

Disqualifying the Church Order: Reading *Karukku* as Bama's Deliverance

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Abstract:

Karukku (2000) by Bama (Faustina Soosairaj) is a watershed in the history of Indian Dalit Literature in general and in the genre of life-writing in particular. The core of any Dalit personal narrative writing, usually, is the two classic paradigms of grinding 'poverty' and inhuman (ex-) 'untouchability'. The last three decades' upsurge in the circulation of this new dimension of Dalit writings in India and abroad has revealed a different kind of reality which is fraught with social, economic and political isolation and negation. Today, there are a pretty numbers of papers and writings available on Bama and Karukku which very scholarly decipher the author's resilient and uncompromising zeal as a marginal Dalit woman crusading towards the centre for the betterment of her community through her writings. And also, there are papers which depicts Bama in crisis and transition; the telophase to her individual self (Karukku 2000) and how she initiates to the prophase of her community-self (Sangati:Events 2005). But, few cases are there which dig delve into the how's of the life she sojourned in the convent for almost eight years and finally why she renounced the life of 'poverty, chastity and obedience'¹, a life which she dreamt of entering from almost when she was in the nursery. Dealing partly with the hardship and indignity of the Dalit people where necessary, I would mainly look into the bow windows of the narrative to explore the true nature and functioning of

the Catholic Church, the world's largest established charitable missionary, at the then time working in India. In this paper, so, I would specifically concentrate on how Bama, a third world Dalit Catholic Christian woman has unmasked the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church and its double standard regarding its mission and enlightenment project. The paper concludes by saying that Bama's resignation from the Church Order does not imply any spiritual or religious loss or retrogression nor it is an escape to easier alternative. Rather, it has been a deliverance from the constrictions of ritualism. She is brought back to her real self from the 'ivory tower'?

Key words: Bama, Institutionalized Religion, Christianity, Russel, Catholic Church, Dalit-life writing, hegemony, Dalit Liberation Movement

1. Introduction:

Dalit literature has lent voice to a large community which has been victim of an extreme form of poverty, indignity and marginalization. Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste* (2003), K.A. Gunesakara's *The Scar* (2009) , *Viramma: Life of a Dalit* (1997) by Josian Racine and Jean-Luc Racine, Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit;s Life* (2007) and Baby Kamble's *The Prison We Broke* (2008) Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2008), P. Sivakami's *The grip of Change* (2006) are few of the most acclaimed self *viz-a-viz* community writings across the country which have heralded a creative space and a recognition for Dalit Literature. In all of these narratives, we hear valid voices of caste, class and (in few cases) gendered marginalization in a society which is ruled and hegemonized by upper *savarna* Hindu *jatis* (caste layers in India). Bama recounts in her celebrated classic life-writing *Karukku*, the humble life of the *paraya* community of Tamil Nadu in India to which she belongs. Bama wrote the autobiography in a moment of crisis. She looks back in anger (as most often Dalit literature is) to her life when she has just abandoned the church Order

because she finds no scope in it to render any service for the poor Dalit children for whom she joined the Order. *Karukku* (first published in Tamil in 1992) had to face hostility from established mainstream Tamil literary tradition for its disturbing subversive voice backed up by a free, colloquial use of the local Dalit dialect. It is only after the availability of the translations (beginning with the English by Macmillan Chennai edition in 2000) in many other languages around India the world. Bama recollects that the successful global journey 'forced the critics to accept the users of the dialect into their fold'. Bama feels proud for being 'instrumental in bringing about this change in Tamil Literature'.

Throughout the memoir, Bama has registered caste discriminations with its ugliest faces. She was a regular and good student in the class, took her study by heart and moved on. In course of pursuing her degrees, she happens to come across curious eyes around her, searching her true caste. And once they got it out, she became the object of humiliation and avoidance. After facing an inescapable cobweb of casteism she plunges in to self-pity. The more she thought about all these things, the more she grows desperate within. She poses the most innocent question regarding the upper caste people's treatment of the Dalit people with the notion of corporeal impurity. Bama darts,

How is it that people consider us too gross even to sit next to when travelling? They look at us with the same look they would cast on someone suffering from a repulsive disease. Where ever we go we suffer blows. And pain. Is there never to be any relief? It doesn't seem to matter whether people are educated or not. They all go about filled with caste hatred. Why, even the nuns and priests, who claim that their hearts are set upon service to God, certainly discriminate according to caste. And in my heart I have even grieved over the fact that I was born as I am. (Bama,2000: 27)

The frustration of being constantly treated as impure and far below the level of normal human being haunts a Dalit individual perpetually. Bama's dissatisfaction with such an unjust society gets reflected in a famous poem by the renowned Marathi Dalit poet Baburao Bagul. In the poem "You Have Made the Mistake", Bagul writes-

"...That's why I say-

You have made the mistake of being born in this country..."

(Dangle,2009: 81)

Here, very pertinent to relate what is said by Pradeep K. Sharma that personal consciousness reaches out to organized political consciousness when the former truly connects to the collective consciousness of all the Dalits suffering under the overall oppressive and depressive Hindu society (Sharma, 2006: 27).

Bama says that wherever she looked, however much she studied, whatever she took up, her caste identity hinders her in every way. The reasons of such despicable practices are so deep rooted that finding out any ready made remedial measures are truly perplexing. Bama feels deeply hurt when she sees that even the older people of her community tremble in fear like small children in presence of the Naiker people and the Sisters of the Church. Bama lets her inner most rebel self loose. Bama effuses her sulphureous rage against this rotten society and its big bugs. She interrogates and at the same time she holds the age old customs and prevalent social politics responsible that have caused the Dalits to such wretchedness. She retorts,

Are Dalits not human beings? Do they not have common sense? Do they not have such attributes as a sense of honour and self-respect? Are they without any wisdom, beauty, dignity? What do we lack? They treat us in whatever way they choose, as if we are slaves who don't even possess human dignity. And if ever a Dalit gets wise to this and wants to live with some honour and self-respect, they jump up and down as if something really outrageous is happening. They seem to

conspire to keep us in our place: to think that we who have worked throughout history like beasts, should live and die like that; we should never move on or go forward. (Bama, 2000:28)

Traditional Dalit psyche is a curious mixture of fear and force. Like all the rustics, they are full of life in groups but very meek and humble in individual. In the presence of upper caste people they bend down to the earth. Such is the result of century old hegemonies. Remaining barred from all kinds of privations, the Dalits have truly grown themselves as the perfect example of hegemony-internalized community. Today's activist-writers want to amputate, first, this gratuitous, deep grown and invisible fear factors from their people. Bama observes that,

Because Dalits have been enslaved for generation upon generation, and been told again and again of their degradation, they have come to believe that they are degraded, lacking honour and self-worth, untouchable; they have reached a stage where they themselves, voluntarily, hold themselves apart. This is the worst injustice. This is what even little babies are told, how they are instructed. The consequence of all this is that there is no way for Dalits to find freedom or redemption. (ibid,2000:28)

As a true social researcher, Bama hammer home the following issues. She says that, Dalits are a hard working community without any direction. She warns by saying that, the upper caste would never make provision for the upliftment of the poor nor do they let it happen easily.

2. Bama's Crusade

Karukku is an amalgamation of Bama's personal account of her life after Convent as well as of her own community in which she belongs. Up to chapter six and seven, we come to know various Dalit life worlds. Their works, cultures, rituals, superstitions, games, sports etc. Bama writes from many directions

simultaneously, giving a wholesome picture of her Pudupatti/Puthupatti village paralleling her own story of her education, struggle, jobs and Convent life.

Bama completed B.Sc (she was a mathematics teacher in the school and the convent) and B.Ed. Her brother remains, throughout her career, a true guide who hammered her home that it is only through education and hard labour in study that the caste stigma can be eradicated. Bama studied with persistent determination. Bama's brother, the Dalit thinker Raj Gouthaman made a talisman of the maxim of Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar, the iconic Dalit leader, who said that "It is the education which is the right weapon to cut the social slavery and it is the education which will enlighten the downtrodden masses to come up and gain social status, economic betterment and political freedom." This statement seems to echo another redeemer of a racially marginalized nation. Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. He also said that, 'education is the most powerful weapon in the world.' So, Bama read with all her might, dedication and perseverance. Elsewhere, Bama recalled her brother's long letters (to her) saying mainly, "We are not rich" and "We have no social status. Only your education will bring you respect" (Satyanarayan and Tharu, 2011: 91).

Bama came out as a successful student. She chose to teach Dalit students in a convent school. In course of her unflagging pursuit of enlightening the Dalit students, she scrutinized few things in the Convent School. The Church authority is biased towards the wealthy boys and they are just careless about the poor Dalit children. This was the juncture where Bama got to thinking to join the Convent Order and become a nun herself. She justifies her ways of entering into the Order.

I might have continued in that way. But from somewhere or other a desire came over me. It struck me overwhelmingly that these nuns collectively oppressed Dalit children and teachers so very much; why should I not become a nun too and truly help these people who are humiliated so much and kept

under such strict control? The thought kept returning every day, however hard I pushed it away. So at last I resigned the teaching post that I held, and went and entered a religious order. (Bama, 2000: 23)

So, Bama tendered her resignation to a secured post of teaching and joins the religious order jeopardizing the possibilities of a safe and secure personal as well as social life. She decides renouncing her personal happiness and comfort. This is truly heroic. However, She thought, ultimately, she was able to tie herself with the biggest humanitarian agency in the world towards radical reformation. She also thought that, she could now spend her life 'usefully and meaningfully (110)' because she knew that to join the Order 'was to achieve something tremendous (110). Her devotion oozes out when we hear her to say, 'I want to give myself to God' (101). As we learn from the memoir, the fountain head of her inspiration was truly divine.

Before my decision, I had read about the woman who founded that particular order, how she had done so for the sake of the poor and lowly, lived and died for them alone. I wanted to be like her, living only for the poor and downtrodden; so I entered that particular order. (Bama,2000: 23)

Initially, Bama waited longanimously and thought that everything would come out to be fine and right. She tried to focus on her daily duties, prayer and communion etc. After few years, Bama began to protest gradually. Whenever she complains about the Church's double dealing between the children from the well off and children from the Dalit community, the nuns used to give her a disgusting reply. Bama says, "They say in explanation that God's calling is not just for the poor; the wealthy too are God's children. They explain that God had said, 'The poor are with you always.' These are only self defense. Such explanation incites only exasperation. Bama, too, says, "You have to wonder whether you should laugh or cry."(113)

Once she became an insider of the system, Bama from her very arrival, got to know the actuality. Her ideal 'isms' to become a nun collided violently with the practices in vogue inside the nunnery. She gave a vivid picture of the dichotomy she faced. She recollects -

There is a lengthy training and preparation before one becomes a nun and decides to stay in the convent. *What they taught us at that time was truly admirable* (Emphasis mine). They told us each one of us is different, each is unique, there is no one else at all like us in the whole world. It was good to hear that God created each one of us in a very special way. (Bama, 2000: 114)

But, far from living a life of introspection and renunciation, the nuns are seen to be gossipmonger, quarrelsome and pharisaical. All the time, they just show off. With novena and rosary in hand, the nuns are totally disconnected from their true vocation to serve the poor in the real world. They have made a world of their own, as Christ said, 'whited sepulchers'. Being true to her vocation, Bama was a disturbing presence for all most all the nuns. They tried hard to make Bama like one of them. Bama gets disillusioned gradually. She says-

But when it came to actual practice, it was not like that *at all* (Emphasis mine). They expected us to behave as if we had all been made from the very same mould. Nobody was allowed to think differently or speak differently. We had to accept only what our Superior told us, as if it were God-given Scripture. If you didn't accept it, or spoke differently, then that was the end of you. They said there was something wrong about your childhood, some gross mistake in your upbringing. They said there was some fatal flaw in your family, as if they were looking at your horoscope. (Bama,2000: 114)

Bama reveals another vice among the nuns in senior portfolios. When Bama was on leave, she receives five consecutive phone calls from the Provincial to join here and there without any confirm suggestion. In one call she was asked to join here, and

in the next call she was asked not to join there but to another convent and such on. All these harassments were excused by saying on behalf of the Church that, 'all this was done because they were guided by the Spiritus Sanctus.'(117) Bama gets puzzled and asked herself with acid wit, 'Only I couldn't understand why, in that case, the Spiritus Sanctus was so indecisive.'(117) When she is trying to finalize her decision regarding her resignation, one of her fellow nun, who was sympathetic to Bama and her condition, says that the Church authority would not let her go so easily, nor would they forward her application of resignation to Mother Superior. They would, rather try to, by hook or crook, dissuade her from her decision. That very sister opens up another secret regarding the practice of partiality among the nuns. Particular trainee nun may get under rated even if she is brilliant than the one who gets the upper hand only because the latter is a close bug to the Church Superior. One such case we come across in *Karukku*.

Just look at this, out of your set (*set means one batch of trainee nuns*); they've only chosen Sister Rita to study medicine and become a doctor. That's because, Rita is related to Marian. Although Sister Edna had higher marks than Rita, she wasn't chosen. Edna was really upset and told me about it. What can we do? We have to go where they send us. There's no other way.' (Bama, 2000: 124)

Bama, was out and out shocked when she learns that her long cherished destination and vocation is also not free from its caste divisions, hypocrisy, jealousy and competition.

3. Conclusion: Bama, the Dalit Meliorist

After becoming a victim of a 'needless transfer' (125), Bama, ultimately, got a (punishment) posting in Jammu Branch. This Convent was the place which draws the best rebel out in Bama. All of the nuns there save two or three, didn't talk to her. Their holier-than-thou behavior was so embarrassing that she felt

claustrophobic to remain within the boundary of the Convent. She really became troubled at heart and she plans to quit. Bama bought ticket for Trichi by the money she secretly asked from an old friend through a telegram. The ticket episode really is hair raising. How she ultimately poised herself on the reservation seat of the train to Trichi can itself be successfully staged as a climax of any thriller story. There was possibility of Bama being stolen/tactfully retained of her return ticket. She kept it with her all the time. So, the place of her beloved vocation turned upside down and ultimately gave her a realization of being 'caged within that special world' (120).

With bitter repugnance and a mordant abomination Bama resigns from the Convent Order which she once embraced being strongly pulled by the pious soul of that Sister who founded that particular Convent Order and Christ the Redeemer. The hypocritical censorious sanctimony of the nuns haunts her day and night. She could no more adjust with the endless palavering of the nuns full of sweet-talk, preaching of magnanimity, practicing only magniloquence. Her inner and outer struggles ultimately pushed her to such an extent that the nuns became a *bete noire* to her. She asseverates, 'I argued and fought. I thought to myself with some disgust, Chi, they are all hypocrites and frauds'. (102)

All most seventy years before Bama shows her grievances to the Church authority, Bertrand Russell, the most celebrated, sophisticated philosopher and a brilliant speaker of the last millennium harangued with acid wit against Christianity and its dogmatic parochialisms in a lecture delivered to the National Secular Society at the Battersea Town Hall on March 27, 1927 (later it came in a book form in 1957). That lecture was captioned as "Why I Am Not A Christian". Russell concluded the lecture saying that (Christian) religion is based primarily and mainly on fear and people who have held to Christianity have been for the most part extremely wicked, that Christianity is the principal enemy of moral progress in

the world etc. Interestingly, Russell too darted against the traditional Catholic arguments. Even if we don't take the philosopher's statement as something taken for granted, the objections raised by Bama against the Catholic nuns breathe in the same air. She became bitter with herself and with others. She recollects, 'They behaved as if they were the queens there, and everybody else was there only to run errands for them. The few nuns who were even slightly humane had a difficult time' (103).

She also says about the 'fear of punishment theory' that the 'Sisters never seemed to tell any cheerful stories' (83). They would always tell stories of the 'Devil wandering about with a pair of balances' and of the punishments faced by committing any sin. The impacts of such fearful stories on little children have also been narrated by her as she says, 'I would be stupefied with terror'.

In an interview conducted by Maria Preethi Srinivasan³, Bama was asked about a researcher's comparative study of the works of Bama with that of Alice Walker. Bama replied with satisfaction that few of Alice's characters are from Christian background and they too voice against the maltreatment they received from the whites within Church.

So, *Karukku* unfolds many smaller and bigger issues and becomes an authentic register of failure of the European Catholic Convention for its inability to discharge 'service' to the left out masses of the third world suffering in poverty, inequality and injustice. Bama's account of her struggle to join the Convent Order and then a more desperate struggle to come out of it ushers in a debate that a huge authority like Catholic Convent of the Western World stands discredited by the devotion and piety of a Dalit woman. Then, a single book like *Karukku* proves that artists are truly the antennas of the society. It also, calls for consideration that empowerment of a particular community is not/can't be the sole responsibility of any institutionalized religion or authority; rather it is mainly

dependent on the commitment of the members of the community and their pertinacious nature and willing spirit towards self improvement through proper education.

Bama now sees happily people who live with 'zeal for the single objective' of Dalit liberation movement. Bama calls her fellow Dalits to aim to live with human dignity, self-respect and social gregariousness. She wants her people to proclaim loudly, '*Dalit endru sollada; talai nimirndu nillada*' ('Say you are a Dalit; lift up your head and stand tall'). (139)

End Notes:

1. Before entering the Convent as a nun, one is required to make three vows: of poverty, chastity and obedience. Needless to say, these vows keep the nuns eternally bounden to the god's providence to see the almighty's manifestation in and prospicient care for his creatures; especially for the poor and the meek. One has to take the path of renunciation from wealth and comfort of material world in order to truly, lowly and lovingly sympathize for the ordinary people whom they are rendering their services. After joining the Order, Bama realizes that most of the nuns just showcase these vows. Bama says, "They teach that these vows liberate them and enable them to lead lives that are centred around ordinary people. But in truth, the vows become a means of control and enslavement." (Bama,2000: 113)
2. Original French word for ivory tower was *tour d'ivoire*. The Miriam Webster Dictionary defines the compound word in two points apart from its caption definition. It reads that (1) "ivory tower is an impractical often escapist attitude marked by aloof lack of concern with or interest in practical matters or urgent problems" and also (2) "a secluded place that affords the means of treating practical issues with an impractical often escapist attitude; especially: a place of learning." The most interesting entry happens to be the

entry definition. It says, "ivory tower is a place or situation in which people make and discuss theories about problems (such as *poverty* and *racism*; emphasis added) without having any experience with those problems."

3. Maria Preethi Srinivasan in her erudite article, "A Dalit and a First Nations Canadian speak of the women in their bones" (*Indigenous Biography and Autobiography*) included an interview of Bama by her. She posed the question that, "You (Bama) were talking with great passion about Alice Walker.

Bama: Yeah because Alice Walker ... There is a lady in Stella Maris College, there is an English lecturer, Agnes, she has done this comparative study. Her thesis was titled 'Celebrating Life' and *I just love* it because for me also life is to be celebrated and for Alice Walker too. Most of her stories are from the Christian background, about how those people were treated within the Church by the whites." (Peter, Francis and Anna, 2008: 126)

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