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Dalitness and Struggle: Two Faces of the Same Coin

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Abstract

Karukku, written by Bama, narrates what life is like outside the mainstream. Bama writes her bitter experiences and struggle as a Dalit girl, as a Dalit woman and as a Dalit nun. The text provides a critique of the upper caste attitude towards Dalits. Men, women and children of upper-caste treat them as slaves and with contempt. Even the Church is not an exception. It exposes the hypocrisy of the Church and convent authorities (nuns and priests) who forget the noble values like service, kindness, forgiveness, love and equality preached by Jesus Christ. The book deftly unfolds different kinds of humiliation a person has to undergo and the struggle one has to make just

because he/she was born as a dalit. At the same time the book gives a clarion call to Dalits not to be deceived in the name of God and rituals of the Church.

Keywords

Dalit; Bitter Experiences; Hypocrisy; Humiliation; and Struggle.

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We are very well acquainted with Charles Darwin's theory of 'Struggle for Existence and Survival of the Fittest.' This theory was propagated by Darwin by observing the behavior of animals in 'Jungle Raj,' that is, in forests. But in our so called civilized society also this struggle for survival occupies a prominent position, especially, in the lives of the marginalized. This article makes an honest attempt to show how Bama unfolds Dalit life and struggle in her autobiography *Karukku*.

Bama (whose original name is Bama Faustina Soosairaj) writes *Karukku* to narrate her experiences as a Dalit. This was first published in Tamil in 1992. Its translation by Lakshmi Holmstrom came in 2000. The word 'karukku' means the saw-like double-edged stem of the palmyra leaf. Another Tamil word 'karu' means embryo or seed, which also means freshness or newness. Bama herself, in the preface to the book, brings the connection between the saw-edged palmyra leaf and her own life. She recollects: "Not only did I pick up the scattered palmyra karukku in the days when I was sent out to gather firewood scratching and tearing my skin as I played with them, but later they also became the embryo and symbol that grew in this book" (xiii). The embryo Bama refers to is the Dalit consciousness and the symbol is the new revolution, which aims at bringing a new social order into the Indian society. Apart from 'scratching' and 'tearing', *Karukku* has also other functions- it can help Dalits to regain their lost dignity. As she writes in the book: "There are other Dalit hearts like mine, with a passionate desire to create a new society made up of justice, equality and love. They, who have been the oppressed, are now

themselves like the double-edged *karukku*, challenging their oppressors” (xiii). Thus, *Karukku* signifies both Dalit oppression and Dalit struggle to get out from such an oppressive state.

Karukku is the depiction of a collective trauma—of Bama’s community—whose length cannot be measured in time. She just tries to freeze that in one book so that there would be something physical to remind people of the atrocities committed on a section of the society for ages.

The narrator sees, feels and experiences the humiliation caused due to her caste at the age of eight or nine itself. The Naickers who are the upper caste treat the Parayas, the lower caste to which Bama belongs, very inhumanly. The Parayas are afraid of these Naickers due to caste factor. Once the narrator sees an elder Paraya walking towards the Naicker’s house holding out the vadai packet by its string without touching it. As the belief goes the Naickers are upper caste, and therefore must not touch Parayas. If they do, they will be polluted. The sight of this elder of her community going of meekly to the shop to fetch snacks and handing them over reverently, bowing and shrinking to this Naicker who just sits there and stuffs them into his mouth makes the narrator infuriated. The upper caste people think so much of themselves because they have money, but they have lost all human feelings.

These kinds of humiliation and oppression of the Parayas by the Naickers is an age-old ‘practice.’ The narrator’s both grandmothers worked as servants for Naicker families. The Naicker children would call these old women by their names and order something or the other to do for them. And these women would address them as ‘Ayya,’ Master and run about to do their bidding. Even the way they were given their drinking water was disquieting. The Naicker women would pour out the water from some height, while the Dalit women receive and drink with cupped hands held to their mouths. Some Paraya women would go to Naicker houses, sweep out the cowshed, collect up the dung and dirt, and they bring home the leftover rice and curry from the

previous evening. This feeling of purity and impurity is deeply rooted in the Naickers as well as the Parayas. “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” (14). The narrator’s grandmother believed that, “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?” (14).

Oppression of the low-caste by the upper-caste is seen everywhere in our society. As they have money, power and influence they often try to ‘teach a lesson’ to the lower castes even there is no provocation or there is a trivial provocation. There is a dispute between the Chaaliyars and the Parayas over the cemetery which actually belongs to the latter. This dispute grows to the extent of a fight which witnesses attacks with weapons on each other. When such a fight is taking place between them, all of a sudden a huge gang of policemen come out of the Chaaliyar settlement with batons in their hands and drive the Dalits back ruthlessly, mercilessly beating them before arresting. A few men escape and tell the men who are aiding in the fields not to return, but to stay there among the mountains and woods. The women take gruel to these men when they go to work in the fields. This is a planned attack arranged by the Chaaliyar folk who

invited some people known as the ‘Reserve Police’ all the way from Sivakasi, butchered a sheep for them and arranged a feast. They’ve taken an oath to destroy our boys, they say, so without counting the cost they are slaughtering sheep at the rate of two a day and feasting the police. Do we have such means? Here we are, struggling just for this watery gruel. So how will be the police or the government be on our side? (31)

The police prowl round and about for a few days. They thrash soundly every Dalit whom they catch while the women shout and yell in protest. The police do not spare houses to search for the hiding men. The police behave in an uncivilized manner with the women. They behave deplorably with these women as they go from house to house. “They used obscene language and swore at them, told them that since their husbands were away they should be ready to entertain the police at night, winked at them and shoved their guns against their bodies” (35).

For the downtrodden, leading life is a hard task. Without putting their bodies to toil it is impossible to earn their livelihood. Their economic condition makes them to do all sorts of physical labour. Bama’s community also does work of various kinds. They do agricultural labour like ploughing, manuring, watering, sowing the seeds, spreading the seedlings and planting them out. After this follow the work of weeding, spraying the fields with fertilizer, reaping the grain, working on the threshing floors and the like. Apart from this work in the fields they do the constructing labour like digging wells, carrying loads of earth, gravel and stone. If they do not get any of these works, they have to go up to the hills to gather firewood, or to the kilns to make bricks. Even though they work so hard night and day, their economic condition and life style has not improved. They never receive a payment that is appropriate to their labour. They eat the same kuuzh every day, it is the same broken-grain gruel and it is the same watery dried-fish curry.

After her Bachelor of Education, Bama joins a school as a teacher. A nun asks her whether she is a Nadar (an upper-caste). By this time Bama has developed a lot of courage and confidence about herself. She straightaway says that she is a Parayar. She feels there that these nuns collectively oppress Dalit children and teachers very much. A thought of becoming a nun and helping these children who are humiliated strikes her. Finally she resigns and enters a religious order. Before selecting and entering that order Bama reads about the

woman who founded that particular order. That woman had lived and died for the poor and lowly. The narrator wants to be like her. But her beginning experience here itself is not better than her previous experiences in schools and colleges both as a student and a teacher. A sister makes a nuisance and humiliates her on two dates of birth of the narrator. (One on her degree certificate and the other on her Christening certificate.)

After her training as a nun she is sent to a convent. She is shocked to see the convent and the school attached to it. Most of the students of the school are from very wealthy households. The people who look after the menial jobs like sweeping the premises, swabbing and washing the classrooms, and cleaning out the lavatories are 'Harijan'. In the convent they speak very insultingly about low-caste people. In the opinion of these upper-caste nuns the low-caste people are all degraded in every way. They think the Harijans have no moral discipline nor cleanliness nor culture.

Bama narrates satirically the priest and the Mother Superior of the convent for the way they treat her community. At the start of the New Year, it is the custom for the entire congregation to go, family by family, both to the Priest and Mother Superior, carrying gifts of fruit and biscuits. They will garland the priest and the Mother Superior and pay their respects. Even though their people have never tasted the fruit themselves, they somehow go through every effort to buy the fruit for the Church elders. They make their offering, kneel before them in all humility and receive the sign of the cross on their foreheads. On such an occasion a woman laments, "The priest who was here before this always gave us a couple of orange sweets, five or six holy pictures and a new calendar when we came with our gifts. This one just puts a cross on us and tells us to go away" (57). The Mother Superior retorts insultingly to the women who have given her gifts and asked for a holy picture, "Have you given me some money in order to buy you holy pictures? Very well, now, you may all go home quickly without leaning on the walls or touching anything" (58).

The work points out how the church distorts the real image and teachings of Christ. The priests and the nuns frighten the Dalit children telling stories of Satan and Evil. After reading the Bible she understood the real meaning of the teachings of Christ, “I learnt that God has always shown the greatest compassion for the oppressed. And Jesus too, associated himself mainly with the poor. Yet nobody has stressed this nor pointed it out” (89). She finds that none has taught that “God is just, righteous, is angered by injustices, oppose falsehood, never countenances inequality” (89). Jesus is described differently to different castes and the oppressed are taught in an empty and meaningless ways about humility, obedience, patience, and gentleness. In the convent, Bama keeps quiet about her caste initially, but her anger propels her to reveal her identity and ultimately take the bold step of leaving the convent. It becomes an act of resistance, thereby breaking the conventions and though she feels unstable, unprotected and unemployed, she achieves a sort of freedom by doing so. She has no regrets when she leaves the convent because she had a false existence there.

At the end the book expresses a note of optimism, hope and more than all a sense of awareness. Bama feels that deceiving and fooling the innocence of the Dalits in the name of Pusai, Holy Communion, rosary and novena are over. The Dalits no longer listen open-mouthed to whatever said in the Church. The Dalits have realized that these others have never respected them as human beings, but bent the religion to their benefit.

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