

## TRACING THE JOURNEY FROM OTHER-HOOD TO SELF-HOOD: INTERPRETING BAMA'S KARUKKU

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### ABSTRACT

Dalit writing in India gained significance in the 1950s. Among the prominent Dalit writers of India, Faustina Bama is a distinguished writer. Ambedkar and Phule started the movement, which gained importance in 1950, and Bama through her writings instilled profound thoughts in the reader's minds. Her main idea was to evoke revolutionary voice in the marginalized that was silenced in the past. Arjun Dangle quotes "Ambedkar shaped the tradition of revolutionary thinking of almost a generation of Dalits who can today hold their heads high. (Dangle 238) Following the footsteps of Ambedkar, Bama chronicles in her narratives the tales of subjugated lives of Dalit women who are thrice marginalized and yet attain their identity, through their journey from pain to power. The transformation is brought about by these Dalit untouchables from their stigmatized identity to self-chosen identity, which is a product of collective struggle against the autocracies society. The present paper is an in-depth study of Bama's Karukku.

Dalit literature is not just literature, but it is the narrative of pain, suffering, humiliation, and a journey towards a change:

### INTRODUCTION:

"Dalit literature is one which acquaints people with the caste system and untouchability of India, its appalling nature and its system of exploitation. In other words, Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys, and sorrows and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of the society." (Sawant 66)

Bama was born in Puthupatti village in Viruthunagar district in Southern Tamil Nadu in 1958 as Fatima. *Kurukku* is her first novel written in the year 1992, discussing the life of a Dalit Catholic Christian woman, her experiences of pain, caste-based oppression in the village, untouchability in the Convent and finally breaking away from the nunnery. In her writing, she commits for an egalitarian social structure and the creation of feminist consciousness. Bama states the necessity to form a voice of resistance against the harsh society that deemed it useful to keep especially Dalit women under subjugation. The voice can only be created through education, empowerment, and a strong will to become independent. This shapes their journey from other-hood to woman-hood. She observes:

'Our girls must be brought up bearing the above factors in mind. The freedom the boys enjoy must be made available to girls also. If girls are brought up in this manner, their real strength and power will emerge.' (Kulkarni 22)

Bama through her works breaks the stereotypes and the social constructs that divide lower and upper caste man and woman. She articulates the experiences of a Dalit woman experiencing tremendous hardships in the society, theorizing their pain. Spivak in her phenomenal essay questions, "Can the subaltern speak?" which Bama answers in her work *Kurukku*. She can speak, only she needs to adopt the ways to speak up which she can attain through education. The society does not give space to a 'subaltern woman to speak, yet gives reasons to speak, to protest, to say 'no' to the constructed domain created for her that makes her feel suffocated. While translating *Kurukku*, the translator said that Bama did not portray the very feminine attributes associated with a woman of Dalit society in her novel, rather she created strong resistive characters to have the courage to 'speak' up.

*Kurukku* details the tripartite society where the Dalit people occupy the bottom line in the society's structure. The Dalit woman does not find a space in the society by the upper caste people, and oppressed in the house by Dalit men. The practice of patriarchy along with caste hegemony unjustly suppresses Dalit women. The novel is an autobiography of Bama's life, discussing the various forms of violent oppressions in the Dalit women's life. She significantly shows that religious oppression of church is also too poignant. *Kurukku* depicts Dalit Christians are not allowed to sing in a Church choir, forced to sit separately away from upper caste Christians, and are not

allowed to bury the dead bodies in the cemetery within the village that is meant for upper caste Christians only. Moreover, a different cemetery is built in the outskirts of village for the Dalit Christians to bury the dead. Bama or the Parayars converted into Christianity thinking that Christians are less rigid in their caste system than the orthodox Hindus. She points out that the church contorts the real image and teachings of Christ and only preaches docility, dispirited, self-effacing modest and the faithful while restraining the radical and liberating teachings of Christ.

Bama is believed to be the first Dalit woman writer in India. Karukku means palmyra leaves, having tooth-like projections on one side as in a saw, serrated or pointed away from the petiole. Bama chose the title with a different feeling in her mind that the leaves are like double-edged swords, a tool if used can bring about a change in shaping the life and upgrading the woman's position in the society. In the preface of the novel Bama herself describes:

"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 those bonds; and when chains were shattered into fragments, the blood that was split all these taken together." (Bama xxiii)

She is the first Dalit woman to write a classic autobiography depicting the painful experiences of the subaltern. In the text, she narrates: In North Street, while they were beating up Maariappa's son, it seems a five rupees note fell out of his pocket. It seems his mother stooped to pick it up, weeping all the time. At once a policeman put his boot against her stomach, kicked her aside, and took the money himself." (Bama 37) Even the priests took the side of the powerful, the upper caste people and did not think about the Dalits of church. Bama's experiences shaped her being, once in her childhood she saw an old man carrying vada and bhajji that he had bought from a teashop in string. She felt funny by the sight and narrated this to her brother. Her brother explained the situation to young Bama:

"Annan told me the man wasn't funny when he carried the package like that. He said everybody believed that Naickers were upper caste, and therefore must not touch Parayas. If they did, they would be polluted. That's why he had to carry the package by its string." (Bama 15)

This incident left an indelible mark in her mind. She narrates her rage and anguish and a bitter sense of pain in the narrative:

"The thought of it infuriated me. How was it that these fellows thought so much of themselves? Because they had the scraped four coins together, did that mean they must lose all human feelings? What did it mean when they call us 'Paraya'? Had the name become obscene? But we too are human beings ...." (Bama 16)

The numerous humiliating experiences in her life arise the voice in her and she writes Karukku. Karukku does not present only the experiences of Bama's life but also presents the significant challenges in her life that shaped her being as a woman. The series of notable experiences that took place in her life enabled her to discover her womanhood from the detrimental otherhood of each woman of the Dalit society struggle to overcome. Bama from her very young age understands the implications of being a Dalit and woman. Thinking that Christianity would treat them equally with the upper castes, Bama along with her family converted into Christianity. However, after conversion they learn that the bitter caste struggle is very much prevalent in the realm of the convent. The politics and bias structural divide within the sanctity of church was something Bama never expected. Moreover, she never showed her anger and her discontent towards the place, neither had she tried to escape. The brutal indifference towards the Dalit children is something that can never be thought of. Rich pupils were left to study, whereas the Dalit students were asked to do menial jobs:

"People of my community (Paraya) were looking after all the jobs like sweeping the premises, swabbing and washing the classrooms and cleaning out the laboratories. And in the convent, as well, they spoke very insultingly about low-caste people." (Karukku 25)

Karukku is all about the development of a voice of protest that was silenced in the past. In other words, Karukku traces the development of feminist voice and Dalit feminist theory that remained buried in the past. Bama attempts to speak out their experiences theorizing pain and suffering. Dalit feminist theory aims to attain social justice and remove all sorts of oppression towards the Dalit women. Dalit women are portrayed as victims of lust of the upper caste women, humiliated, insulted, spat upon who can never answer back to the atrocities against them. Dalit feminism does not look at the women as subservient, meek, docile and silent but portrays them as radiant onwards their hope, radical in their protest, and finally developing the voice within themselves that enables them to question their identity and form an identity by deconstructing the patriarchal hegemony. Moreover, writing about Dalit feminism, the writers took a background journey to recollect their experiences that they narrated in the texts to make history visible. The act of survival needs a womanist spirit of resistance against a racist and sexist society where adherence to a caste system or casteism is deep rooted. Adrienne Rich writes in her essay:

Re-vision the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from new critical directions for women more than a chapter in cultural history. It is an act of survival. We need to know the writing of past and know it differently than we have ever known it, not to pass on a tradition, but to break its hold over us .... (Funck 69) The difference in Dalit women's screams against betrayal, insult, pain inflicted towards them for

several years made them stronger. Sharmila Rege rightly pointed it out in her quintessential work *Dalit Women Talk Differently :A Critique of Difference and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position* , that Dalit women speak with a difference because they are different from other women and their voice reverberates the connotations of marginalization, subjugation, and a need for resistance. Within such apparent framework of difference issues of caste, become the sole responsibility of Dalit women to put up a fight.

Bama shows the same vigour, courage , independence in her voice while narrating the painful experiences of her life, her voice echoed and the vibrations made her journey more powerful. She created a woman of utmost power in Karukku and gave a voice with which she questions the society each time when the society tries to pull her down. Bama clearly states the importance of education in a woman's life, especially in a Dalit woman's life. Education can alone give her the moral worth that she is entitled to have. The difference Bama created in her life made her a woman with a voice, primarily because she gained education. Thinking that devoting her life in the service of God will heal her wounds that are inflicted upon her since her birth. However catastrophe comes to her life when the actual image is unveiled from the obscurities that hide the real image. Understanding the truth, she decides to come out of the nunnery she once thought to be a virtuous recluse. Here we see a difference in her actions, voice, purpose and determination. She takes up a step that many Dalit women cannot think up. A woman she shows is not destined to be ruled, controlled and victimised . She must develop a voice, and "there is no space for which the sexed subaltern subject can speak...(Spivak 142) She is no more a sexed subject meant to provide service, but a human being who carries forth the action of her life. Bama triumphantly depicts the journey of woman from other-hood to self-hood , detailing the turbulence, she encountered and fought bravely to achieve it.

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