



## A Critical Study of *Karukku* as a Testimonial Autobiography.

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*“Diversity there certainly is in the world, but it means neither inequality nor untouchability.” ~ Mahatma Gandhi*

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### ABSTRACT:

This study aims to underscore the pivotal role played by autobiography of feminist Dalit writer, Bama, in exposing the patriarchal socio-historical structures of India and highlighting culturally discriminatory experiences. Autobiography emerges as a powerful medium through which the marginalized communicate their suffering and assert their identities. These narratives not only depict protest but also serve as a quest for self-identity amidst societal constraints.

*Karukku* stands as a testimonial narrative. This masterpiece explores the issues of caste-based discrimination, gender discrimination, economic exploitation, oppression and identity. This research paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of testimonial literature's role in advocating for social justice and bringing out the voice of the voiceless to be heard in the outer world.

**Keywords:** Feminist Dalit, autobiography, marginalized, self-identity, Testimonial narrative, discrimination, oppression, exploitation, social justice, voiceless.

### I. INTRODUCTION:

The impact of the upper castes has been significantly felt in the social, religious and cultural lives of the lower sections over the years. *Karukku* is written by Bama (Faustima Mary Fatima Rani) in 1922 and translated in English by Lakshmi Holmstrom in 2001. *Karukku* has been translated in English, German, French, Telugu and Malayalam. "*Karukku*" is an autobiographical narrative that puts forth Bama's experiences as a Dalit woman. She tells how they are humiliated because of their caste. The title "*Karukku*" translates to "palmyra leaves," symbolizing resilience and endurance, themes that are central to Bama's narrative. The book immerses into the intersectionality of caste, gender, and religion, throwing light on the discrimination and marginalization faced by Dalit women in Indian society. One being a woman and

another being a Dalit makes them double marginalized.

Bama was detested by her village for depicting it in poor light and was not allowed to enter the village for the next seven months when her novel was published. She merges feminism and casteism in her writing, offering a unique perspective on societal issues. According to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "*Through Karukku, Bama redefines the boundaries of literature, centering the experiences of Dalit women and challenging literary norms.*" This article focuses on the voice of the voiceless in bringing out their voices to be heard in the outer world.

### BAMA'S EARLY BACKGROUND:

Born in 1958, Bama, also known as Bama Faustina Soosairaj, is an explicit Tamil, Dalit feminist, devoted teacher and novelist. She was born into the Paraya community in Tamil Nadu, a community of agricultural labourers that occupies the lowest strata of the caste-ridden hierarchical society. She published an autobiography *Karukku* (1992), a novel *Sangati* (1994), and a collection of short stories, *Kisumbukkaaran* (1996) and a novel *Vanmam: Vendetta* (2003). *Karukku* is a poignant autobiographical work that speaks of childhood experiences of the author. Bama was born into a Dalit Christian family in Puthupatti, a village in Tamil Nadu, where she experienced firsthand 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.

According to writer C. S. Lakshmi, "*Bama is more than a writer; she is a chronicler and recorder of Dalit life and struggle in Tamil Nadu.*"

### DOUBLE JEOPARDY OF DALIT WOMEN :

In India, the incident of discrimination, humiliation and violence needs to be understood as deeply rooted in the caste system, which



presupposes the stratum and hierarchical ordering of people into various groups designated as 'castes'. Whereby the hierarchically lower groups bear unending torment on the ostensible reason of their social ordering. The lowest in the hierarchy, traditionally referred to as 'untouchables' are now collectively known as Dalits.

The Dalit women live under deplorable conditions with little or no access to basic health care, education and sanitation facilities as are singularly positioned at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. Furthermore, their socioeconomic vulnerability and lack of political voices increase their exposure to potentially violent situations. This reduces their ability to escape. While comprehending the discriminatory episodes of Dalit women in India, their situation becomes synonymous with the Black women's experiences. Dalit women, who often are the victims of double-discrimination or 'double jeopardy' i.e. they are oppressed as women and are relegated to the bottom of the social hierarchy for their identity as Dalit. The Dalit woman's exploitation is physical as well as mental. She suffers in the family first, because she is a woman and then has to face the society as she is a Dalit. For Dalit women, gender discrimination, caste discrimination, and patriarchal domination go hand in hand.

#### **DALIT LITERATURE :**

The term "Dalit," meaning "oppressed" in Sanskrit and "broken/scattered" in Hindi, primarily denotes Indian castes subjected to untouchability. As De Boland rightly confesses, '*literature is an expression of society*'. Literature in itself embodies life and life is a social reality of society. A writer, who is a member of a society, is influenced by specific social status and receives some degree of social recognition. Dalit literature focuses on the lives, experiences and struggles of Dalits who have been facing centuries of caste based oppression and discrimination. It serves as a platform for Dalit voices to be heard and for their stories to be shared with a wider audience. The manifesto of the Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra, published in 1973, defines Dalits as '*members of scheduled castes and tribes, neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion*'. 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 barbarity such as lynching, rape, and forced displacement.

Dalit writings are narratives of trauma, pain, resistance, protest and social change. Dalit texts document the sufferings and atrocities committed upon a large section of the population. The writing proceeds from a lived experience of inequality, discrimination, poverty, violence, rejection injustice and sufferings. Dalit literature has always true portrayals of the lives of the Dalits in India. Bama says: "*Dalit literature is our weapon. It is through our words that we assert our existence and demand justice*". Dalit literature is of the oppressed which is always literature with a cause. The main aim of Bama's writing, as she says, is "*to share with people my experiences. I use writing as one of the weapons to fight for the rights of the underprivileged*". Thus, through her writings, she gratifies self-reflection and inner strength.

The future of Dalit literature is engraved on the present condition of the Dalits and their susceptibility. Because of the nature of Bama's work as a Christian Dalit as well as a woman writer, both of which gave a tangentially different understanding of Dalit experiences, the testimonial form of writing (about her own life and that of her community in this instance) creates a generic challenge and its value truly depends on its perceived truth of expression, its complete fidelity to lived experience.

#### **AUTOBIOGRAPHY versus TESTIMONIAL WRITINGS:**

An autobiography is a self-authored narrative that chronicles an individual's life, serving as a reflection of human consciousness. The genre has roots in Greek literature and has undergone transformations throughout history. Autobiography is a genre of literature characterized by its firsthand account of an individual's life, written by the author themselves. While it shares similarities with other forms such as memoirs, diaries, and confession, its primary focus is on depicting the progression and maturation of the author's character.

Testimonio is a genre commonly associated with Latin American atrocity narratives. John Beverley defines it thus: A novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first person account by the narrator who has faced instances of social and political inequality, oppression, or any specific form of marginalization.



Primarily these narratives are documents of atrocities and suffering, bringing one into contact with the victimized. The testimonio is the voice of one who witnesses for the sake of another, who remains voiceless. That is, the speaking subaltern subject of the narrative gives voice to the lived experiences of herself and of those who are victims of social and linguistic-literary marginalization. Testimonio is a collective document here and Karukku moves from individual to community through a narration of trauma. Bama described Karukku this way:

*“The story told in Karukku was not my story alone. It was the depiction of a collective trauma – of my community – whose length cannot be measured in time. I just tried to freeze it forever in one book so that there will be something physical to remind people of the atrocities committed on a section of the society for ages.”*

#### **SOCIAL CONVOLUTIONS IN KARUKKU THAT EMPHASIZED DISCRIMINATION :**

The narrator reflects on various events and how they have shaped the outlines of her life and imposed on her self-understanding and socio-political awareness.

As a child, Bama grew up in an atmosphere instilled with faith in the Christian religion. Religion for her was a sense of duty and obedience (enforced with strict punishment), and also an idea of class and caste identity. She learns very early what it means to be a Dalit in the Indian society, and, rapidly, understands what it means to be a Dalit in the Catholic Christian society.

This autobiography shows how low caste individuals are viewed as untouchables due to caste prejudice. Low caste members not only show deference to high caste members, but they also poison everything they touch. The upper-caste people living 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.”* 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 scold us for no rhyme or reason.”* Dalit students are treated as inferior.

In another incident she went to home for 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*”. 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 highlights the deep-rooted discrimination in society.

She saw a similar incident when she was absolutely unaware of what untouchability meant. While walking home from school, she saw an old man from the street holding out a packet of vadai or something without touching it. When she saw this, she did not know why the old man held the packet without touching it. She asked about this to her elder brother. He then tells her a real truth about her being from a low caste and that the upper caste people do not like their presence or touch the low caste as it would make them impure. He says, *“Everybody believed that Naickers were upper caste and they must not touch parayas. If they did, they would be polluted”*. She finds it so disgusting that she grows angry over the upper caste people.

She voices again about untouchability as a set of stringent rules she had learnt to observe as a part of her life: *‘All the time I went to work for the Naickers, I knew I should not touch their goods or chattels; I should never come close to where they were, I should always stand away to one side’*. 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”*. The Naicker woman came out with left-overs, stretched from a distance and poured them into 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?”*.

Bama reveals about the hard work that she enjoyed: *‘I don't know why they were so surprised. In those days, I really enjoyed that kind of hard physical labor’*. The education system encourages subtly to look down on people doing physical labour. She does not look down on the work that her community does; she is only astounded at the fact that society does not reward or even recognize



the importance of this labour. She further points out that even today, men and women in her village '*can survive only through hard and incessant labor*'. People of her community work for Naickers. '*More than three - quarters of the land in these parts are in the hands of the Naickers*'. If they are unable to find any work then they will have to go to the forest and bribe the guards for firewood. Only then they would have been able to collect it. The twigs and thorns would scratch and tear their face, their hair, their arms and legs. If they wanted to gather firewood they had to go through this much struggle and hardships, but the Naickers bought them for seven or eight rupees each. In her village, both men and women had 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*".

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*". 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*". Because of her identity, she was accused falsely. They were to be blamed for any wrongdoing, 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*". This incident shows how deeply rooted caste discrimination is in our society. This is an instance of injustice on a marginalized community by those in power.

Bama also criticizes the church. She realized that the world was inside the church but social service to the country and to the poor were far from the minds of the serving nuns. The church valued the wealth and influence among the upper castes. Bama says that even the school attached to the convent was no better. The nuns were 'trapped in comfort'. Bama found in the church was a disjunction between what was professed and what was practised. As she says, the training that the

nuns received had no connection to the lives they had to live later. She says "this attitude not only among the common people in the society about us. Far worse is the attitude within our own Church. At the first place of work, a nun asked, "*Are you Nadar*". She said, "*I am Paraya*". 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*". She learnt, "*The God has always shown the greatest compassion for the oppressed, and Jesus too associated himself mainly with the poor. If by accident a poor and lowly person appears they will fall upon that person like rabid dogs*".

She entered the convent to teach poor children but the convent was filled with wealthy children and "*there was every comfort and convenience*" and "*the convent does not know the meaning of poverty*". 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.

#### **KARUKKU: AN EXPRESSION OF EXPERIENCE**

Karukku is a powerful critique of Indian civil society itself: the educational system, the church and the bureaucracy and highlights the complicity between class and caste in post-independence India.

Bama has expressed her humiliation and pain throughout this work. 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. 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*". This shows the ill treatment of individuals of low-caste backgrounds 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.





## II. CONCLUSION:

*“If untouchability lives, humanity must die.”*

—M.K. Gandhi

Bama's *Karukku* is as much about the writer and her interpretation of the hardship endured by her people as it is about her Dalit community. She writes as a Dalit woman about the experiences of Dalit women in her community and urges women to emerge victorious in bringing out their identity to independence. A salient point about conversions to other religions by Dalits is that they usually convert as an entire community, as a caste based in a certain location. Hence, their identity as a caste is carried over, unfortunately, into the new religion. Bama's own community was outraged for a while after the publication of the book. *Karukku* created quite a stir in Tamil literary circles after its publication, although it marked a new era in the Tamil Dalit society in voicing the voice of the voiceless to be heard in the outer arena. Thus, Bama used the local dialect of the Tamil people and not the formalized text that can be easily understood. Bama realizes that her own experiences and the resultant awareness are part of a larger Dalit consciousness raising a larger movement.

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