

Voicing the Unspoken: Bama's *Karukk*

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Abstract

Creating a 'self' and voicing the unspoken is a herculean task for the marginalized especially the Dalits. Breaking the rigid notions of conventional mainstream literature, Dalit literature established itself as a literature of protest with its own uniqueness. The role played by Dalit autobiographies becomes significant since it reflects the Dalit society and the cultural milieu. Dalit woman autobiographies celebrate the self of Dalit women by attempting to discard the zero representation they had in their lives and by making sense out of their chaotic existence. This re-presentation of their silenced voices through a literature of their own was an act of creating a self consciousness through the change that would be decisive as well as unique. Bama's *Karukku*, rightly considered as a benchmark in Tamil Dalit Literature, clearly sketches the journey undertaken by Bama to establish herself as a spokesperson of Dalit women. The journey from 'other' to 'self' was not an easy endeavor for Bama. The hardships intermingled with its various nuances of agonies; oppression and suffering offer an unpleasant journey as well as a narrative of its own kind. This paper attempts to focus on how Bama tries to regain and assert the voice which was forbidden to the Dalits; how the unspoken had been given a voice.

Keywords: marginalized, oppression, re-presentation, silence, self consciousness.

Full Paper

Literature of the marginalized needs to be addressed seriously in the wake of decolonization as the marginalized sections and

their predicament counts a lot in the field of any discourse. What matters is how singularly the experience has been synchronized into the world scenario by the subject as well as the object. Relegated to the background, there has been little space for the marginalized communities to express their agonies, woes and singular experiences. Once silenced by the masters, the silence itself remains strong. Silencing the subjugated lives had been an easy task for the hegemonic powers but it has been equally tough for the suppressed and the oppressed to make their voices heard.

It has been found that in the history of contemporary marginalized literature, there is an intense period of disillusionment and despair. At the same time, one can also detect a healthier struggle evident in the writings which signal a future beyond hopelessness. There is a strand of optimism visible in their writings that they convey a radical transformation in the existing condition. They demonstrate their protest and resist all those forces which become a hindrance in their quest to achieve self assertion and identity. This process of moving from the silenced to the heard is an act constituting the journey from invisibility to visibility, a journey undertaken by the marginalized from oppression to resistance. Oppression, a very cunning strategy, has been utilized so that one section of the people is dominated and discriminated by others to enjoy some socio-politico-religious benefits. This strategy of silencing the subjugated is remarkably visible in the literature produced by the hegemonic powers.

Society has not been able to free itself from the perception that ignores brutal oppression and it still cherishes the belief that some races or castes are more superior to others. Frederic Jameson in his book *The Political Unconscious* observes that our readings of the past are vitally dependent on our experience of the past. If the present appears to be oppressive, the roots of it can be found in the past. But, if the past cannot be completely captured, then there is no use of digging into the past. This is a strategy for evading some crucial issues in and from history which can turn out to be problematic. History could serve as the source of servitude or freedom.

The marginalized did have only a zero representation of themselves, that is, an image of selfhood which is basically repressed and oppressed. Such representations were not a neutral one since the marginalized could not create an image for themselves other than which is bestowed upon them by the dominant group. But, the marginal identity cast upon the Dalits could not remain static forever as when the oppressed found their voice and began to make sense of the chaos of life, they used their literature to subvert the accepted notions and attitudes of the hegemonic power. Literature for them was an act of analysis, analyzing their condition and attempt to remake their lives. This process helped them in creating a consciousness of their own thereby initiating a process of change.

Making the invisible visible and the unheard heard is the first expression of the victims of oppression when they acquire the voice. Their voice takes the form of protest and anger and is explicitly expressed through their literature. The acquisition of voice enables the Dalits to reconsider their existence in this fragmented world.

Dalit literature is a new and distinct literary stream of Indian literature. Dalit literature, being the literary expression of a boycotted society, has made significant contributions to Indian literature in terms of fresh experiences, a new sensitivity and vocabulary, a different protagonist, an alternate vision and a new chemistry of suffering and revolt. Its social, cultural and literary environment is distinct from

the intent and discourse of the mainstream Indian literature. But the Indian literary history and theory have remained spectacularly silent about Dalit literature. Dalit writers have a strong complaint that the entire canon of Indian literature has neglected Dalits as subjects in their writings.

John. C. B. Webster in *Religion and Dalit Liberation: An Examination of Perspectives* defines the term Dalit as “ground down, downtrodden, broken or oppressed. Dalit is a name for themselves” (11- 12). It is a caste rather than a class label. One is made a Dalit by birth and cannot escape one’s caste. The brokenness and oppression they experience is something they inherit by birth and must continue to live with till their death. Dalits were condemned to live in extreme poverty; a position imposed upon them in the name of caste-based hierarchical society which ensured that their life is a never ending struggle simply to survive, with little hope or expectation of outside sympathy and support. Oppression affected both the outer and inner world of Dalits.

The word ‘Dalit’ in Dalit literature includes the harijans, neo-buddhists, all the untouchable communities living outside the boundary of the village as well as the adivasis, landless farm-labourers, workers, the suffering masses and nomadic and criminal tribes. Dalit society began to organize itself and struggle under the influence of the literary writings and political activism of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. The period from 1920 to 1956 may be taken to be the most active period or the renaissance phase in the history of Dalit literature and movement as Ambedkar argued for the case of the untouchables. He fought powerfully for the right of the Dalits. Along with Ambedkar, there were writers like Bandhumadhav, Shankarrao Kharat, Annabhau Sathe and N R Shende who also collectively worked towards raising the consciousness that was very necessary for the upliftment of the Dalit society from the mire.

“Dalit literature,” according to Arjun Dangle, “ is marked by revolt and negativism, since it is closely associated with the hopes for freedom by a group of people who, as untouchables, are victims of social, economic and cultural

inequality” (xi). Dangle considers Ambedkar’s revolutionary ideas to be the force behind the creation of Dalit awareness. Dalit writers wanted to expose the inner contradictions that lay in a concealed manner in their writings.

Sharankumar Limbale, a notable Dalit critic and activist, asserts that the subaltern condition of the Dalits is not because of any colonial structure but it was the result of the caste-based socio-cultural and economic structure of the Hindu society. Apart from the physical segregation as manifest in the Dalits being forced to be outside the periphery of the village inhabited by the upper caste Hindus, the Othering of the Dalits is quite sanctified by the religious order as the Dalits are supposed to occupy the lowest place in the Hindu hierarchical order. Spatial inferiority of the Dalits also becomes normative. Dalit writing becomes essential to maintain the hierarchical upper caste Hindu’s purity. Dalits become an object of revulsion for the upper caste Hindus socially as well as scripturally. Having denied the Dalits their rights, they were designated as polluted and untouchable. The subaltern status of the Dalits is recorded as inherited by birth and sanctioned by sacred authority, an identity which becomes eternal and unalterable. This social condition of the Dalits is reflected in their culture too. Limbale’s narration of the history of Marathi literature shows that the subaltern condition of the Dalits as reflected in their culture is to ensure that there is no voice or presence for the Dalit voice in the mainstream. No place was accorded to the Dalits in the content of this literature. The physical space which they inhabited outside the village sphere was however erased in the world of literature. Thus, while the society ensured that the Dalits did not pollute them spatially, literature made it certain that the Dalits did not pollute its world.

The central concern of Dalit literature has been to represent the authentic experience of the Dalits at its best. According to Limbale, no literary theory can successfully be made use of in analyzing the singular experience of the Dalit since this singular experience is the experience of not an individual but that of the people as a whole and it is seemingly an unalterable experience quite different from any other group

or community. While the poor, the colonized or the ethno-racial minority can hope for an alteration in their condition, the untouchable cannot hope so. The condition of being a Dalit is a condition for which it is very hard to find a parallel, though it is possible to find some similarities. The Dalit consciousness may be compared to that of a slave’s or an African American’s or women’s.

The radical function of Dalit literature is served through the authentic representation of Dalit reality. This representation gives the Dalit a voice to use, a voice to speak against all oddities, discrimination, bias and inequality present across the caste system. The purity of savarna space gets destroyed in the process and the Dalit remains no longer an invisible entity. The process of Dalit assertion begins at the cost of the destruction of the upper class hegemony in literature. The process of the creation of an authentic Dalit representation signals the deconstructivity taking place at the realm of history, society and literature which had been the base on which the discriminatory oppressive class system had established itself.

The assertion of a distinct Dalit identity along with its own history, culture and humanity makes it more revolutionary. They are no longer the silent, suppressed objects in history but they are the people who have a history of their own and through this history they attain the confidence and the strength to assert their humanity. From this view, one may decipher the central concern of Dalit literature to be that of enabling the development of a new consciousness and identity among Dalits. Identity in Dalit world has a different connotation, rather a complicated one. There is a perceived difference among the different Dalit castes which makes the identity formation even more complex as there is a reluctance to let the jati affiliations present in the Dalit castes be absorbed into the larger Dalit identity. To have a unity among the Dalits is a crucial issue in determining the identity of Dalits as a whole.

The voice of Dalit literature being one of protest saw its expression in various forms of literature like poetry, novels, autobiographies, short stories, critical essays, theatre and street plays. The genre of autobiography was used

extensively by Dalit writers to suit their narrative content more than any other form as the main focus since an autobiographical writing is an act of conscious self which is documented through the active help of memory. The emergence of a 'self' is thus the making of an author. Writing an autobiography is a political act because there is always an assertion of the narrative self. Constituting a significant element of Dalit literature, autobiographical narratives are used as tales of personal sufferings of the Dalit writers fused with their interpersonal responses and community feelings which they experience in a Hindu society. Raj Kumar (2010) observes:

On the face of several oppressive social forces, these writers, with their growing perceptions and mature imagination, capture the tensions which grow out of a continuous battle between 'loss of identity' and 'asserting of self'. Thus the very process of writing autobiography by the Dalits is a form of resistance against various forms of oppression" (150).

Subjectivity in Dalit autobiographies thus becomes intricate by the deep connection between the individual self and the communal self. For the Dalit community, autobiography, more than being a kind of literature, turns out to be a form of assertion and resistance in its own right.

It was with the entry of Bama into Tamil Dalit literature that serious discussion on Dalit women oppression came into limelight. Bama rightly observes that Dalit literature is people's literature, an integral part of Dalit culture. Dalits are repeatedly reminded by the elite class that their culture is to be servants of others. There is no rightful place given to the culture, art, language and literature of the Dalits in the history of the dominants. Therefore, Bama opines that every dominant literature should be inverted.

Dalits were always on the marginalized 'other' side of the Indian society. So when they started voicing after centuries of silence, about themselves, we have the literature depicting assertion of human rights, self-pride, revolt against social injustice, chronicles of personal and collective suffering, and hopes and aspirations for a new society devoid of discrimination. Dalit is not a caste but it is a

symbol of change and revolution. The primary motive of Dalit literature is the liberation of Dalits and the struggle against casteist tradition has a long history.

Bama's *Karukku*, considered to be the first Dalit autobiography in Tamil written by a Dalit woman, was acclaimed well by both the readers as well as the critics. Hailing from a Dalit background herself, Bama through her autobiographical narrative questions some of the established elite consciousness as rampant in the patriarchal hegemonic society which always treats Dalits as the outcaste and underprivileged. *Karukku* chronicles the life of a Dalit woman, how her attempts to get educated and later to be economically independent are getting challenged at each point in her journey. But fighting against the odds, how she becomes the vocal representative of her community is where the struggle she had been waging becomes successful. Since Bama's experience is not hers alone, she considers her autobiography to be the story of a community as a whole.

According to K. Geetha and K. Srilatha:

The first of its kind in Tamil, *Karukku* was not only the first Dalit 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 right space to articulate the travails and suffering of Dalit women... 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 religion, recreation, and education, etc. Through these perspectives, Bama gives a clear picture of the 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).

To Bama, Dalit literature is not merely literature on Dalits but a critique of the Hindu social order. Bama herself stands for Dalit feminism and the emancipation of the Dalit Paraiya community. It is now clear that through Dalit women autobiographies there is a transformation of women's rejection into resistance. Second last line of her novel *Sangati* represents the optimistic end of the novel

towards desires for a better future for women. "Women can make and women can break" (123).

As an exponent of Dalit Feminism, Bama has found in *Karukku* the right space to express the travails and sufferings of Dalit women. *Karukku* thus enjoys the unique recognition of being one of the first radical feminist discourse by a Tamil Dalit woman. Though written in Tamil in 1992 *Karukku* won worldwide acclaim only after Lakshmi Holmstrom translated it to English in 2000. 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 religion, recreation, and education, etc. Through these perspectives, Bama gives us a clear picture of the caste oppression faced by the Dalit Christians not only from the upper caste society but also within the Catholic Church itself.

As a feminist writer Bama protests against all forms of oppression and relying on the strength and resilience of Dalit women, makes an appeal for change and self empowerment through education and collective action. In her recent novel *Vanmam- Vendetta* Bama concentrates on the internal differences among Dalits. To Bama Dalit Literature is not merely 'Literature on Dalits' but 'a critique of the Hindu social order.' Bama through the portrayal of Dalit women's life blood from birth, childhood, marriage to death, reveals the Dalit women's struggle against the society, caste and patriarchy.

Karukku is an authoritative representation of Dalit suppression. The book is set in the first person narration. The narrator moves from the past to the present in exploring the varying multiple sets of different incidents, which have taken place in her life. *Karukku* represents the Dalits' life and their misuse and repression, as its author believes, "Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creations."

Bama's *Karukku* becomes a testimonial literature since it deals with the issues of oppression faced by the Dalits, especially in Tamil Nadu. When Bama speaks as the representative of the subaltern community, *Karukku* becomes the testimony which accounts not only her life

but also the life of the Dalit community into which Bama belongs. Bama's unusual way of writing her autobiography and her deliberate attempts to discard the style and diction of autobiographies made it unusual and thereby appreciative.

Karukku can be considered as the childhood memoir written by Bama, which expresses the joys and sorrows of her people, oppressed by the higher castes in India. The book records the various events in her life. She was born into a poor Dalit family. Her grandmother and mother toiled in the fields and the homes of the Naicker landlords. Despite the misery, she had a carefree childhood. Her brother, Raj Gauthaman, also a writer, introduced her to the world of books and inspired her to write. In college, she used to write poetry. Later she turned into writing fiction. After education she became a schoolteacher.

Bama portrays the oppression she faced as a student and a teacher. As she was bright in studying and teaching, she managed to escape from the violent oppression to a certain extent. At the age of 26, her life took a big turn, when she took the vows to become a nun. But in the seminary and later in the convent, Bama realized the harsh truth that the situation of Dalits will always be the same. Thus seven years later, Bama walked out of the convent. Outside the convent, she faced lots of questions directed upon her. It is her decision to narrate the experiences in the form of her autobiography that saved her from ending her life in the midst of all that struggles.

As a woman and as a Dalit Christian, Bama's act of expression can be perceived as a subaltern expression. It came out as a resistance against the current caste and gender oppression. The book becomes the testimonio of the bitter experiences a Dalit Christian woman and her act of witnessing turned out to be a source of inspiration to her fellow beings. *Karukku* focuses on two crucial aspects namely: caste, and religion that cause great pain in Bama's life. Bama has bitter experiences at the school. One day while Bama and her friends were playing at the school in the evening, somebody stole the coconut. The blame of the theft is thrown on her. Though she was not guilty, the headmaster

treats her badly since the other students stand against her. He scolds her in the name of caste. When she protested, the head master tells her: "You the people of low caste like the manner you have...we cannot allow you inside this school. Stand outside" (19). Bama is in agony as she has been ashamed and insulted in front of all the children. Soon she gets suspended from the school. When she is crying, a teacher advised her to meet the Church priest for an apology letter and when she enters the classroom with the recommendation of the priest, the entire class looks at her in a strange way. She expresses: "When I entered the class room, the entire class turned around to look at me, and I wanted to shrink into myself as I went and sat on my bench, still weeping" (19).

It is a very shocking incident and she is baffled by listening to the caste name particularly when she is not mature enough to understand it at all. She does not talk about the humiliation. Until her third standard in school, Bama has never heard of untouchability. As Bama was returning from school, she finds an elder from her street holding out a small packet of snacks tied in a string. The elder was giving it to a Naicker in the village without touching the packet. Unable to control her laughter looking at the funny sight, 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" (15). The 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 (16).

Bama starts to look out for ways to uplift herself and her community from this pathetic existence. Her elder brother tells her that education is the right path and the only way to attain equality. Bama's elder brother opines:

Because we are born 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 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 (17-18).

Bama's elder brother's advice makes a deep impression on Bama. Since she wants to prove herself, she takes her studies very seriously. She makes it sure that she always stands first in the class. Bama writes: "In fact, because of that, many people become my friends, even though I am a Paraiichi" (15). Throughout her period of education, Bama finds that there is a painful reminder of her caste in the form of untouchability. The government offers the financial grants and special tuitions to the Harijans, which were more of humiliation than consolation, mainly because it singled out her caste identity. Once the identity is disclosed, Bama opines: "Among the other students, a sudden rustling; a titter of contempt. I was filled with a sudden rage" (19). After completing her under graduation and B.Ed, she decides to become a teacher and works in a convent. Bama finds that the nuns working there frequently oppress the Dalit children. When she is in the hostel after completion of her eighth class, Bama painfully recollects the nuns commenting on the Dalit children. Bama expresses her grief:

The warden sister of our hostel could not abide low-caste or poor children. She'd get hold of us and scold us for no rhyme or reason. If a girl tended to be on the plump side, she'd get it even more. These people get nothing to eat at home; they come here and they grow fat, she would say publicly. When we returned to the school after the holidays, she would say, look at the Cheri children! When they stay here, they eat the fill and look as round as potatoes. But look at the state in which they come back from home just skin and bone (17-18).

Bama is very happy teaching the children because most of the children in the convent are Dalits. Nuns used to suppress Dalit children and Dalit teachers very much. Bama decides to become a nun on seeing the oppression at convent. She decides to sacrifice her life and help the poor and Dalit children. "I wanted to be like her, living only for the poor and down trodden; so I entered that particular order" (20-21). Bama notices that there is casteism in the convent. She

realizes that one can tolerate outside discrimination from society, but it is hard to face casteism inside the convent. She decides to continue there because of the purpose of her survival and her strong determination and perseverance towards the poor and the Dalit children. Those who are undergoing training with Bama to become nuns are anxious to find out the caste of Bama. Bama answers honestly without any hesitation. The religious order itself has its own reservation about the Harijan women who want to become nuns. Bama is admitted in the religious order only after she gets affirmation from the convent. The convent has asked for her services. The nuns in the convent constantly threw insults and abuse against the Dalit students. They could not admit Dalit students in their convent school, because their standard will fall. They marginalize all Dalits as poor quality. The nuns in the convent speak very insultingly about low caste people. About low caste people the nuns' notions are: "Low caste people are all degraded in every way. They think we have no moral discipline nor cleanliness nor culture" (22–23).

Bama's autobiography typically unfolds her growing up story in episodes and throughout she demonstrates strong courage, conquering the dominant forces. Bama explains even the minute experiences that she had throughout her life. She persistently speaks about "dying several times within" (28). The feeling of indifference that she received at school, college, workplace, and convent and in the society as a whole, set fire in the heart of Bama and filled it with a conscious desire to fight against the system. *Karukku* became her testimony; and thereby a subaltern's testimony of being a Dalit.

Bama's *Karukku* is not merely a revolutionary voice seeking to liberate the Dalits from oppression. It also does the purpose of a memoir that has a great cultural value. The book gives an identity to the Dalits by proudly recollecting the cultural significance of being a Dalit. The book therefore becomes the sign of an awakening and a resonance of the Dalit's freedom to question, rebel and reinterpret. As Lakshmi Holmstrom puts it, "...Bama's work is among those that are

exploring a changing Dalit identity..." (Holmstrom xix)

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