkustands as the pioneering Tamil Dalit autobiography, distinguished by its unique first-person narrative. This remarkable work transcends being solely Bama's autobiography; it serves as a poignant portrayal of the collective struggles faced by the entire Dalit community. Sharmila Rege(2006) also argues: "dalit life narratives are in fact testimonies, which forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual and provide the context explicit or implicit for the official forgetting of histories of caste oppression, caste struggle and resistance" (Rege 13). Karukku means freshness or newness and it refers to Palmyra leaves which look like double-edged swords due to their serrated edges on both sides. In Tamil Karu means seed or embryo. Bama writes in her foreword:

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two- edged sword piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Hebrews 4:10) (Bama 1)

The throbbing and poignant suffering she had been subjected to since her childhood made her write in the preface of her book Karukku:

In order to change this state of affairs, all dalitsho have been deprived of their basic rights must function as God's word, piercing to the very heart. Instead of being more and more beaten down and blunted, they unite, think about their rights and battle for them". She further continued "the driving force that shaped this book are many: events that occurred during many steps of my life, cutting me like 'Karukku' (rugged edged palmyra leaf) and making me bleed..." (p. xiii).

But Bama has a response to all these queries. She has been successful in finding her vocation, her individuality, has given a name to her community, and has given a voice to the voiceless. This is not merely the narration of Bama's story. It is the account of the rebellion and authority of the upper classes. She articulates the experience of the oppressed in the language of the oppressed thereby making it crystal clear that the writing that started at the margin has reached the centre and created new socio-cultural identities for self-governing reflection and self-action.

Bama presents a compelling critique of the entrenched caste hierarchies that have long dominated Indian society. The novel is replete with incidents that challenge these hierarchies and provide a stark condemnation of the discrimination and oppression faced by Dalit communities in India. Bama explores three fundamental aspects that significantly impact her life, marginalization, caste, and religion - causing profound pain. Lakshmi Holmstrom, the translator of Bama's *Karukku* in her introduction says:

Bama is doing something completely new in using the demotic and the colloquial routinely, as her medium for narration and even argument, not simply for reported speech. She uses a Dalit style of language which overturns the decorum and aesthetics of received upper-class, upper-caste Tamil. She breaks the rules of written grammar and spelling throughout, elides words and joins them differently, demanding new and different pattern of reading (*Karukku*, Introduction, XIX).

One incident that stands out in Bama's memory is when she encounters an elder from her street on her way back from school. The elder holds out a packet of snacks, cleverly tied to a string, and hands it to a Naicker in the village without touching the packet directly. Witnessing this entertaining sight, Bama bursts into laughter, unable to contain her amusement. In essence, *Karukku* centers around these essential themes - marginalization, caste, and religion - which leave an indelible mark on Bama's life. Her discovery of untouchability at a young age and the humorous incident she witnesses serve as pivotal moments that shape her understanding of the societal challenges faced by her community. Bama says:

Just then, an elder of our street come along from the direction of the bazaar. The manner in which he was walking along made me want to double up. Thus self-questioning has begun in Bama with wonder. Bama writes: "What did it mean when they called us 'Paraiya'? Had the name become that obscene? But we too are human beings. Our people should never run these petty errands for these fellows. We should work in their fields, take home our wages, and leave it at that" (13).

This occurrence poignantly underscores the pervasive and insidious nature

of caste-based discrimination permeating even the most mundane aspects of daily life. Upon discovering the harsh reality that Paraiyar people are branded as untouchables, and that they are forbidden from touching the possessions of the Naickers due to the belief that their touch is polluting, Bama is deeply affected. Her elder brother becomes her guide, enlightening her about their low caste status and emphasizing that education is the key to upliftment, albeit to some extent. He offers valuable advice to Bama in this regard.

Because we are bom into the Paraiyajati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that. But if we study and make progress, we can there away these indignities. So stady 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 hand and learn (15)

Bama's novel delves into the intersection of caste and gender, spotlighting the unique challenges encountered by Dalit women. Karukku offers a powerful and unwavering portrayal of how caste hierarchies persistently shape and oppress Indian society, serving as a rallying cry for social justice and equality. The novel's evocative incidents leave a profound impact, urging readers to challenge and dismantle the discriminatory systems that continue to impede progress towards a more just and inclusive society.

Intersectionality of Caste and Class

In Bama's novel Karukku the intersectionality of caste and class is vividly portrayed, offering a complex and layered understanding of the characters' experiences and struggles. One of the most striking instances of this intersectionality is when Bama narrates the challenges faced by Dalit students in the educational system. During her time at school, Bama encounters distressing experiences. One evening, while all the children, including Bama, were playing at school, a coconut gets stolen, and unjustly the blame is placed on her. Despite her innocence, everyone accuses her of plucking the coconut. To her dismay, the headmaster treats her with great prejudice, using her caste as a means to berate her. In the face of her protest, the headmaster coldly declares, "You, the people of low caste, behave like this . . . we cannot allow you inside this school. Stand outside." (16) The incident leaves Bama in anguish,

deeply humiliated and insulted before her peers, ultimately leading to her suspension from the school. As she weeps over the injustice, a teacher advises her to seek forgiveness from the Church priest to obtain a letter of pardon.

During her school days, Bama's bitter encounters leave a lasting impact on her emotional well-being. The false accusation of stealing a coconut and the subsequent humiliation based on her caste devastate her deeply. The unjust treatment she faces from the headmaster intensifies her feelings of marginalization and exclusion. Unable to bear the emotional burden, she finds solace in tears. In search of redemption, she is guided to approach the Church priest, seeking a forgiveness letter to absolve her of the wrongful accusations and to restore her dignity. The incident stands as a poignant illustration of the intersectionality of caste and its profound impact on her experiences at school. So, Bama skillfully weaves together the threads of caste and class, exposing the intricate web of societal inequalities faced by the Dalit community. The novel delves into the multifaceted nature of their experiences, providing a poignant account of how caste and class intersect to shape their identities, opportunities, and challenges in a deeply stratified society.

Formation of identity

Bama's *Karukku* is a powerful account of her journey toward self-discovery and the formation of her identity as a Dalit woman. Through her candid and insightful portrayal of these experiences, Bama sheds light on the complex and often fraught process of identity formation. Dalit writers, despite their significant contributions to Indian literature, encounter numerous challenges in their literary journey. Dalit writers often face prejudice and exclusion from mainstream publishing houses and literary circles, making it difficult for their works to reach a wider audience (Guru, 2013: 205). One of the key factors in Bama's identity formation was her experiences with education. Through her studies, she gained a new perspective on the world around her and began to question the social and cultural norms that had been imposed upon her. As she writes, "For me, education was a new world with new ideas and new ways of thinking" (*Karukku*, 44). Education allowed Bama to break free from the constraints of caste discrimination and carve out a new identity for herself as an educated Dalit woman.

Religion also played a significant role in Bama's identity formation. As a Dalit Christian, she was acutely aware of the ways in which her faith intersected with her caste identity. She describes how her experiences with religion were often marked by discrimination and marginalization, and how she struggled to reconcile her faith with the injustices she witnessed around her. As she writes, "I was beginning to see how religion was being used to perpetuate the caste system" (Karukku, 73). Hence, Bama's experiences with family and society also shaped her identity formation. She was deeply influenced by the stories and experiences of her parents and other relatives, who had all faced discrimination and marginalization due to their caste identity. Through her interactions with others in her community, she gained a deeper understanding of the ways in which caste discrimination permeated every aspect of society. As she writes, "I began to see how caste was a reality that affected every part of our lives" (Karukku, 47).

Feminism and Gender

Bama's intervention in Dalit literary discourse in the early 1990s made a significant contribution in the arena of gender- caste intersections in the lives of Dalits. Her works foreground the twice-cursed lives of Dalit women, oppressed on account of their caste as well as gender, at home and outside, by upper-caste men and Dalit men, by the state machinery as well as the family. Bama is swift to highlight the drawbacks of associating with feminism rooted in scholarly, Western-influenced theories. Instead, she introduces the concept of Dalit Feminism, a term that she uses to emphasize the significance of caste identity intertwined with a gender-based and hierarchical societal framework. As SharmilaRege(2006) argues,

The Dalit Feminist standpoint is about historically locating how all our identities are not equally powerful, and about reviewing how in different historical practices similarities between women have been ignored in an effort to underline caste-class identities, or at other times differences ignored for the feminist cause.(5)

Bama's writings draw our attention to the impracticality of sustaining a uniform concept of gender or presuming the lack of power disparities and social

inequities among women. While Bama writes, first and foremost, as a Dalit, her identity as a woman renders her Dalit identity a more textured experience even as her Dalit identity impinges upon her position as a woman in society at large. Owing to the ground realities, the socio-political conditions that prevail in India, Bama's feminist perspective on Dalits cannot be directly linked to Gynocritics or French feminist theorists even if a certain affinity is recognisable in their respective approaches to the woman question.(6)

The novel provides a poignant depiction of the pervasive gender-based discrimination experienced by Dalit women in India. Throughout the novel, Bama portrays the myriad ways in which Dalit women are subjected to a range of discriminatory practices, including economic exploitation, social exclusion, and physical and sexual violence.

Bama's novel depicts the ways in which Dalit women are subjected to sexual violence and harassment at the hands of upper-caste men. Bama describes how the protagonist and her friends were routinely sexually assaulted by boys from higher castes. Bama writes, "every day we were groped and pinched by the boys from the upper castes. If we protested, they would beat us up.(9). This quote illustrates the ways in which Dalit women are not only denied access to basic rights and resources but are also subjected to physical and sexual violence as a means of asserting power and control.

Furthermore, Bama's novel also highlights the ways in which Dalit women are excluded from opportunities for education and advancement. Bama writes, "The upper castes had their own school, where they learned English and advanced mathematics. But we were not allowed to attend. We had to make do with a separate school for Dalits, where the teachers were unqualified and the facilities were poor"(47). This quote underscores the ways in which Dalit women are systematically denied access to education and opportunities for advancement, which perpetuates cycles of poverty and marginalization.

Literary Significance

The task of recovering experiences of Bama's engagement has been exposed with both the past and present and the trauma that often went with the

experience. Her themes concern themselves with the struggles with racism, casteism, sexism or gender bias, alienation, fragmentation, self and identity.

Bama's narrative stands as a powerful testimony to the experiences and perspectives of Dalit women, conveyed through the masterful use of language, style, and storytelling techniques. As she reflects on her struggles, she writes, "My mind was in turmoil. It was like a churning sea (39)." This quote showcases Bama's evocative language, which effectively captures the emotional turmoil she experiences, making her narrative deeply immersive and resonant.

Bama's innovative use of style and storytelling techniques in *Karukku* further enhances its literary significance. Her candid and introspective approach to recounting her life challenges traditional autobiographical conventions. As she recalls a critical moment, she states, "I didn't know what to do, so I cried and cried" (72). This simple yet impactful sentence exemplifies Bama's straightforward storytelling, allowing readers to connect intimately with her emotions. Additionally, she employs vivid imagery to convey her surroundings and emotions, as evident when she describes the village: "The village . . . it was suffocating me" (18). Through such imagery, Bama draws readers into the world she portrays, creating a compelling and immersive literary experience.

Moreover, Dalit Literature serves as a potent platform for cultural assertion, celebrating Dalit culture, practices, and traditions, which have long been appropriated and misrepresented by dominant cultural forces (Valmiki, 2003: 71). Bama's unique narrative voice and perspective add to the literary significance of *Karukku*. She writes with unapologetic honesty about the struggles of Dalit women, challenging dominant narratives and exposing the harsh realities they face. She boldly critiques the oppressive caste and gender dynamics in society, as seen in her assertion: "Why do they see us as untouchables? We have our own identity. We are human beings too (85)." This line exemplifies Bama's courage in questioning societal norms and advocating for the recognition of Dalit women's humanity and dignity. Her distinct narrative voice amplifies the urgency and importance of their experiences, making *Karukku* transformative work in the realm of Dalit literature and beyond.

In addition to raising awareness, It has also contributed to challenging dominant narratives surrounding caste and identity. Karukku's impact goes beyond academic circles, creating empathy and understanding among the general public. By humanizing the Dalit experience, Bama's work has fostered a more inclusive perspective within Indian society, leading to increased recognition of the need to address caste-based discrimination. The novel's literary depth and emotional resonance have prompted its inclusion in educational curricula, ensuring its enduring impact on future generations.

Conclusion

In the landscape of literature addressing social inequalities, Bama's *Karukku* emerges as a trailblazing narrative that intricately examines the intersections of caste, class, and identity. Through her evocative prose, Bama dismantles the traditional boundaries that have long confined these discussions, allowing for a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of human experiences. This autobiographical work, which chronicles of her own journey as a Dalit woman, challenges prevailing norms by offering a raw and unfiltered account of the challenges faced by marginalized communities in India.

Moreover, Bama's exploration of identity in *Karukku* is a powerful testament to the resilience and agency of marginalized individuals. She confronts the internalized oppression and self-doubt that often accompanies belonging to a marginalized caste, while also celebrating the strength and collective spirit of the Dalit community. Bama's narrative challenges the notion of a single, monolithic Dalit identity and instead showcases the diverse experiences and perspectives within the community, emphasizing the importance of recognizing and embracing individual identities. In a world where systemic inequalities persist, *Karukku* acts as a catalyst for change. Bama's courageous narrative challenges readers to confront their own biases, question preconceived notions, and engage in transformative dialogues. By intertwining personal experiences with larger societal structures, she compels us to acknowledge the intricate tapestry of caste, class, and identity, ultimately paving the way for a more just and equitable society.

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