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BAMA'S KARRUKU: LIVING IN THE MIDST OF INCOMPREHENSIBLE

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ABSTRACT

Dalit literature comprises the writings that align the revolutionary movement commenced by Dr. B. R Ambedkar with a vision to emancipate the oppressed in every field of life. Dalit literature not only hoist heart wrenching questions but also authenticates the capability of the people in the margins to fight against injustices. Women have always been doubly oppressed and remained the object of male domination. In this context, the dilemma of dalit women in Indian society is horrible as they are oppressed on the basis of class, gender and caste. In the last few decades dalit women are trying to create a female space for themselves through writing their traumatic experiences. There are a large number of dalit women writers who brought dalit texts into mainstream visibility. They have started searching for the root cause of these injustices leveled upon them. Women in these discourses bring their own identification as women as well as dalit. It is in this context that Bama's *Karukku* needs to be ruminated.

Bama's *Karruku* based on the experience of a Tamil Dalit Christian woman has been bestowed with many nomenclatures in different field of studies as Marginal Literature, Translation Studies, Autobiography, Memoirs, Feminist literature, Dalit writing and so on. It is a poignant dalit novel that speaks of the childhood experiences of the author. The present study attempts to bring forth that how the author's childhood is interspersed with events that repeatedly impel her to raise ultimate question (regarding equality, oppression, untouchability etc.) which the society considers impossible. She feels bewildered and perplexed over the passivity of her community and the subtle measurement of superiority by the upper class and religion in society.

KEYWORDS: Dalit Literature, Oppression, Untouchability, Autobiography, Marginality

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How did the upper castes become so elevated? How is it that we (Dalits) have been denigrated?...And in my heart I have even grieved over the fact that I was born as I am. Are Dalits not human beings? Do they not have common sense...honour ...self respect...wisdom, beauty, dignity? What do we lack? (Bama 27)

The above stated series of burning questions is not only the outburst of Bama, a grief stricken woman, born as a member of untouchable community. It is an articulation to the tormenting soul of every downtrodden who has to face exploitations at the name of polluted. These lines are from Bama's *Karruku* which is often included in the field of dalit studies that comprises the writings having alignment with the revolutionary movement commenced by Dr. B. R Ambedkar with a vision to emancipate the oppressed in every field of life. The term dalit refers to all the exploited and oppressed people belonging to various lower castes in India. According to Bama Dalit Literature is:

Liberation literature like Black Literature, Feminist Literature and Communist- Socialist Literature...there are traces of the agony and ecstasy of the dalits, the direct and emotional outbursts, the collective identity, the mockery and caricature of the immediate oppressors, the supernatural powers of oracle and the mythical heroism: these are the several elements for the reconstruction of a conscious Dalit literature. (97-98)

Dalit literature not only hoists heart wrenching questions but also authenticates the capability of the people in the margins to fight against injustices. Women have always been doubly oppressed and remained the object of male domination. In this context, the dilemma of dalit women in Indian society is horrible as they are oppressed on the basis of class, gender and caste. In the last few decades dalit women are trying to create a female space for themselves through writing their traumatic experiences. There are a large number of dalit women writers who brought dalit texts into limelight. They have started searching for the root cause of these injustices forced upon them. Women in these writings bring their own identification as women as well as dalit. It is in this context that Bama's *Karukku* needs to be ruminated.

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Karukku is the first autobiography of its kind to appear in Tamil for Dalit writing in this language has not produced such an exceptional piece of writing in the form of autobiography until its publication. This work is an account to author's life from childhood till her adulthood when she decides to leave her job as a nun. It ends on a particular moment; a personal crisis and watershed in her life, which drives her to make sense of her life as a woman, a Christian and a Dalit. The event of Bama's life is not arranged according to a simple, linear, or chronological order. It is divided in different chapters with the force of theme as work, games and recreation, education, belief and so on. The use of stream of consciousness technique reflects Bama's quest of integrity as a Dalit, a woman and a Christian.

Bama, the child of a housewife and fathered by an army man is born in the family of paraya, an untouchable caste. Bama a voracious child from the very beginning is not able to understand the double standards of the society. She does not know how her village come to be divided on the basis of communities the lower caste and upper. But she knows:

We only went to their side if we had work to do there. But they never, ever, came to our parts. The post office, the panchayat board, the milk depot, the big shops, the Church, the schools all there stood in their streets. So, why would they need to come to our area besides, there was a big school in the Naicker street which was meant only for the upper caste children. (Bama 6- 7)

Bama as a child till third class have not yet heard people speaking openly of untouchability. But she says, "I had already seen, felt, experienced, and been humiliated by what it is" (13). She is perplexed to see a paraya old man carrying an envelope in his hand and handing it over to a Naicker with an effort of not touching him. It seems really amusing to her. When she comes home and tells this story while laughing her brother's reply breaks the ground under her feet:

He said everybody believed that Naickers were upper caste, and therefore must not touch Parayas. If they did, they would be polluted. When I heard this, I didn't want to laugh any more, and I felt terribly sad. I felt so provoked and angry that I wanted to go and touch those wretched Vadais myself. (15)

A memory of that happening again and again disturbs her psyche. This first overhearing of her position or the position of her community, her family, her elders, in the society flood her mind with furious questioning:

How was it that these fellows thought so much of themselves? Because they had scraped four coins together, did that mean they must lose all human feeling? What did it mean when they called us 'Paraya'? Had the name become that obscene? But we too are human being. Our people should never run these petty errands for these fellows. (Bama 16)

This incident leaves a deep scar on the psyche of Bama. Now she starts to observe every petty detail of dealing with Naickers by her community. She finds that at the time of workers demand of water (in which Bama grandmother was also one) the Naicker women would pour out the water from the height of at least three four feet. In the evening the Naicker women used to give the paraya workers the remaining food of her home as the remuneration of their work. She observes that her grandmother placed the vessel at the side of the drain and, "The Naicker lady came out with her 'leftovers, leaned out from some distance and tipped them into Paatti's vessel, and went away. Her vessel, it seemed, must not touch Paatti's; it would be polluted" (16). For a moment, Bama can ignore the attitude of Naicker community. But her astonishment has no boundary when she listens to her grandmother who says, "These people are the Maharajas who feed us our rice. Without them, how will we survive? Haven't they been upper caste from generation to generation, and haven't we been lower caste? Can we change this? (17)

So, in the answer of her queries, she just receives more queries. She is not able to comprehend the passivity of her community regarding their exploitation in every walk of life. Her brother convinces Bama that education is the only way to come out of their indignities. But at school also whatever bad is done, it is attached with the name of lower caste children. They are not considered student like others. This heinous demon of caste discriminations does not leave them in school –the temple of knowledge. In spite of Harijan children's good performance in studies, they are exploited as their parents outside the school, "Everyone seemed to think Harijan children were contemptible. But they didn't hesitate to use for cheap labor. So we carried water to the teacher's house. We watered the plants. We did all the chores that were needed about the school"(Bama18).

In the above lines again the double standard attitude of society towards paraya community is exposed. What an irony, the teacher can drink the water fetched by paraya children but their community is not allowed to use the common wells and hand pumps in the village which are meant for the upper class.

Bama's journey does not end in village. Being a studious girl for her further schooling from ninth standard, she is admitted in a hostel in a neighboring town. Although she feels awkward among the high-class children, Bama decided to concentrate on her studies. She feels heartbroken at the ill treatment of Paraya children by the hostel warden, "The warden sister of our hostel could not abide low-caste or poor children. She'd get hold of us and scared us for no rhyme or reason.... These people get nothing to eat at home, they come here and they grow fat; she would say publicly" (20). Bama found it really embarrassing when the statement like there is repeated again and again. She grudges, "we too paid our fees like everyone else, for our food, for this and that yet we had to listen to all this as well" (20). Not only in village, school, hostel but public places like in buses also the lower caste people encounter such humiliating situation. Bama describes an incident when an upper caste woman left the seat beside her the moment she is told by Bama that she belonged to Paraya Street.

In college also her dream of equality is sheltered very mercilessly. She has thought that at such a big college, at such a distance away, at such a higher level of education nobody will be worried about caste. But there also she finds that they certainly consider caste differences and, "It struck me that I would not be rid of this caste business easily, whatever I studies wherever I went" (22).

As a young educated girl Bama tries to comprehend the incomprehensible by joining the church as a nun. She thinks that as a teacher she will teach the Dalit children that are humiliated so much and kept under such strict control by teachers and nuns. Her decision of entering the church at the cost of leaving her school job does not get positive response from her family. But Bama's inspiration to do something for the untouchable gives her the courage to dissent her family. In spite of everything they say she enters the order and this is a huge mistake by her as she admits:

Before my decision, I had read about the woman who founded that particular order, how she had done so for the sake of the poor and lowly, lived and died for them alone. I wanted to be like her. I live only for the poor and downtrodden, so I entered that particular order. But once inside the convent, it was like coming from the backwoods into a big metropolis... I began to understand, little by little that in that order, Tamil people were looked upon as lower caste. And then, among Tamils, Parayar were separate category. (23-24)

In this connection Ajay Kumar observes, "The condition of a Paraiya under Catholic Church is not different from the ill treatment that he or she suffers within Hindu society. Irrespective of their religious affiliations or even financial position the lower caste people suffered humiliation from the dominant sections of the society" (Kumar 131)

Bama finds that in the school posted by Church other nun and even the superiors of Church have the notion that low-caste people are all degraded in every way. The Dalit have no moral description nor cleanliness nor culture. Listening such abusings everyday from her colleague about her own community Bama can do nothing but keep on, "dying several deaths within", (26).

Bama is now able to see clearly that in this society if a person takes birth in the lower caste, he has to spend his whole life facing caste discrimination in every nook and corner till their death. Even after death also the filthy game of caste affiliation is played. Bama describes in the text a very pathetic incident where two castes fight for the ownership of cemetery. After the death the final ritual does not matter but what matters the most is that to which caste do you belong? During this feud Bama very cleverly exposed the role of police in the exploitation of poor class. Bama ridicules blatantly the discriminatory attitude of the police whose basic duties of protecting the innocent and checking the criminal are forgotten by the police.

In this feud of cemetery's ownership between Chaliyar and Parayas, police take the side of chaaliyar as they have paid the police some money and also have offered them good food during the whole incidents. In return the police attacks on Parayas, arrest all the male members of Paraya community and beat them black and blue, "We continued to hear the thuds as the police struck heavy blows, our men screaming the pain, and women shouting and yelling in protest" (38). This description by Bama reminds one *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy and the merciless beating of Velutha, the untouchable by the hand of ravenous police who have taken bribe to do so. Roy spares no literary device to hit hard at the utter hypocrisy, cruelty and unscrupulousness of an administrative agency whose work is to protect the citizens from the violence of lawbreakers. Velutha, "the Untouchable" is killed by the "Touchable Boots", of the state police. (Roy 161)

The condition of woman in lower caste is more terrible. They are not encouraged to study further as Bama listens about her higher education, "They said it would be difficult for me to find a husband in my community if I went in for further education" (74).

Bama realize the complete upside down picture of church after becoming the nun. Socially they pose as they are living a life of physical and mental chastity, loving poverty and eating the simple food. But inside the Church the ground reality is altogether different. The nuns there are fond of eating delicious food, having much interest in money and clothes. They feel jealous with each other and talk sometimes in abusive language. They are taught to keep distance with lower caste. Even inside the Church there are divisions among nun on the basis of caste. In spite of repeated request of Bama for posting in a rural school where she can teach the Dalit student for which she has entered in the order Bama is transferred in Kashmir, an area that does

not meet Bama's aim in any way. She finally resigns her post and leaves the order as it weakens her inner strength day by day. Stella has rightly observed that, "The vow of obedience and the virtue of humility become subtle tools of intimidation and she found herself caged in that special world of bondage"(Stella 95). As after leaving the Church order Bama accepts:

Today I am like a mongrel, wandering about without a permanent job, nor a regular mean to find clothes, food and a safe place to live. I share the same difficulties and struggles that all Dalit poor experience. I share to some extent the poverty of the Dalits who toil for more painfully through fierce heat and beating rain, yet live out their lives in their hut with nothing but gruel and water. Those who labor are the poorest of the poor Dalits. But those who reap the reward are the wealthy, the upper castes. This continues to happen in my village to this day. (79)

In this situation also, Bama does not bury her intention to work for the good of society. She does not go back to her home because if she returns home her family would marry her. She knows it well what the life of a married woman is in the society as she understands, "if I were to marry, I would have to live the rest of my life and even die in the end for the sake of one man. What use would I be then, to society? I leave the convent now and go into the outside world; I want to show that it is possible to live a life that is at least a little useful to society" (131).

Bama attacks church and the representatives of Christianity for misguiding the lower caste for their personal benefits. The Dalits are taught by priest that they should follow the rules of religion otherwise God will punish them. Bama enquires that why all the rules of God's kingdom are applied only on the poor, the underdogs? Is God always keeping his eyes on them? Does God always have fury for the poor? The answer is in negative. This false picture of God is represented by priest in front of Dalits to frighten them so that they may act according to their wishes. The priests do not teach the oppressed about God but rather they are taught in an empty and meaningless way about humility, obedience, patience, gentleness. Bama believes that this situation will not prevail for long time. The priests will not be able to deceive the poor much longer. Because now:

Dalits have begun to realize the truth. They have realized that they have been,,, made slaves in the name of God, the Pusai, and the Church. They have experienced a state of affairs where, in the name of serving the poor, these others have risen in power while actually treading on the poor Dalits have learnt that these others have never respected them as human beings, but bent the religion to their benefit, to maintain their own falsehoods. (109)

The church keeps the Bible out of reach of Dalit consciousness. Bama's reading of the Bible reveals that the Church's construction of Jesus is misplaced, untrue and a willful deception. She is shocked why the Dalit are never taught that Jesus dwells among the poor and fight for the suppressed sections. The church teaches them that God loves peace loving, patient, obedient, almost servile. They are never taught the truth that God loves justice, fights back injustice, opposes hypocrisy, does not discriminate, does not believe in any hierarchy , "There is a wide gulf between this Jesus and the Jesus of organized Christianity" (85).

Bama's education has brought her to this level of understanding that now she is not the passive recipient of Church's description of God and religion. But this is not the end of her mission. Mere questioning to the set norm and wrong interpretation would not work. Moreover it is not such adventures as by Bama or any individual like her can bring sea change. If the whole dalit community wants to have the equal status in the society, they must unite and educate themselves in order to stand firmly against their exploiters. It would be appropriate to wind up this discussion with the inspirational words by Bama herself:

We who are asleep must open our eyes and look about us. We must not accept the injustice our enslavement by telling ourselves it is our fate, as if we have no true feeling; we must dare to stand up for change. We must crush all their institutions that use caste to bully us into submission, and demonstrate that among human beings there are none who are high or low. Those who have found their happiness by exploiting us are not going to let us go easily.

It is we who have to place them where they belong and bring about a changed and just society where all are equal. (28)

Therefore, Bama's *Karruku* attracts the attention of Dalits towards awareness regarding their education. In order to bring an end to caste oppression, Bama's autobiography acts as a sociography as it gives the detailed description to the savior exploitation of the whole dalit community in every part of the country. Dauntless calls for equal rights, unity of voices against every kind of injustice, necessary education to all the members of dalit community, and recognition to one's unique identity with its potentialities of survival in any kind of circumstances are some suggestions which according to Bama can help the dalits to come out of their perennial exploitations and suppression at the name of untouchability.

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