EUROPEAN ACADEMIC RESEARCH
Vol. III, Issue 10/ January 2016

Impact Factor: 3.4546 (UIF)
DRJI Value: 5.9 (B+)

ISSN 2286-4822
www.euacademic.org

BAMA'S *KARUKKU*: A Quest for Spiritual Salvation in Dalit Emancipation

DEBDULAL BANERJEE
Purulia (W.B), India

Abstract:

Bama is the first Tamil Dalit woman to venture into the literary arena with the poignant narrative of her own suffering as a woman, a Christian and a Dalit. Her Karukku translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom into English which won the Crossword Award for translation in 2001 illumines hitherto the darkest niche of the world of oppression of the people of her kind. This autobiographical writing, apart from sharing the common aim of the construction of Dalit identity with all other Dalit autobiographies through the truthful portrayal of a Tamil Dalit's life, problematizes the discourse even more critically by taking the author's gender and spiritualism into consideration. The present paper endeavours a study on the polemic of this Dalit self-representation vis-a-vis the social, cultural, political and economic hegemonisation as evinced in Bama's autobiography Karukku.

Key words: Dalit, Oppression, Dalit identity, Discourse, Gender, Hegemonisation

Dalit-Autobiography: A literary capital of identity formation

Dalit autobiography which sprouted in the post-independence India honed the spirit of Dalit sensibility with the firsthand accounts of exploitation and suffering by some Dalit individuals and thereby this genre has augmented the literary revolt

against the hegemony of mainstream literature which is being fostered traditionally by a hierarchical socio-economic world-order. Most of the Dalit auto-biographers are first-generation-literate personalities who, taking inspiration from Dr. B.R Ambedkar, have felt the need to lay bare all the facets of injustice inflicted upon them in this democratic nation-state and to reconstruct the identity of the 'self' of their community in the intellectual realm. Right from the movement of the Bhakti saints during 10th and 13thcenturies, the non-Brahminic movement against caste-based discrimination has time and again got enriched with the participation of unnumbered stalwarts from almost every corner of this country. Gail Omvedt observes:

"It was in the 1920s however that the Dalits began to organize strongly and independently throughout many regions of India. The most important of the early Dalit movements were the Adi-Dharm movement in the Punjabi (organized 1926); the movement under Ambedkar in Maharashtra, mainly based among Mahars which had its organizational beginnings in1924: the Namashudra movement in Bengal (1972): the Adi-Dravida movement in Tamilnadu: the Adi-Karnataka movement: the Adi-Hindu movement mainly centered around Kanpur in U.P: and the organizing of the Pulayas and Cherumans in Kerala."

Understandably, with the emergence of Dalit auto-biography in particular and Dalit literature in general the horizon of the movement against all sorts of marginalisation, especially based on caste, has expanded and new social, cultural, economic, and political realities are being explored.

Gender and Religion:

Now Dalit is a term which, according to Rupa Biswanathan, includes the Untouchables who have converted to other religions to escape the stigma of the caste whereas the scheduled caste does not. The reality is, as Bama substantially

puts forward in her autobiography, this refuge in other religion scarcely guarantees any relief or repose to a Dalit just because a Dalit remains 'untouchable' no matter what religion s/he converts to. On the other hand the brutal horror of caste-based oppression, economic deprivation, denial of knowledge all are even more acutely experienced by the Dalit women who are exposed to an additional vulnerability of gender dominance. Despite India being highly hailed as a 'motherland', Indian society is structurally patriarch and the lives of the Dalits women are painfully henpecked by this patriarch social fabric. Bama in this autobiography has minutely dealt with these two comparatively overlooked experiences of Dalit-life which she being a Dalit woman had to undergo.

Karukku: Autobiography of a Dalit Christian Woman

The non-sequential narrative of *Karukku* that weaves the onerous experiences of Bama's Dalit womanhood with emotional spontaneity is a precise documentation of the socio-cultural world of the Dalit community inhabiting a remote village in Tamilnadu. Bama portrays the starkest reality of the locality of their community for general readership: 'If you look at our streets they are full of small children, their noses streaming, without even a scrap of clothing, rolling about and playing in the mud and mire, indistinguishable from puppies and piglets.'(P-79) Striking it is to find out that the stories of all the Dalit communities in every nook and cranny across this country are almost the same- segregated colony in a particular village, insalubrious slums, inexorable poverty and hunger, scavenging jobs and wage deprivation and thousands of superstitious beliefs which seem to have shackled the poor people almost irrevocably.

Segregated 'Colony':

The lower-caste Paraya community to which Bama belongs had a settlement predictably on a separate part of their village. Bama reflects on the politics that normalize this segregation on the basis of caste: 'I don't know how it came about that 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.'(P-7) The institutions like School, Church, panchayet, post office or even the big shops all of which are needed to lead a decent life were situated on the other part of the village where the upper caste people used to live. Hence the upper caste Naickers had no need to visit the lower community though, quite inevitably, the lower castes were dependent upon the other part for survival. Moreover how these segregated colonies have to sustain the mortal rage of the upper caste communities who are in collusion with the Govt. and the police merely to exist every moment is evident from the Paraya-Chaaliyar enmity chronicled in the text.

Institutional untouchability:

Bama had the unfortunate privilege to feel the pangs of untouchability at such a tender age when it was not possible for her to perceive even what untouchability actually meant. 'When I was studying in the third class I had not yet heard people speak only of untouchability. But I had already seen, felt, experienced and been humiliated by what it is.'(P-13) She gives a detailed account of how casteism as a social practice was patronised institutionally in schools, colleges, convents and churches by the teachers, fellow nuns and priests themselves. Bama remembers her school days where 'If ever anything bad happened they would say immediately and without any hesitation "it must be one of the Cheri children who did it"' (P-

18) On being accused falsely by the headmaster of her school, Bama on one occasion sought justice from the local priest who without even verifying the incident remarked 'After all you are from the Cheri. You must have done it.' (P-19) In the higher school pupil of her kind were always singled out as they belonged to the Harijan caste. 'We'd stand there in front of nearly two thousand children, hanging our heads in shame, as if we had done something wrong. Yes it was humiliating.'(P-21) Both in Degree College and B.Ed College Bama encountered the same humiliation because of her caste.

Exploitative economy:

The authoress introduces the readers with her family and society the inhumane sufferings of which are never acknowledged and always taken for granted. She relates the perennial penury of the Paraya community in her village to the exploitative socio-economic mechanism which is prevalent unchallenged across our country. 'More than three-quarters of the lands in these parts are in the hands of the Naickers. People of our community work for them, each Paraya family attached to a Naicker family as pannaiyaal, bonded labourers.' (P-48) They could barely manage to afford anything other than 'broken-grain gruel' for their sustenance. How grossly they were victimised to economic deprivation becomes apparent through the writer's narration of the experiences in her own family. The text informs us that both of Bama's grandmothers worked as servants for Naicker families. For all sorts of menial labours at Naicker upper caste households they would get 'the left over rice and curry from the previous evening.'(P-16) The text, in many ways, appears be an essential probing into the 'reasons' for which her grandmother '...would behave as if she had been handed the nectar of the gods.'(P-16)

Usurpation of human rights and dignity:

The way the lower castes are treated in this country is a clear violation of human code of conduct though, astonishingly, this truth has never been brought into the forum of mainstream socio-political discourse. Bama recounts how the '...lower castes irrespective of their ages are called by their names by the upper castes who (also irrespective of their ages) in turn, were addressed as Ayya, Master' (P-16) Pollution-purity matrix has equally been harped by Bama through numbers of 'charred experiences' in her own life. She refers 'Even the way they (her grandmothers) were given their drinking water was disquieting to watch.'(P-160) Her own experience in this regard is no less heart-rending: 'All the time I went to work for the Naickers, I knew I should not touch their goods or chattels; I should never come close to where they were. I should always stand away to one side. These were their rules.'(P-53)

Ostracization of Women:

Gender in this text ostensibly has attained an unprecedented treatment. Bama analyses the role of gender in the backdrop of her upbringing as a Dalit woman. A Dalit girl could not dream of education for she had to meet the household chores as a child, had to stay at home for the lack of decent clothes in the adulthood and as a woman, without having any other option to survive, had to toil as a 'pannaiyaal' or bonded labourer to some upper caste household along with the other male folk of her community. If a girl went for higher education, it would become difficult for her to find a husband in her community. Besides, to aggravate the plight of wage deprivation, the women were paid less than the men for the same work. The writer deliberates 'Even if they did the same work, men received one wage, women another. They always paid men more. I could never understand why.'(P-54-55) Bama unequivocally unravels the Govt, Police

and upper caste nexus as she describes the police atrocities on Dalit women under every slightest pretext. Thus the autobiography chronicles the maturation of a Dalit Christian woman with gender being an important issue of consideration.

Bama's Education and Spiritualism:

Education: Despite all these adversities Bama who had all through been good at studies managed to complete her graduation and B.Ed and ultimately got recruited as a teacher in a school. But her struggle as a Dalit did not come to an end with her attainment of higher education and employment. Even at her work place too she had to fight hard to survive as a teacher who belonged to 'Parayar' caste. Bama avers 'Most of the nuns there were Telegu people. They did not care for Dalits like us.'(P-23) Initially Bama had the spirit to withstand this hatred and ignominy she was being irrationally subjected to just because of her caste. Later this urged her to renounce her job and become a nun as she had always harboured an intrinsic desire to rid her fellow Dalit pupils of the oppression exerted by the upper caste nuns.

Spiritualism: Bama wages a scathing take on the convents and Churches which the Dalit Christians of her community are supposed to pay their allegiances to. That she took order to become a nun gave her a privilege to observe the casteist attitude of Christianity more closely. Dalit Christian majority were separated in all possible socio-cultural ways by the upper caste Christian minority. They were barred from entering the upper caste cemetery. They had to pay even for the blessings of the Mother Superior or the Priest on days like Christmas, New Year, and Easter. Bama recollects how the upper caste Nadar community never joined in the 'Dalit celebrations'. As a teacher she experienced how the nuns who worshipped 'a wealthy Jesus' maltreated poor Dalit pupils. She gets furiously enraged

even at the sight of those priests and nuns for their hypocrisy and comments that '...it is injustice that dances like a demon in the convents and within all the institutions run by them.'(P-106) At the penultimate stage of her training as a nun, Bama comes to learn that '...in certain orders they would not accept Harijan women as prospective nuns and that there was even a separate order for them somewhere.'(P-25) No wonder, it is a thunderbolt to a woman who has renounced her entire life at the altar of church to become a nun just for her society's sake. Then she gets to know 'Even amongst the priests and nuns it is the upper castes who hold all the high positions...And if any Dalits become priests or nuns they are pushed side and marginalised first of all.' (P-80) Nothing could be more disturbing than this utter failure of religious establishments. Dissatisfied Bama ultimately leaves the snug and comfort of the convent in order to 'work for the liberation of the Dalits'. Thus *Karukku* quite aptly suggests that Bama by dint of her unwavering faith in Lord finds her true spiritual salvation in the emancipation of the Dalits.

Conclusion:

Dalit autobiographies, as it has repeatedly been argued, share the experiences of a whole community through the persona of an individual Dalit writer. Therefore these writings are deemed to have the potentialities of being effective social and historical documents. Each autobiography invariably pertains to the entire corpus of Dalit literature which aiming at an alternative ideology and aesthetic purports to annihilate the stigmatisation of the 'untouchables' by reconstructing Dalit identity upon the firm basis of equality and justice. *Karukku* with its serrated edges of dissent undoubtedly strengthens the choir of Dalit literary resistance to ensure dignity and empowerment for the Dalits.

REFERENCES:

1. Ambedkar B.R. *Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition*. New Delhi: Navayana. 2014. Print
2. Bama. *Karukku*. Trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom. New Delhi: OUP. 2012. Print
3. Bharat Patankar and Gail Omvedt. *The Dalit Liberation Movement in Colonial Period*. New Delhi: Critical Quest. 2007
4. Valmiki, Omprakash. *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*. Trans. Arun Prabha Mukherjee. Kolkata: Samya, 2014. Print