



A CRITICAL REFLECTION OF BAMA'S KARUKKU AS TESTIMONIAL NARRATIVE

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Abstract: Karukku stands as a testimonial narrative. By analyzing Bama's portrayal of her personal experiences as a Dalit Christian woman, this study seeks to elucidate how "Karukku" serves as a powerful testimony against systemic oppression and marginalization. Additionally, it explores the issues of caste-based discrimination, gender discrimination, economic exploitation, oppression and identity. Through a nuanced exploration of "Karukku," this research paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of testimonial literature's role in advocating for social justice and promoting inclusive narratives.

Key words - Identity, Marginalization, Caste, Oppression, Testimony, Discrimination, Intersectionality, Dalit Literature, Subaltern Voices

INTRODUCTION

"Karukku" written by Bama (Faustima Mary Fatima Rani). Karukku was written in 1922 and translated in English by Lakshmi Holmstrom in 2001. Karukku has been translated in English, German, French, Telugu and Malayalam. "Karukku" is autobiographical narrative that offers Bama's experiences as a Dalit woman. She tells how they are humiliated because of caste. The title "Karukku" translates to "palmyra leaves," symbolizing resilience and endurance, themes that are central to Bama's narrative. The book delves into the intersectionality of caste, gender, and religion, shedding light on the discrimination and marginalization faced by Dalit women in Indian society. According to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Through Karukku, Bama redefines the boundaries of literature, centering the experiences of Dalit women and challenging literary norms."

Bama was born into a Dalit Christian family in Puthupatti, a village in Tamil Nadu, where she experienced firsthand, the marginalization and discrimination faced by Dalits in Indian society. All her works focus into issues related to caste, gender and social justice, providing insights into the experiences of Dalit women. Dalit literature has always true portrayals of the lives of the Dalits in India. Bama says:

"Dalits literature is our weapon. It is through our words that we assert our existence and demand justice"

Dalit literature is Indian writing that focus on the lives, experiences and struggles of Dalits who have been facing centuries of caste-based oppression and discrimination. The word "Dalit" comes from Marathi word with Sanskrit root. "Dalit" means "ground", "crushed" or "broken into pieces". It serves as a platform for Dalit voices to be heard and for their stories to be shared with a wider audience.

Caste oppression in India is a deeply rooted social issue characterized by the hierarchical caste system. According to Jyotirao Phule, "Caste is a disease, and we must collectively work towards its eradication." They are often subjected to derogatory treatment, verbal abuse, and physical violence, including caste-based atrocities such as lynching, rape, and forced displacement.

The upper-caste people in Bama's village never visit Cheri, where Bama lives, because all the essential facilities like the post office, the panchayat, the board, the mill, the temple, the big shop, the church, and the school are located in their own street.

In her high school hostel, the warden sister remarked, "Look at the children, when they stay here, they eat their fill and look as round as a potato. But look at the state they come from home, just skin and bone." [20] Despite paying full fees like everyone else, the warden sister scolds them because they are from a low caste and lack money. Bama says "she'd get hold of us and scolds us for no rhyme or reason". [20] Dalit students are treated as inferior.

She went to home holidays, the upper-caste woman avoided sitting next to her on the bus. "she'd immediately ask me which place I was going to, what street". As soon as I said, the Cheri, she'd get up and move off to another seat". [20] They'd prefer them to get

up and stand all the way rather than sit next to me or to any other woman from the Cheri. This happened to her several times, as they believed sitting next to her or any other woman from Cheri would “pollute” them. This highlighting the deep-rooted discrimination in society.

She saw a similar incident when she was unaware of what untouchability meant. While walking home from school, she saw an old man from her street holding out a packet of vada or something without touching it. When she saw this, she doesn't know why the old man hold without touching. She asked about this to her elder brother. “He said everybody believed that Naickers were upper caste and there must not touch parayas. If they did, they would be polluted”. [15]

Whenever she went to work for the Naickers she should not touch their goods. She should always stand away. These were their rules. Because Naickers belonged to a higher caste and had money. Naickers women would pour water from a height of four feet, which her grandmother and others would receive and drink with their hands. Both of her grandmothers worked hard at Naickers house, from morning till evening. They brought home leftover food from Naickers house. The Naickers behave "if she had been handed the nectar of the gods". [16]

The Naicker woman came out with left-overs, stretched from a distance and poured them into her grandmother's vessel. Because the Naicker woman should not touch her grandmother's vessel. When she asked about this to her grandmother. Her response was “These people are the maharajas who feed us our rice. Without them, how will we survive?”. [17]

People of her community work for Naickers. “More than three - quarters of the land in these parts are in the hands of the Naickers”. [48] If they didn't find any work, they will go into the jungle to collect firewood but it wasn't easy because the guarded will allow them only if they give money to him. The twigs and thorns would scratch and tear their face, their hair, their arms and legs. It wasn't a short distance, after all, between the mountain jungle and their village. If they want to gather firewood this much struggle and hardships, they have to face but the Naicker buy them for seven or eight rupees each.

In her village, both men and women have to work hard just to survive. She says, “they never received a payment that was appropriate to their labor” “Men received one wage, women another”..... “Even though they worked so hard and suffered bodily pain”. [54,55]

One day after school, she was playing with her friends. She touched the coconut, and the coconut dropped. The next day, the headmaster called her name in the assembly and he said “You have shown us your true nature as a paraya”. [19] When she approached to priest for permission to enter the school. His response was “After all, you are from Cheri. You might have done it. You must have done it”. [19] Because of her identity, she accused falsely. She also said the headmaster abused her and he used every bad word. They are blamed for any wrongdoing, and even minor incidents are blown out of proportion, leading to unjust punishment. The headmaster, belonging to a higher caste, perpetuates these biases, leading to further marginalization of Dalit students.

From her community, some individuals attacked a member of Chaaliyar caste. Soon after, member of the Chaaliyar caste filed a complaint against the entire paraya community.

“All of a sudden a huge gang of policemen came out from the Chaaliyar settlement, batons in hand, drove our men back ruthlessly, mercilessly beating those they caught before arresting them”. [34,35]

This incident shows how deeply rooted caste discrimination is in our society. The police failed to conduct a thorough investigation and instead they beat and arrest men simply because of their caste. The men named Alphons died because the police beat him blue and black. This is an example of injustice faced by a marginalized community by those in positions of power.

She thinks the discrimination, humiliation, and only in society are not in convent. She says “this attitude not only among the common people in the society about us. Far worse is the attitude within our own Church.” [80] At the first place of work, a nun asked “Are you Nadar”. She said “I am Paraya. [20] After she entered the convent, she realized “there was no place with free of caste”. “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”. [22] She learnt “The God has always shown the greatest compassion for the oppressed, and Jesus too associated himself mainly with the poor”. [104] “If by accident a poor and lowly person appears “they will fall upon that person like rabid dogs.” [107]

She entered the convent to teach poor children but the convent was filled with wealthy children and “there as every comfort and convenience there” [78] and “the convent does not know the meaning of poverty”. [77] then she saw this she felt frustrated. “Even amongst the priests and nuns, it is the upper castes who hold all the high positions, show off their authority, and throw their weight about. And if Dalits become priests or nuns, they are pushed aside and marginalized first of all, before the rest go about their business. It is because of this that even though Dalits like me might wish to take up the path of renunciation, we find there is no place for us there”. [80]

She expressed her humiliation and pain. In this society, if you are born into a low caste, you are forced to live your life of humiliation and degradation until your death. And she also says, caste discrimination stalks us in every nook and corner and drives us into frenzy.

She says “Convent life had changed me fundamentally. I who had once been bold had become an extremely timid person, fearful of everything. ready to burst into tears, and without any strength”. [78] This shows how individuals from low-caste backgrounds are treated by those from high-caste backgrounds. The caste discrimination inflicted significant harm on the individual's confidence and emotional well-being. She experienced discrimination and marginalization solely because of her caste.

The book shows us how a Dalit woman in Tamil Nadu faces a lot of unfair treatment just because of her caste. From when she was young until she grows up, she's always treated badly, whether it's at school, in public, or even in religious places. She shared the difficulties and struggles faced by all Dalits.

REFERENCES

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