

# Through A Child's Eye- As Portrayed in Bama's 'Karukku'

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## Abstract

Bama, one of the first few Dalit women writers, expresses her emotions and thoughts in her book "Karukku". This book, originally written in Tamil, contains autobiographical episodes of her life. This paper is an attempt to explain the effects of such oppression and ostracization on a child's mind and a child's perception of it. This paper also explores how education can help eradicate such atrocities. This idea, of education being one of the weapons, is supported by the protagonist's brother as well, who motivates her to educate herself to come out of the suppression.

Apart from the above mentioned themes, this paper also comments on the relevance of patriarchy, and unfair social hierarchy in today's scenario. Along with it, it tries to find the reasons for the continued oppression and ways to overcome oppression.

**Keywords:** discrimination; Dalit; children; education

Headed by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Dalit literature is a revolutionary movement to bring about a change in the mindset of the oppressed. Women are more vulnerable to such discrimination as they are discriminated on the basis of both, gender and caste. Dalit literature raises important questions and the work of writers, especially women writers is to explore the problems and the root cause of it. Christened as Faustima Mary Fatima Rani, Bama was born in a Dalit Christian family in Tamil Nadu. She is one of the first few women Dalit writers. In her book *Karukku*, originally written in Tamil, she has recorded autobiographical episodes of her life throughout her childhood till adulthood. She, along with her family members, were victims of acute discrimination like ostracization, untouchability and suppression all throughout their lives.

Bama assumes herself to be a bird whose wings have been clipped, yet she desires to live a meaningful life. She believes that empowerment of Dalits is possible only through education and employment and by them taking pride in their identity. Her book *Karukku*, deals with issues like the condition of Dalit women and Dalit culture, concentrating more on the need for unity among Dalit sub groups, the need to get political power, the need to get self-confidence, to own up to their identity and be proud of their own culture. '*Karukku*' means '*Palmyra*' leaves, which with their serrated edges on both sides, are like double-edged swords. By a felicitous pun, the Tamil word '*Karukku*', containing the word '*karu*', embryo or seed, also means freshness, newness. She mentioned in *Karukku* that she was in third grade when she realised the pitfalls of being from a lower caste. One incident where an elderly man of their community was ill-treated by a Landlord, by making him fetch *vadai*'s without touching them. As it was a common belief amongst the higher caste people that a man from lower caste touching anything related to them would pollute it. The poor old man had to hold the packets from its strings because of which his manner of walking was strange. Initially finding it funny, as anyone else would so, she laughed out hysterically, narrating the incident to her brother, who made her realise the real reason

behind such behaviour. The sudden realisation made her furious, and she wanted to rebel at once and touch those 'wretched *vadai*'s'. But it was her brother who calmed her down and explained her that the only way to come out of this discrimination was proper education and be in a position where the higher caste people cannot ill treat them. These words by her brother never sounded truer than when she topped the class which earned her many friends, even those from the so called higher caste.

It was not only untouchability and ostracization that was being faced by the people of the Dalits; other forms of discrimination were also present. Sometimes they were tagged as robbers, thieves or culprits even if they did not do anything. The only reason to accuse them was that they were from a lower caste. The already present discrimination and now being tagged as something that they aren't isolates them, leaving them depressed. Researches on children facing racial discrimination have varied effects one of them is depression. This also leads them to actually becoming thieves and robbers in the future. Once they are already tagged with such names, they don't have to worry about the society anymore. Children who are discriminated in such ways are mentally damaged to such an extent that they don't mind doing wrong things later on in life. Another reason for them turning into thieves and robbers is their financially crippled condition, probably the only thing they got from their forefathers.

Even the games of children were a replica of the social surroundings. *Karukku* gives a very detailed example of the way young children are socialized into the cultural patterns and the common experiences of their community. She describes the games they used to play as young children, and one notices that these games replicate the social relations between the 'high' and the 'low'. Some children used to be the 'high' caste people while the others were labourers. The latter went around the 'high class' who would humiliate and insult the 'labourers' as they worked in an imaginary field. She further explains other games where they used to marry two people and set them off in a bus, or the husband coming home drunk and beating up the wife. These games were clearly not the innocent games that were expected out of children. Unconsciously these children were absorbing the surroundings and these actions got imbibed in them. There is always a chance that they would do the same things as their parents when they grew up. These games also bring to the surface the underlying insecurity and surrender towards the higher caste people.

Women are considered "Dalit amongst Dalits". This statement clearly shows the vulnerability of women. Already suppressed in this patriarchal world, she is more prone to discrimination when she belongs from a lower caste. They say "If you educate a man you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate a family (nation)." Once Dr. B.R. Ambedkar advised his followers in a seminar if you want to educate your children, educate woman first. Educating a woman is important for two reasons. First, a mother is the first teacher of a child. The values of a mother are reflected in her child. If a mother is well educated and is able to teach her not to tolerate any form of discrimination against them, there is nothing that is going to stop them from growing and coming out of it. The second reason is that, women no matter what this male chauvinistic society thinks, have a lot of potential- enough potential to change the ideology of the orthodox society. Education is a perfect weapon for women to use. This brings us to how important a role does education play in eradicating caste discrimination. The idea of education was even supported by Bama's brother. She mentions the incident where her brother motivates her to proper education so that she does not have to be the victims of discrimination. She reveals it in one of her interviews with Nirupama Dutt that it was her brother who introduced her to the world of books. And as they couldn't lay their hands on any new books, she re read the same books. In another interview with The Hindu Bama confesses to embracing sisterhood and teaching in a convent but she also added that she had given it up as she took up writing. On being asked as to why she left the job because it didn't satisfy her cause of teaching the marginalised section

as they were the most deprived of proper education. But the convent had only the elite. Although this brings to the surface, the underlying discrimination that takes place in the convents, I personally cannot accept this attitude of hers as I feel that she started the vicious circle of discrimination, in her career, which she was once subjected to.

If we talk about the development of a country, a country is not more developed than its most backward areas. Although, in ultra modern societies, the issue of caste discrimination doesn't affect the regular lives of people, in rural areas however, it is still prevalent. I remember an experience during the summer vacations when I used to visit my native place, I accidentally happened to touch someone from a lower caste. I was immediately asked to take a shower as if I had committed a sin. I wasn't really aware of the caste system back then, so I couldn't even understand what was happening. I have also witnessed a girl from a lower caste being insulted as she tried to enter the temple. She was rudely reminded of her being from a lower caste and that she wasn't allowed to go in. I was very disturbed with it, in fact I felt more offended than her. It was even more disturbing to see her quietly accepting the insult, as if it was the way it was supposed to be. As I grow older, I realize that even today, after almost seven decades of independence and several to reform the backward caste people, our country is still shackled by its orthodox beliefs. It is mainly because people have accepted it as a part of their lives and are living with it. As a matter of fact I believe that the reservation system in India is in a way fuelling this mentality. Only because people are being given perks for being born into a lower caste family, they are in a way happy to be discriminated, because it is this discrimination that is helping them claim the facilities of the government on a higher scale. A highly qualified student from a higher caste is not able to get through a reputed government college because his seat was given to a student from lower caste, probably who didn't even score half the marks as him. Same happens in the field of employment in the government sector. In my opinion the only way to completely eradicate this form of discrimination is to change the mindset of the people. If everyone believes everyone else to be equal to them, and no one higher or lower at least on the basis of caste and birth, there would not be any discrimination. This will take time, but sooner or later, discrimination on the basis of caste will disappear. How "gradual" this gradually is, remains debatable. It may take decades or centuries, but if and when it happens, it will be worth the wait.

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