

## AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING USED AS A WEAPON AGAINST CASTEISM AND MARGINALISATION WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO BAMA'S KARUKKU

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**Abstract:** Dalit literature has emerged as an important genre in the field of English Literature in the recent years. Bama, a representative writer of Dalit Literature rebels against the established hegemonic practices of the people from higher caste using the literary tool autobiographical writing. In this paper, her first novel and her autobiography *Karukku*, which means 'serrated leaves' has been analysed in depth. It throws light on her rebellion against the caste system which plagues the Indian Society. The author of this paper critically explores the lucid picture of Dalit society and Dalit lifestyle painted by Bama, in the minds of the reader.

**Keywords:** Autobiographical writing, Dalit Literature, Dalit Society, Hegemonic practices.

**Introduction:** Bama's characters are of casteism. The evil system that has plagued ever since man made this discrimination is vividly expressed and strongly denounced in Bama's novels. This generation old evil has succeeded in corroding the psyche of the victims to the extent of meek and humble surrender which has made the so called upper caste to dominate the marginalized both physically and mentally. Repression of these marginalized generates an abnormality of character which distances them from the normal concerns of life. Their subaltern position moulds them and makes them conscious of it. Debashree Chakravarti and G.A. Ghanshyam says that subaltern consciousness is "one that borders on the realms of neurotic and psychotic behaviour, a result of years of repression, pain, loss and denial . . ." (33).

Bama's novels communicate her inexplicable urge to awaken the slumbering consciousness of men to the problems of casteism and human suffering that are rampant in the society. Her first novel *Karukku* pictures the evils of casteism and the inhuman behaviour which results because of it. It reflects the deep rooted prejudice which affects the human behaviour which poses an intractable problem. She focuses on the existential situation wrought by discrimination and segmentation. Autobiographic in its essence and tone, *Karukku* challenges the oppressors who have enslaved and disempowered the dalits and it compels the need for a new society which deals with justice, equality and love. It also satirizes the religious bigotry the hypocrisy and heartlessness of caste Hindus and the degraded servility of the outcasts. Their philosophical resignation and psychological subjugation and endurance continues until their offsprings deem it an utter injustice and choose to rebel, emboldened by education but only to be crushed again by the iron hand of authority. For example, Bama describes how her relatives used to receive food and water from the houses of the land lords. "The Naicker women would

pour out the water from a height of four feet, while paatti and the other received and drank it with cupped hands held to their mouths: I (Bama) always felt terrible when I (Bama) watched this" (*Karukku* 14). Having imbibed this servile instinct in them, the older ones show exceptional psychological tolerance. Their psyche is so tuned to this kind of treatment that it comes to them so naturally to obey their landlords, though aware of the gross injustice. Bama's another grandmother too considered the left overs given to her as "nectar of the Gods" (14) for all the menial work she did for the land lords. When questioned how they could lay open themselves to such behaviour paatti replied:

These people are the maharaja's 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? (14)

The psychological feeling of unworthiness is so ingrained in their mind and it becomes an advantage for the oppressing clans to dominate as the oppressed accept it as their destiny without questioning. Coronil states as follows: "Subalternity defines not the being of a subject, but a subjected state of being . . . enduring subjection has the effect of fixing subjects into limiting positions . . ." (44). Therefore, the characters of Bama are continuously subjected to limitation and are assigned limited position which they are doomed to endure. They represent the poor socially oppressed people who have been laden with the self-derogatory and untouchable image from centuries. They have grown up as a negative image of impurity that has been imposed upon them by the caste traitors. (15)

The children too are not spared from this inhuman treatment. Insult is heaped upon them for being born into that unfortunate caste and any mild fault committed by them is reprimanded severely and insulted. They are treated as outcasts which poisons the tender mind. Bama narrated an incident from her

childhood.

When she was in the seventh class they used to play after class, on the big neem tree in front of the school. Once they were hanging like bats upside down from its branches, they then started another game of running up to the coconut tree and touching its tip. The children in the frenzied excitement started to run up and down and in the process some even gave the unripe coconut a twist and so that when Bama touched it, it fell to the ground with a thud. Every one blamed her and being terribly frightened ran away. The next day morning, the head master call out her name. "You have shown us your true nature as a paraya...We cannot allow you inside this school" (16). Having denied entrance to school she went to the priest to seek permission to enter the class, on the advice of the teacher. As priests were respected by all, a letter of recommendation from him would mean a lot to the unfortunate souls. The priest's response shattered her as tears welled up in eyes pouring forth in torrents. "After all, you are from the Cheri. You might have done it" (17). The look that she got when she entered the class was cruel and piercing that she felt like shrinking to herself. This blow to her pride and ego of being ostracized in front of others and disabled to strike back, nurture in her a determination to climb the rungs of the social hierarchy and prove her worth.

Bama's psyche was embedded with the ringing words of her brother "work hard and learn" that she inadvertently brushed aside all such insults to make a woman out of herself. But wherever she went the same discrimination dogged her very heels. Constructing a sense of self-worth was the only way by which she could survive all the odds and discriminating circumstance. At college she was not allowed to go from the hostel to attend the First Communion of her younger brother and sister while the students from the upper caste were allowed to. Bama stood her ground adamantly refusing to give up, a wild rage impelling her to go.

Talking of Anita Desai's heroines Gajendra Kumar remarks that her heroines are women, who have identified themselves with a "woman's struggle for self-realization and self-definition, woman's quest for her identity, her pursuit of freedom equality and transcendence, her rebellion and protest against oppression at every level" (66). This is what Bama does too. She defiantly fights her extent battle to realise her dream and prove her mettle and identity. Her cherished dream of a nun did not free her from the caste crisis. To her shock the students of her community studying in that school did all the menial jobs whereas the wealthy ones enjoyed special treatment. They spoke of her community insultingly and did not even consider them as human beings and

Bama did not have the guts to say that she too was a dalit, "I was filled with anger towards them, yet I did not have the courage to rebel sharply that I too was a low caste nun. I swallowed the very words that came into my mouth; never said anything aloud but battled within myself" (22). Throughout her interaction with the society Bama is treated with contempt and abuse and rejected by the socially acceptable upper caste, rich and educated. Thus, she silently suffered then ignominy digesting everything yet getting tougher in spirit day by day.

There are a myriad number of questions that rise in her mind as to why there was this inequality and by what means other castes were higher than theirs. But the only answer she could muster up was "Because Dalits have been enslaved for generation upon generation . . . This is the worst injustice" (25). Thus, the built in marginalization in the society left behind a trail of humiliating and worthless feeling unconsciously in the minds of the dalits.

If this was the situation in the temple of learning it was worse in the temple of worship. There too it was only the uppercaste Christians who enjoyed the benefits and comforts of the church. Before a God who is all loving without any difference, the upper caste only made a farcical show of reverence, making use of the dalits "who were immersed in ignorance as their capital, set up a big business and only profited their own castes . . . And if Dalits become priests or nuns they are pushed aside and marginalized first of all, before the rest go about their business" (69).

Bama narrates how they celebrated Easter in their village in a grand manner. The daylong Good Friday service where the children who were dozing off were woken up by the sisters who were on vigilance, she ironically laughs how the sisters themselves would doze off. This was followed by the celebration on Easter Sunday with all its pomp and splendor of procession, wearing new clothes, lighting candles, singing Christian hymns. Bama never realized the greatness of the event then frivolous as a child. "But I understood what an important event Easter is for us, only after I had left home and gone to study elsewhere. It was only then that I became fully aware of its significance" (87). These celebrations left no devout feeling of the omniscient God as they did not really drive home the point that it was meant to. They only catered to the bubbling excitement of the festivities. It took years to sink down into her psyche, to comprehend the exalted significance of those rituals.

Life in the nunnery was a complicated struggle of complex emotions. Once inside the four walls of it Bama found to her dismay that it was only the rule of obedience and submission prevailed. Any challenge or rebellion to it was deemed as a mistake in

'upbringing' or 'fatal flaw in the family'. So engulfed in wealth and riches were the nuns that some were not even aware of what Dalit meant. And even those who were aware had very poor opinions about them. Their treating of the dalits was so cruel and merciless. Stricken in her conscience Bama wonders how these nuns could bring souls to the kingdom of God where there are neither the high nor the low. The insensibility of the people around her shrinks her capacity to co-operate and communicate. The discrepancy between what she aspired to be in her life and the harsh reality that confronted her plunges her into abysmal anguish. Her intensely private and personal emotions and fears render her futile in the harsh world.

The psychological trauma for having to put up with the hypocritical life in the convent became so great that Bama decided to walk out of it. She was no longer able to bend to its cruelties for fear of breaking and therefore she left. Having been immersed in the exploitive, fanatic and hypocritical society, her mind became infused and dulled. The imprisonment in the convent had drained all her creative energy that she felt herself a stranger to her own self.

**She describes her situation thus:** At the time I entered the convent, I was like the strong core of a teak tree. Both in mind and in body, I was firm and steadfast as that. But when I came out, I had lost all my strength, and was as feeble as a murunga tree that blows over in the wind. It was only after I entered the convent that I fell prey to every illness and disease. My mind too had been buffeted and knocked about, so that I was only living a half-life or a quarter-life. In such a diminished state, how could I be of service? (103) She felt like a soaring bird whose wings were clipped arresting its motion. Yet, the fighting spirit in her was not quenched. Putting all her past back she relentlessly determined to look forward, finding comfort in the thought that to lead life weeping real tears is better than to live with a fraudulent smile. With all their words and rules in the convent, they cut me down, sculpted me, damaged me. Today I

blunder and stumble about in the world outside. Most of all, it hurts me that I should be doing this at my age.

I don't know when my wings will heal and gain enough strength so that I too will be able to fly again. Just as people throw sticks and stones to wound a wingless bird, many people have wounded me with their words and deeds. Yet I know I'm moving forward slowly, Step by step (104).

*Karukku* literally means serrated leaves or blades. Paula Richman observes, "Bama uses *Karukku* to articulate the notion that pain need not be an ending point; it can spur realization and new growth, as it did for her". (140) This Dalit text conveys that pain can generate change. The centuries of sufferings and pain have the power to prompt Dalit to rebel and revenge. Pain is a double edged weapon for them. The ragged blades of Palmyra tree can harm the hands that touch them but they can also be used as weapon for defense. Similarly the state of being Dalit of a socially depraved position can function against Dalits to demoralize them, as it has been working since centuries. But the awakening to this very status of Dalithood can also instigate the Dalits to fight against their deprivation. The identity of Dalit is a double edged weapon for Dalits. It has been used to hurt them but now they have realized that they can use to defend themselves. *Karukku* thus symbolizes the Dalit consciousness that inspires Dalits to fight for their equitable existences, to use their Dalithood as their defense. It evokes the subversion of consciousness of victim and oppressed into a strong equipped survivor. Bama realized this subverted Dalit consciousness which works as an inspiration for other Dalits. *Karukku's* sharp edged attack, shows the importance of society as a support system to an individual, the absence of which can create a hell leaving a trail of pain and disgust. By exposing the hypocrisy behind religious conversion and caste system *Karukku* revolutionizes the Dalit identity.

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