

DALIT IDENTITY AND SELF-ASSERTION IN BAMA'S KARUKKU

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Abstract

Dalit literature serves as a powerful medium of expression for the voices of the oppressed and marginalized. It reflects the lived experiences and growing self-awareness of the Dalit community. These writings act as direct narratives of those who have faced exploitation, allowing them to assert their identity and reclaim their sense of self. In this context, Bama's voice represents the collective struggle of all oppressed individuals. Her work *Karukku* explores two major forces caste and religion that have shaped and burdened her life. The hardships of Dalit people, as portrayed by Bama, stem from the intertwined realities of caste, gender, and religion. Through *Karukku*, she questions the systems of exploitation and marginalization imposed on her community. Moreover, Bama emphasizes that education and literary expression are essential tools for Dalits to attain self-recognition and identity.

Key words: Caste, Dalit, Marginal, Exploitation, Identity

INTRODUCTION

Dalit literature, particularly the novels written by Dalit authors, clearly expresses the quest for self identity and recognition. For centuries, Dalit communities have suffered exploitation and discrimination at the hands of the upper castes. Dalit people have been exploited for many years at every level by upper caste people. Though the constitution of India provides equal rights to all castes, yet the lower caste people are deprived of their rights. The lower caste people victims of the hegemonic practices; motivated by caste and gender based social system, searched for their existence in this Dalit literature. As Indu B.C. in an article "Silence Speaks: A study of Bama's *Karukku*" defines Dalit literature:

Dalit literature is a writing that parallels the revolutionary movement spear headed by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar with a view to bring about psychosocial transformations in the minds of the oppressed. Dalit literature, a strong oppositional voice only raises important question but also narrate the ability of the people at the margins to fight against all odds and injustices. (The Criterion 1)

Dalit literature initially emerged in regional languages such as Marathi, Tamil, and Kannada. Early Marathi writers like Gyaneshwar, Chakradhar, and Mukundraj, followed by saint poets such as Namdev, Eknath, Ramdas, and Tukaram, composed devotional works praising God. However, their writings continued to uphold the traditional social hierarchy rooted in the Vedas, Smritis, Ramayana, and Mahabharata. These early authors did not challenge or portray the harsh realities of caste discrimination; instead, their focus remained on religious devotion. It was only after the 1960s that Dalit literature began to take a new, more progressive direction and gained wider recognition and popularity.

Dalit literature stands apart from other forms of literature in its values, purpose, and nature because it is rooted in Dalit consciousness and reflects the perspective of the oppressed. While other types of literature may be fictional and created mainly for entertainment, Dalit literature is not meant to entertain. Instead, it portrays the harsh and realistic picture of the rigid caste system and the suffering and exploitation endured by the lower-caste communities at the hands of the upper castes. As Nimbalkar says:

Dalit literature is that literature which in an artistic manner shows the agony of the Dalits, their painful perplexity, family deterioration, poverty, humiliation, and impoverished condition. (Nimbalkar 75)

Bama's *Karukku*, a novel work, reveals how Dalits are treated as less than human. Even after converting to Christianity a religion that claims to reject caste divisions they still find no real relief from discrimination. Bama herself experienced the hypocrisy of the upper-caste-dominated society, which gives her autobiography authenticity and emotional strength. *Karukku* marks a significant turning point in Tamil Dalit literature. In it, Bama a Dalit woman, former Christian nun, and now a school teacher shares her personal experiences, exploring her identity and marginalized status shaped by her gender, class, and religion. She exposes the various forms of oppression faced by Dalits, particularly Dalit women. Writing from and about the margins, her work becomes a powerful means of giving voice and empowerment to the Dalit community.

The title *Karukku* refers to the leaves of the palm tree, which have sharp, serrated edges resembling a double edged sword. The author cleverly uses this as a pun, since the Tamil word *Karukku* also contains *Karu*, meaning "embryo" or "seed," symbolizing new life and freshness. Bama wrote *Karukku* as a way to heal her inner pain, finding renewal and strength through expressing her experiences. One edge of this symbolic sword represents her

personal healing through truth telling, while the other edge motivates and empowers Dalit people to speak out against their oppression. Thus, Karukku becomes a symbol of resistance and rebirth. As Bama herself explains in "Ten Years Later," she wrote the book purely "as a means of healing my inward wounds; I had no other motive" (Bama 09).

Karukku portrays the harsh realities of Dalit life in Tamil Nadu. Most Dalits are uneducated and, because of this lack of awareness, remain unaware of their own oppression and suppressed identity. They live in extreme poverty, often working as bonded laborers, and suffer the worst consequences of the Hindu caste hierarchy. Some have converted to Christianity hoping for equality, but discrimination continues even within the Christian community. Bama also highlights the internal divisions among Dalit sub-castes. For instance, during a conflict between the Chaaliyar and Paraiyar castes, the Pallars sided with the Chaaliyars and even revealed the Paraiyar men's hiding places to the police. Despite being victims of casteism themselves, the Pallars fail to recognize their shared suffering and dehumanized condition. Through Karukku, Bama seeks to awaken Dalit consciousness, urging her people to recognize the truth of their situation and strive for self-upliftment. She dedicates her life to improving the miserable state of Dalits and emphasizes education as the key to their liberation and empowerment.

Bama's life reflects a deep sense of betrayal by the unfulfilled promise of freedom and dignity in India. The most striking part of her story is the betrayal she experienced within the convent and the church. Karukku portrays her childhood as a Catholic and her spiritual journey that eventually led to the realization of her Dalit identity. Her life was shaped by religious traditions and festivals that followed the rhythm of agricultural seasons. However, she later recognized how both religion and society continued to marginalize Dalits and treat them as untouchables. Throughout her life, Bama faced many painful and disillusioning experiences, which she powerfully conveys in her work. We can see and observe her feelings and expressions about Karukku when she herself reveals in the preface of the book:

The driving forces that shaped this book are many: 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 own desperate urge to break, throw away, and destroy these bonds; and when the chains were shattered into fragments, the blood that was split all these taken together. (Bama 23)

In Karukku, Bama strongly condemns the existence of untouchability within the Roman Catholic Church as well as the larger issue of caste discrimination in Indian society. Her use of language itself reflects her Dalit consciousness she deliberately chooses the local, colloquial Tamil spoken by Dalits instead of the standard or elite Tamil, showing her pride and belief in the richness of Dalit culture and speech.

Bama conveys that years of pain and suffering have given Dalits the strength to resist and retaliate. For them, suffering acts as a double-edged sword like the sharp edged leaves of the Palmyra tree, it can both wound and protect. This awareness of their condition empowers Dalits to turn their pain into a weapon of resistance against oppression.

Thus, Karukku becomes a symbol of Dalit awakening and self-awareness, urging them to fight for their existence and dignity. Bama's realization of this transformed consciousness inspired many others, as Paula Richman notes: "Bama uses Karukku to express the idea that pain need not be an end; it can lead to awareness and new growth, as it did for her" (Kumari 74).

Karukku vividly exposes the overpowering influence of caste. During her time in the convent, Bama becomes deeply angered by the behavior of the upper caste authorities, as all the menial and degrading tasks are assigned to Dalits. They are treated with humiliation and disrespect. What pains her most is witnessing elderly Dalit men trembling and acting submissively before upper-caste priests and nuns. The Dalits live in constant fear of the power and wealth held by these religious figures.

Bama feels increasingly uncomfortable and disillusioned by the injustice and cruelty she observes among the upper caste nuns. She realizes that religion has been used as a tool to control and exploit Dalit communities. As a child, she had prayed sincerely, believing that all people were equal in the eyes of God. However, her experiences reveal that caste and religion are intertwined to sustain oppression. Losing faith in both God and religion, Bama no longer feels the fear of divine punishment. Instead, she turns toward Ambedkar's ideals of love, equality, and brotherhood, seeking to spread these principles. Her time in the convent completely destroys her belief in the religious system, as she sees caste divisions not only among the laity but also within the convent itself between rich and poor nuns, and even based on the languages they spoke.

Karukku vividly reveals the painful and tragic realities of Dalit life. Bama's depiction of her own experiences reflects the deep suffering and hardships faced by Dalits, especially women. At the same time, her story also shows a growing sense of self-awareness and a strong desire among Dalit women to strive for dignity, purpose, and higher goals in life. Her path is full of struggles and painful encounters, and her experiences are marked by anguish. Yet, through this difficult journey, Bama's pursuit of self-discovery, identity, and empowerment becomes a challenging but transformative process.

The painful and suppressed experiences described by Bama lead to an unavoidable and deeply traumatic transformation. Her actions and struggles are not just personal but represent the collective suffering of the entire Dalit community. Bama endured the hardships of caste discrimination, untouchability, poverty, and deprivation, yet writing Karukku gave her the strength to heal and rediscover a love for life. The book serves as a source of courage and inspiration for countless others whose identities have been denied or erased, helping them find resilience and hope.

Karukku explores the wounded identity and painful realities of Dalit consciousness. It portrays how Dalits, long forced to accept their oppressed condition, begin to transform that submissive mindset into one of strength, independence, and dignity. The book challenges the dominance of the upper caste (Swarna) order, which views Dalits as untouchable, impure, and inferior. Through Karukku, many marginalized individuals have found the courage to speak out against injustice and reclaim their self-respect. The work carries a dual purpose – it seeks both liberation and the affirmation of self-worth. It powerfully captures the inner conflict that arises from the ongoing struggle between the loss of identity and the determination to assert one's true self.

It is essential today for the oppressed and downtrodden to rise above their state of suffering and transform themselves into confident, self-respecting individuals. Karukku powerfully conveys a message of defiance and courage, urging Dalits to stand strong and resist all forms of injustice and oppression that prevent the formation of an equal and fair society.

For Dalits, the struggle for survival remains a central issue. In the 21st century, the question of existence has become even more crucial, as humanity faces numerous challenges and Dalits face far greater ones due to centuries of marginalization. They must now compete with the privileged classes who control most of the resources and opportunities. Hence, new avenues must be created for Dalits to ensure equality and social justice.

Dalit writers continuously raise these concerns in their works. This paper examines how Bama, through Karukku, offers a response to this challenge. The book serves as a revolutionary expression seeking to liberate Dalits from the grip of caste-based oppression. Having personally endured caste discrimination, untouchability, poverty, and hardship, Bama found in Karukku a source of courage and renewal. As the first Tamil Dalit woman writer to gain recognition in academic circles, she emphasizes education as a path to empowerment. Karukku thus stands as a source of strength and inspiration for countless people whose identities have been suppressed or erased.

CONCLUSION

Karukku clearly shows the deep connection between education, writing, and empowerment tools that Bama uses to help liberate Dalits from a life of humiliation and oppression. The work serves as a form of revolution, aiming to free Dalits from the chains of caste based discrimination. Having personally endured the suffering of untouchability, poverty, and social exclusion, Bama found in Karukku a source of courage and renewal, allowing her to embrace life again with strength and hope. As the first Tamil Dalit woman writer to gain academic recognition, she highlights the vital role of education in uplifting the marginalized. Karukku thus stands as a beacon of empowerment and resilience for countless Dalits whose identities have long been suppressed or erased.

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