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## Caste and Its Penetration: A Study of Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati*

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**ABSTRACT:** Dalit literature is also not welcomed as Dalits in the society. Dalit literature first appeared in Marathi and then spread across almost all regional languages of India. The post Ambedkar socio-political scenario boosted Dalits to raise their voice against injustice as Dr. Ambedkar has suggested. Dalit literature proliferated in all genres of literature but the genre of autobiography has provided a great stimulus to Dalit literature across the country. Autobiography as a genre gives space a person to share his/her lived experience. The experience becomes text for the writer. For Dalits, the past has been one of violence, dispossession, and death. Their writings reflect these trials of invasion with passion and persuasiveness and provide an unparalleled view of their histories as lived experiences. Hence, the flesh and blood genre of historical and family realism is very strong in their writings as we find in Bama's *Karukku*. In her autobiography Bama presents her experience as a Dalit Christian and how Dalits are segregated in the institution of Church and thus Christianity. In *Sangati* also she points out problems of Dalits especially Dalit women in Christianity. Thus, Bama becomes voice of all the Dalit Christians across India.

**KEY WORDS:** Autobiography, Experience, segregation, historical and family realism

Bama's *Karukku* was first published in Tamil in 1992. Its English translation by Lakshmi Holmstrom appeared in 2000. *Karukku* is a bold account of what life is like outside the mainstream of Indian thought and function. It is also the first such writing to appear in Tamil. *Karukku* is an unusual autobiography in the sense that it grew out of a particular moment – a personal crisis that drove the writer to make sense of her life as a woman, a Christian, a Dalit. The focus of the book is on the narrator's spiritual development through the nurturing of her belief as a Catholic and her gradual relationship of herself as a Dalit. Bama has given a full picture of the way the Church controlled and influenced the lives of Dalit Catholics. Each day is ordered by religious ritual. Religious festivals mark the year. Every child's life is imbued with the Christian religion. At the same time, there is a socio-political as well as self-education, that began and grew from the moment she had realized what untouchability meant as she stated in *Karukku*, "When I was studying in the third class, I hadn't yet heard people speak openly of untouchability. But I had already seen, felt, experienced and been humiliated by what it is" (2000, 11). She also described the Dalits' position outside the village thus, "I don't know how it came about the upper-caste communities and the lower-caste communities were separated like this into different parts of the village. But they kept themselves to their part of the village, and we stayed in ours. We only went to their side if we had work to do there. But they never, ever, came to our parts" (2000, 7).

Most of the land in Bama's village belonged to the upper-caste Naicker community. Her people's lives were marked by abject poverty, shameful humiliation, and endless toil from dawn to dusk. Both her grandmothers worked as servants for Naicker families. They were mostly paid with the unwanted food of the previous day. Yet her grandmother behaved "as if she had been handed the nectar of the gods" (2000, 14). It is however, the attitude of the Church and the religious authorities that pained her most. She mentioned experiences of her childhood and high school days. She recollected how the bishops and the mother superiors expected and accepted as their due the unaffordable offerings of apples and other fruits that their poor Dalit flocks brought on feast days, fruit that they had never been able to buy for themselves. In her high school hostel, the warden-sister commented on low-caste or poor children, "Look at the Cheri Children! When they stay here, they eat their full and look as round as potatoes. But look at the state in which they come back from home – just skin and bone!" (2000, 17-8).

Unlike earlier generations, Bama's education empowered her and encouraged her to speak up for herself. Thus at her first place of work, when a nun had asks her "Are you a Nadar?" she replies, "No, we are Parayar" (2000, 20). Bama writes, "When I recall the expression that came over her face, I want to laugh, even now" (2000, 20). When she was convinced that she could fight for her people more effectively by becoming a nun herself, she despaired when she learnt from a nun that in certain orders Dalit women are not accepted as prospective nuns. In the school attached to the convent she was being sent to, she observed that Dalits did all the menial jobs, "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" (2000, 22).

If the humiliation of caste-based discrimination on the part of society was hard to bear, the attitude of the church was intolerable to Bama. Didn't the Church claim to treat all people alike and to uphold justice? Instead, she realized,

They have made use of Dalits who are immersed in ignorance as their capital, set up a big business and only profited their own castes. It is one the upper-caste Christians who enjoy the benefits and comforts of the church. Even among the priests and nuns, it is the upper-castes who hold all the high positions.... even though Dalits like me might wish to take up the path of renunciation, we find there is no place for us there. (2000, 69)

As Frantz Fanon found the church in the colonies to be the white people church which did not treat the natives as per the God's ways but as per the ways of the white man, the master, and the oppressor, Bama also found the Catholic Church to be an upper-caste church that called the Dalit to the ways of the upper-castes. She revolted against the lack of humanity of the church and denounced exploitation in the name of the religion thus, "They (Dalits) have become aware that they too were created in the likeness of God. There is new strength within them, urging them to reclaim that likeness which has been so far repressed, ruined, obliterated; and to begin to live again with honor, self-respect and with a love towards all humankind" (2000, 94).

In order to work for the cause of Dalit liberation – Bama left the convent. In her preface to *Karukku*, Bama writes, “There are many congruities between the saw-edged palmyra karukku and my own life. 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 into this book” (2000, xiii).

*Karukku* is a part of the body of Dalit writing that has exposed the dominant versions of history and society that has been invoked through the centuries of legitimizing the caste system. *Karukku* also exposes the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church, which while claiming to care for the Dalit convert, exploits them, as much as the rest of society. It asserts the Dalit's selfhood, history, and agency. Through literature like this, Dalits are no longer a people without history. They are the central figures of their own history that has attained the position of speaking subjects and not listening objects. They are no longer objects of pity as they have derived the confidence and right to assert their humanity.

In *Sangati*, Bama celebrates her identity of being a Dalit, who has overthrown the caste subjugation. Her identity reflects indomitable spirit and pride and set for a new trend in Dalit writing. In *Sangati*, Bama represents a chain of interrelated events, which she observed in her village. It expresses the inward turmoil of the Dalit women who were considered Dalit in the hands of religion, upper caste men, the rich, the politician and educational institutions as well as among the Dalit community and the Dalit men. The voice of Bama sets up is a collective voice under subjugation, which echoes the anti-caste struggle, and the agitation for reserved places in the interest of social justice and political protest for economic equality. *Sangati* celebrated a vibrant community of Dalit women.

Bama's struggle to uplift herself and her community through education led her to criticize the church. When she realized that, there was a sea of divide between what the church preached and practiced, Bama quit the convent. S. K. Paul pointed out the failure of the egalitarian institutions,

The experiences of Dalit woman in a variety of social institutions like the village, the family, the education system, the church and clergy. The caste system has been so deeply ingrained in the Indian psyche that institutions that ought to promote egalitarianism or awareness end up propagating the same distinctions. The stories of individuals such as these function as voices of entire communities of people who have undergone similar experiences of discrimination. (66-7)

*Sangati* is the second novel of Bama published in 1994. It was translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom and was published in 2005. *Sangati* consists of the narration and reflection on individual stories of Dalit women, anecdotes, memories of personal experiences presented from a feminist perspective in first person narration that bridges experiences. Bama depicts the narrator's life from the twelfth year until she reaches womanhood by end of the novel. The narration does not have a standard plot as Bama acknowledges in the *Introduction to Sangati* that,

My mind is crowded with many anecdotes: stories not only about the sorrow and tears of Dalit women, but also about their lively and

rebellious culture; their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter them, but rather to swim vigorously against the tide; about the self-confidence and self-respect that enables them to leap over their adversities by laughing at and ridiculing them; about their passion to live with vitality, truth and enjoyment; about their hard labor. I wanted to shout out these stories. (2005, xvi)

The events related in a chain breaks the western concept of form. The novel urges a break from the oppressive Brahminic culture, which talks of Gods and glorified life and their literature, which had no representation of the lower caste Dalit. *Sangati* is neither an idealized representation of life nor an individual commitment but rather it reflects a social commitment. The events exposed the evils of caste system and injustice done to the Dalits by the higher caste. In the preface to the novel, Bama writes:

In *Sangati*, many strong Dalit women who had the courage to break the shackles of authority, to propel them upwards, to road (their defiance) changed their difficult, problem-filled lives and quickly stanching their tears. *Sangati* is a look at a part of the lives of those women who dared to make fun of the class in power that oppressed them. And through this, they found the courage to revolt. (2005, vii)

The narrator is a spokesperson of her community, and she is a representative voice of all the young girls who lose their right of equality in games, toys, food, and treatment due to caste. She represents the voice of young women who experienced the pain of maturing late in life due to poverty, who are exploited by the upper caste men. As an adult, she represents her grandmother, mother and all the women in her neighborhood. She also highlights their management ability, hard work and strong minds that are able to face turmoil. In the narration, the past as flashback has been told as stories either heard or told by someone. It led to the present with incidents that re-experienced, observed, and explicated in the life of Mariamma and Maikanni. The future is left unexplained. Bama as a Dalit talked about the struggle of the Dalit in renting a house, finding lodgings and employment. She remarked, "Being a Dalit creates a problem; on top of that, being a Dalit woman makes it more difficult" (2005, 119-20). Therefore, Bama felt that as women they must somehow dare to take control of their lives. Instead of becoming meek, Bama proclaims, "I am paraichi: Yes I am a paraichi" (2005, 121). Bama understands very well that Dalitness is essentially a means towards achieving a sense of cultural identity. For her, Dalitness is a source of confrontation as observed by S. K. Paul, "Dalitness is a matter of appreciating the potential of one's total being. Thus, individual, culture, social burden, and Dalitness cannot be isolated.... For this new Dalit individual, social and cultural freedom has come because of his self-elevation and self-identification" (35).

Bama's mind is filled with thought of the struggle, which leads her to investigate why she and her people are punished constantly for the simple fact of having been born Dalits. She questions in *Sangati*, "Is it our fault that we are Dalits? On top of that, just because I am a woman, I have to battle especially hard. Not only do I have to struggle against men, I have also to bear the insults from women of other castes. From how many directions must the blows come! And for how long!" (2005,

121-22). Bama has not only questioned the system but also suggested a solution: by treating boys and girls equally and educating both and providing the girl child enough freedom would eradicate the evils of injustice, violence, and inequalities.

Bama's use of Dalit language opened a Dalit's life from all the angles. The variety of songs and dances of the Dalits from birth to death are intricately represented by Bama. Dalit women sang them and danced on the tune of the folk songs. B. Kathiresan highlighted, "In *Sangati* we find a record of these folk songs sung at the girl's coming-of-age ceremony. The stanza patterns in the songs are marked by the choric ululation at the end of every four lines. Bama through several instances of versification highlights the Dalit women's presence of mind and wit to create songs instantly" (186).

The strong narrative of Bama is revealed in sentences relating to the successive duties of a woman and in Madurai dialect, which is rich in proverbs, colloquial usage, slangs, nicknames, and folk language. In an interview given to R. Azhagarasan, Bama points out, "Before 1993, I was unknown. Today when I say 'I' it includes people like me. All these things together form our collective identity. I cannot claim for myself the identity of an individual, a Dalit woman, I am part of a collective awareness. I carry their voices" (2005, 151). Further, she elaborates her ideas on writing in this interview, "Writing, she claims, is a release for her feelings, an opportunity to expose the "nature of this casteist society" (2005, 153).

**CONCLUSION:** Thus, despite of their worst forms of discrimination, struggles and sufferings, Dalits have sought to redefine their social status through education and conversion in order to transform the character of Indian society as we live in a republic. But still Dalits are denied to have – justice, equality, liberty and fraternity - the four basic principles of democracy. Dalits consider caste is the main hindrance for their oppression and thus they decide to convert to a faith that does not recognize any kind of discrimination. For Dalits conversion is not only a social act but a political act also but Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati* point out that in the present social context conversion does not ensure or encourage social transformation. But Dalit experience suggests that, in practice, a Dalit is not allowed to rid of his/her caste identity that stigmatises him/ her socially, even in the new theological set-up adopted by him/her. The hope for social transformation through religious conversion thus remains elusive.

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