

TRANSGRESSING CASTE, GENDER AND RELIGION AS BARRIERS: DALIT
FEMINIST STANDPOINT IN BAMA'S *KARUKKU*

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Abstract: Dalit literature vociferously proclaims that indigence and deprived social status, both inside and outside Hinduism, have led to the triple marginalization of Dalit women. Even religious conversions have not been able to unleash them from the stigma of descent and gender discrimination. Trapped in the vicious vortex of caste, male hegemony and religion, myriad female Dalit writers tend to reveal the practice of domination and oppression against Dalit women and their objectification. Amongst such oeuvres, Bama's *Karukku* surpasses the victim-agent binary and emphasises on the awakening of Dalit women's consciousness to transgress the barriers of untouchability and gender oppression. The autobiography suggests remedies for the unresolved social and economic complexities that exist in the Dalit women's lives. The paper examines a new Dalit feminist standpoint in Bama's *Karukku* that overcomes caste, gender and religion barriers through the process of self-reflection.

Key words: Discrimination, Stigmatisation, Gender, Religion, Dalit female psyche, Education

1. Dalit Movement and Dalit Women:

The term 'Dalit' was first used by Mahatma Jyoti Rao Phule (1827-1890) for the untouchables of western India (John 668). The millennia old caste system, that was believed to be prescribed by the Hindu religion, is a carrier of cemented prejudices against certain castes. The Brahminic culture and its hegemony suppressed the 'untouchables' and developed in them a disposition of being a subservient caste. According to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar 'Varna system based on birth is a post-Vedic phenomenon and untouchability is a post-Buddhist phenomenon' (Nadkarni 4785) wherein people who ate beef were considered impure and rendered untouchables. Hence caste system was accomplished not as a canon sanctioned by Hinduism, which is a prevalent belief, rather the latter didn't approve determining status and identity on the basis of birth. 'The lower caste people who were not part of the four varna (or Jati) system collectively identified themselves as Dalits with the influential role of their leader Dr. B. R. Ambedkar' (Sinha 54). Dalit Movements, launched under the leadership of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, surfaced the morbid life of Dalits that lacked agency and was exposed to exploitation and discrimination. The movements were a cogent critique of the caste system that proclaimed social exclusion of 'Dalits' on the pretext of impurity.

Though the Dalit movement exposed the inequities existing in society on the basis of caste, it adumbrated the plight of Dalit women. It was a voice against the Brahmanical social structure and resonated with male voices and their predicament. According to Chakravarty, as caste inequalities prevailed in the Indian social system similarly "graded patriarchies" were also an

integral part of the different castes (79). Women's exploitation and subjugation are subjective to their respective Dalit women being the most repressed.

Periyar E. V. Ramasamy Naicker founded the Suyamariathai Iyyakkam (Self-Respect Movement, 1925), chronicled the subjugated status of Dalit women, but researchers retort that their voices have been ignored in historical movement studies (Sarvesh et. al. 94). According to Bhushan Sharma and K. A. Geetha, 'the awareness of Dalit women's issues has neither been addressed by mainstream feminism nor by the Dalit literary movement, which has been largely patriarchal. They remain in the category of outsider within' (1). 'The Dalit Panthers made a significant contribution to the cultural revolt of the 1970s - but in both their writings and their programme - the Dalit women remained encapsulated firmly in the roles of the "mother" and the 'victimized sexual being' (Rege 42). According to Anurag Bhaskar, 'the mainstream male dominated Dalit movement— by refusing to acknowledge the comparatively privileged location of Dalit males denied Dalit women an independent expression of assertion and identity' (65). Even the 'left-party based women's organisations, that advocated the rights of women and raised their voice against the social and economic exploitation of women, were unable to equate women's subjugation due to Brahmanical set-up' (Rege 42).

Not only in Dalit movements, but also in largely upper-caste Hindu-led women's movements, Dalit or ex-untouchable women's voices and opinions have been suppressed (Govinda 427). According to Anandita Pan, 'The identification of 'Dalit' in anti-caste politics centralises on caste, thereby erasing gender' (5). Dalit women fall on the lowest rung of the society which renders invisible the calamitous effects of impurity, stigma and discrimination on them. Economic dependence on men and poverty makes them vulnerable to sexual exploitation and violence. According to Navsarjan Trust India,

Violence and inhuman treatment, such as sexual assault, rape, and naked parading, serve as a social mechanism to maintain Dalit women's subordinate position in society. They are targeted by dominant castes as a way of humiliating entire Dalit communities. Human rights abuses against Dalit women are mostly committed with impunity (1).

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar emerged as a social reformist who relentlessly worked for the upliftment of Dalits. He did commendable work in creating awareness among the Dalits, including Dalit women, in understanding and realising their rights. He lent his voice against women's subservience and subaltern lot (Singh 4) and made people aware of the need for womenfolk to uplift themselves and become pioneers of an egalitarian society which would be casteless and classless. Ambedkar urged and endeavoured aggressively to transform the matrix of caste hierarchical system by transmogrifying the role of women in Hindu society. He strongly abhorred and censured Manu and *Manusmriti* for deteriorating the condition of women and compared it with the Vedas wherein it is explicitly mentioned to give women the right to freedom and education. Ambedkar openly flouted and defied the rules laid by *Manusmriti* that relegated women to a secondary status in society and 'tried to dent the matrix of caste hierarchy through revolutionising the role of women in the patriarchal Hindu social order' (Sharma 1). Ambedkarite Movement in 1930s witnessed a commendable participation of Dalit women by organizing independent meetings and conferences (Rege 41). The revolutionary ideas of social transformation and rights mutated and inspired Dalit women fraternity that initiated the process of overcoming gender and caste binary.

2. Dalit Literature & Dalit Women: The Dalit literature movement gained traction in Maharashtra for the first time in the 1960s, a decade marked by a situation of socio-political flux not only in India but also in other regions of the world that brought forth an unprecedented cultural transition (Bhongle 158). Dalit autobiographies play an instrumental role in unveiling the hidden territories of a Dalit's suppressed life. 'The entire Dalit literature tends to be autobiographical because the Dalit writer refuses to soar high with the wings of imagination; he prefers to write out of the authenticity of experience' (Bhongle 158). Gradually, with the emergence of Dalit consciousness, men (the preferred gender in the community) deciphered their vulnerabilities from a masculine point of view (Sarvesh et. al 91) and Dalit women's position, plight and a desire to recuperate from the despicable status quo went unrecognised. Even literature relegated secondary status to Dalit females by projecting them as extensions of the male protagonist (Sarvesh et. al 91). Sharmila Rege (1998) exemplifies that masculinization of Dalithood and savarnasiation of womanhood led to the classical exclusion of Dalit women (42). Initially Dalit Literature was rife with the writings of Dalit male writers but gradually powerful Dalit female writings emerged (Yogisha & Narendra Kumar 1). Going beyond the realm of penury, exploitation and destitution, Dalit women's autobiographies underline their earnest efforts to unleash from the conservative norms of gender, caste and class and acquire agency. Dalit female autobiographies exhort women to understand the caste and gender bigotry and value their own individual agency. The life narratives of Dalit women acquaint the world with virulence of caste and gender in shaping and cementing various forms of social hierarchies.

A spate of female Dalit autobiographies started emerging in 1980s (Nubile 84) and hit hard the established social discriminatory binary: patriarchy and caste under the umbrella of religion. Kumud Pawade's *Antasphot* (1981) 'speaks about many of the traditional inequalities of Hindu social structure resulting in making the lives of women and Dalits miserable' (Sargar 1). Mukuta Sarvagod's *Mitleli Karvaade* (1983) (*Closed Doors*) lays emphasis on the deep impact of "Ambedkar's humanism" (Pimpliskar 8) on her life. Mallika Dhasal's *Udhwasta Vyayacha Mala* (*I want to Destroy Myself*) published in 1984 is 'an account of her marriage to Namdeo Dhasal' ("The Past as Present" n. pag.). Baby Kamble's *Jeena Amucha* (*The Prisons We Broke*) (1986) 'unveils the various ways in which the construction of the resistant selfhood and subjectivity of not just a person but of the entire marginalized community happens' (Yogisha 221). According to Dasgupta, 'Shaikh's memoir, a blunt, even shocking, story of abuse, neglect and misery, was said by some to have contributed to Dhasal's fading political fortunes' (Ibid.). Shantabai Kamble's *Jalmachi Chittrakatha* (1988) (*The Illustrated Story of My Life*) is a narrative on the life of a Mahar (a Dalit community in Maharashtra) women that encapsulates humiliation, exploitation and poverty (Joseph 7). Shantabai Dhanaji Dani's *Ratradin Amha* (1990) ('For Us – These Nights and Days') her active participation in the agitations carried out in response to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's call against the Britishers (Mukhopadhyay 267). Janabai Kachru's *Maran Kala* (1992) (*Deathly Pains*) is a memoir of motherhood, labour, humiliation, hunger, poverty and resistance (Rege). Kaushalya Baisantry's autobiography *Dohra Abhishaap* (*Doubly Cursed*) (1999) is a protest against 'untouchability and patriarchy in India' (Merrill 52). Urmila Pawar's *Aaydan* (2003) (*The Weave of My Life*), 'is a complex narrative of a gendered individual who looks at the world initially from her location within the caste but who

goes on to transcend the caste identity from a feminist perspective' (Pandit, Introduction, *The Weave of My Life* xvii). Bama Faustina Soosairaj's *Karukku* exhibits a novel Dalit feminist standpoint wherein she underscores the awakening of Dalit Christian woman's consciousness to resolve her deprived social and economic status.

Bama Faustina Soosairaj, commonly known as Bama, was born in Tamil Nadu in a Dalit family. She gained the recognition by her widely acclaimed work *Karukku* published in 1992 in Tamil. Her friend, Father Mark, suggested Bama to pen her humiliating experiences as a Dalit to sensitize the world about the constricting lives of Dalit women. Father Frank states, Then I asked her to write about Dalit women whom she encountered in the village, ordinary women who are not educated, how they go to the field, how they are in oppressive situations, what is the thing that makes them live, and their struggle against the caste structure, their life in the family, their male dominated society... Till that time there was the view that all women have the same problem. But her writing showed that Dalit women have entirely different problems compared to caste women (qtd in Maria Preethi Srinivasan 111).

Bama's *Karukku* is a manifestation of Dalit women's struggle for freedom from the age-old thralldom of, caste, gender and religion. Besides unravelling the despicable status of Dalit women due to the social inequities based on caste and gender, it also suggests to understand the caste hierarchies that perpetuate under the umbrella of religions in India.

3. Caste Discrimination, Dalit Women and Bama: Many Dalit women writers have come forward with their autobiographies that exemplify the despicable lives of Dalit women in a Hindu society marked by unjust social hierarchies. Bama is one such Dalit female writer whose life experiences, as a Dalit woman, are compiled in her autobiography *Karukku*. It demonstrates Dalit women subjected to discrimination and stigmatisation due to which they have become 'double-edged *Karukku*, torn, distorted and disabled inside out. She concludes that the driving forces behind the genesis of her book were her life experiences, The driving forces that shaped this book are many: events that occurred during many stages of my life, cutting me like *Karukku* and making me bleed; unjust social structures that plunged me into ignorance and left me trapped and suffocating; my own desperate urge to break, throw away, and destroy these bonds; and when the chains were shattered into fragments, the blood that was split- all these taken together" (xxii).

Social exclusion due to caste discrimination posits a threat to a Dalit's self-esteem and develops a submissive 'Dalit psyche'. As a consequence, Dalits internalise their deprived social status which erode their self-perception and self-identity and they accept their subaltern status as their destiny. Dalit women placed at the lowest rung of the society and their community inculcate submissiveness and self-abnegation. In order to understand female-Dalit Psyche, it is essential to understand the terms 'discrimination' and 'Stigma' as they immensely contribute in shaping it. According to Aaron Antonovsky, discrimination can be described as the intentional infliction of harm on people for reasons that are rationally unrelated to the situation. Individuals are made bereft of the deserved and desired opportunities for reasons unrelated to their abilities, merits, or behaviour, but only because they belong to a specific group (81). Feagin considers, prejudice as a key component in the singled-out group's discriminating treatment (3). Kevin Lang and Ariella Kahn-Lang Spitzer define discrimination as treating someone differently

because of their gender, colour, or religion. Discrimination can result from prejudice, but only if a person acts on it (68). Hence it can be concluded that a prejudiced outlook towards a gender, class, caste or religion, that leads to the denial of the basic rights, is discrimination. People who are unable to procure a powerful position in the existing social structure and its dynamics are discriminated through several practices and one such practice is stigmatisation. Divya Bhanot and Sunil K. Verma explain stigmatisation as,

the devaluation of people based on the characteristic features associated with them. These characteristics might be overtly visible, for example leprosy, overweight, physical disability, facial disfigurement, or on the other hand, might be related to the position of an individual in the hierarchical structure of the society, for example, individuals belonging to particular castes (scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and other backward classes), socio economic class (economically weak or poor), religion, and sexual orientation (sexual minorities) (1415).

Discrimination and stigmatisation render social exclusion of Dalits which is the genesis of Dalit psyche. Centuries of suppression have restricted them to move beyond their realm of deprivation. United Nations Human Rights highlights in *The Dalit: Born into a life* (2021) the descent-based discrimination faced by Dalits that renders them the 'lowest echelon of society's classes. The article enunciates that from birth to death, stigma affects every sphere of a Dalit's life, including education, housing, employment, access to justice, and political engagement (1). Dalit women who can be considered as Dalits among the Dalits are the worst sufferers as they face discrimination and stigmatisation due to their caste and gender. Out of their deprived social status has evolved a submissive Dalit female psyche that has made them accept their marginalised position in the society and their own community.

In the European and North American context, women—and especially Black women—were ignored, similarly in the Indian context, among the 'Dalits' – the most marginalized community and the lowest in the hierarchical order of the Indian caste system—Dalit women experienced the extreme forms of exclusion in the historical processes (92).

'Dalit-female psyche' evolves from social conditioning and has been one of the prime impediments in their development. 'Dalit women and Dalit men experience the world in a different way. They get to know the reality of their jobs (Kumar & Yogisha 7). Bama in *Karukku* underscores Dalit women subjected to servitude and discrimination by upper castes of Dalit community. She recalls,

Both my grandmothers worked as servants for Naicker families. In the case of one of them, when she was working in the fields, even tiny children, born the other day, would call her by her name and order her about, just because they belonged to the Naicker caste. And this grandmother, like all the other labourers, would call the little boy Ayya, Master, and run about to do his bidding. It was shameful to see them do this (16).

Submissive 'Dalit-female psyche' can be explicitly seen in females depicted in *Karukku*. Bama's mother and Paati embraced their despicable condition to the extent that they don't try to find a way to move out of their deprived status. They accept the social disposition regarding untouchability and impurity as their destiny. Untouchability is so pervaded in the society that any kind of physical contact with them is not acceptable to the upper castes. Bama narrates an

incident in which a Naicker woman (upper class/caste Dalit) pours the water from four feet carefully so that the water container doesn't touch Paati's hands. Bama recalls one of her Paatis accepting her destiny of being born in a Dalit family that demonstrates submissive female-Dalit psyche:

Her vessel, it seemed, must not touch Paati's; it would be polluted. Sometimes later, I said to Paati she should not lay herself open to such behaviour; it was ugly to see. What Paati said to me in return was this: 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? (16)

Bama could understand the reasons behind the restricted lives of Dalit women. Stigma related to their descent and gender has made them feeble and vulnerable to exploitation both in the society and Dalit community. The experiences of female Dalits nurture Dalit-female psyche. They learn to live in a state of poverty and exploitation. Bama at a very tender age became sensitive to the despicable lives of female Dalits. She describes an instance wherein she goes to a Naicker's house along with Paati. The latter keeps her vessel near a drain and after doing all the filthy chores, the Naicker lady comes and pours the left overs in Paati's vessel from some distance. She reticently accepts the stale food and the maltreatment as her destiny.

My other Paati was the same. As soon as dawn broke, she would go to the Naicker houses, sweep out the cowshed, collect up the dung and dirt, and then bring home the left-over rice and curry from the previous evening. And for some reason she would behave as if she had been handed the nectar of the gods (16).

Thus, the 'Dalit-female psyche' stems from discrimination and stigmatization wherein the women have been a victim more than the men in the community. Dalit women are marginalised in terms of non-existence of basic political, social and educational rights. And in due course of time, they nurture submissive 'Dalit-female psyche' as their unalterable destiny that emerges as the root cause of their subjugation which needs to be addressed and transformed. Bama recalls her childhood days when she worked on the fields of Naickers. She was warned by the elderly women of the family not to touch "their goods or chatter"

I should never come close to where they were. I should always stand away to one side. These were their rules. I often felt pained and ashamed. But there was nothing that I would do. They belonged to a higher caste. They had the money. We had to listen to what they said. However, furious or resentful I felt in my heart. I have stepped aside for them, along with the other women of my community. (53-54).

Bama at a very tender age understood that till Dalits keep as serving the upper-castes they'll never be free from caste discrimination. Impurity, untouchability and poverty will continue to pervade their lives until they themselves create a new identity. Lakshmi Holmstorm writes in the Introduction of Karukku. "She seeks an identity, but also seeks a change which means an end to that identity" (xix). Bama, in her childhood, develops a revulsion towards the caste discrimination and refuses to accept it as her destiny.

4. Bama, Gender Discrimination and Poverty:

Gender discrimination and poverty impoverish Dalit women and make them susceptible to exploitation. A report, *Unheard Voices: Dalit Women* (2007), states ‘Dalit women are thrice discriminated, treated as untouchables and as outcastes, due to their caste, face gender discrimination being women and finally economic impoverishment due to unequal wage disparity, with low or underpaid labour’ (1). Domestic labour is among the most exploited and abject work, and is relegated to the most marginal women in a society (92). Bama mentions the Dalits subjected to hard labour for which they never received ‘a payment that was appropriate to their labour’ (54). She also brings forth the difference in the wages of Dalit men and women. ‘Even if they did the same work, men received one wage, women another. They always paid men more. I could never understand why’ (54-55). Dalit women reticently accept the existing discrimination in wages. Judith Heyer claims that around ‘74% of Dalit women workforce who worked as agricultural labourers in 1996 received on average 50% of the wages of men’ (5). According to Anandita Sengupta and Panchanan Das, ‘Gender discrimination is omnipresent in the Indian labour market, and the discrimination is more serious when caste and religious discrimination are taken into account’ (71)

Since childhood, Dalit girls accept their secondary position in the family and society. While living in abject poverty, it becomes quite evident that education is meant for boys and they have to look after the domestic affairs of the family. ‘In 2011 census, a lower proportion of Dalit women (56.6%) 2001 it was 41.9% were literate as compared to 58 %, 2011 and 64.6% in 2001 for non-Dalit women’ (Churiyana 138). CEDAW underscores that Dalit ‘young women are often married at a very early age and thus unable to continue their education, resulting in high illiteracy rates and the inability to be self-sufficient and financially contribute to the family’ (1). Bama comments, ‘In the face of such poverty, the girl children cannot see the sense in schooling, and stay at home, collecting firewood, looking after the house, caring for the babies, and doing household chores’ (79). Dalit girls eventually are socially conditioned to understand their servile role in a family. Bama underscores the fact that being a Dalit female is a challenge as they are deprived of agency in their own community. In the absence of resources and money, it becomes difficult for Dalit families to educate their daughters. Being a son, education was always approachable for Bama’s brother. Dalit Families, due to financial instabilities, find it lucrative to educate the son as he looks after the parents in their old age. Daughters are a liability; hence any such investment is discouraged. Bama’s father also held the same opinion. However, Bama was adamant to continue her education. Her elder brother, Annan, taught her about the importance of education in a Dalit’s life.

Because we are born into Paraya jati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that. But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities. So, study with care, learn all of you can. If you are always ahead in your lessons, people will come to you of their own accord and attach themselves to you. Work hard and learn (8).

Annan evolved as a confident man because of his education and refused to budge before the caste hierarchies. Bama understood that education can liberate her from the stifling norms of the society and can serve as a panacea for all the lingering problems in a Dalit’s life. Bama reminisces,

The words Anna spoke to me that day made a very deep impression on me. And I studied hard, with all my breath and being, in a frenzy almost. As Annan urged, I stood first in my class. And because of that, many people became my friends, even though I am a Parachi (18).

Annan's words had an ever-lasting effect on Bama's mind and she worked hard to excel in studies. She fetched the highest marks in class due to which she garnered respect from the classmates. Teachers encouraged her to help other students who were slow learners in their lessons. This unrivalled behaviour of teachers and her classmates encouraged Bama to give better performance in her school. Bama was overjoyed when she secured the first position among all Harijan students of her district in S.S.L.C exam. Her mother too was jubilant at her success. That was the first time when Bama was not embarrassed to be called Harijan, rather she admired her position 'as the Harijan who gained the best marks' She recalls, 'And the other children congratulated me for doing so well. I thought, why? Is it impossible for a Harijan to study, or what? I felt a certain pride then, a desire to prove that we could study just as well as others, and to make progress' (Karukku 21). However, Bama after completing her eleventh was suggested by her parents to stay at home. Bama reminisces:

But then, my parents wanted me to stay back home saying there was no need for me to go to college or to study any further. In any case there was no money. Then, they said it would be difficult for me to find a husband in my community if I went in for further education (74).

Bama met a nun who had once taught her in the eleventh class. She was not happy with the idea that a brilliant student like Bama was forced to sit at home because of poverty. The nun requested Bama's mother to pawn her earrings and send Bama to a college. Bama with a firm resolution to continue with her studies, landed in the college with just the clothes she was wearing.

Poverty placed Bama in a miserable position at school. She was often mocked at by upper caste/class students for her shabby clothes. She recalls, "All my classmates looked at me as if I was some outlandish creature" (74). Besides the humiliation she had to bear from her classmates, her father also refused to pay her college fees. He wrote to Bama, "You listened to the nuns' advice and joined college, so now ask them to give you the money" (75). Bama didn't want to go home without completing her studies. She says, that's why I endured all the shame and humiliation and stayed on" (75). Bama's brother Annan said, 'You have lots of brains; it's as if a palmyra fruit has been thrust into a sparrow's head. Study well and gain lots of marks. And so gradually 'I cared less and less about clothes. I went about my own business, telling myself this was the destiny that was given to me' (73). Bama knew that education was her saviour.

Yet, because I had the education, because I had the ability, I dared to speak up for myself; I didn't care a toss about caste. Whatever the situation, I held my head high. So, both the teachers and students showed me a certain affection, respect. In this way, because of my education alone I managed to survive among those who spoke the language of caste-difference and discrimination (22).

She never succumbed before the downturn of life and overcame female-Dalit consciousness. What life offered to her as a Dalit female, she rejected and bravely conquered every battle through the only weapon she possessed i.e., education. Bama rejected submissive Dalit female psyche and fought to establish an identity of her own. 'Her life acts as a catalyst for the

downtrodden Dalits and inspires them to break the age-old Dalit consciousness' (Mathur and Thakur 10).

5. Proselytisation: Unable to Efface the Stigma of Descent for Dalit Women

Religious conversions among Dalits have been a common phenomenon since pre-independent India as it was the only way out to transgress the caste barrier. Even, 'Ambedkar believed that the only way the Dalits could find a place for themselves in Indian society was by way of conversion' (Roychowdhury 1). 'Significantly, Dalit conversions in colonial India have been examined largely in the context of Christianity, as mass movements and collective strategies, embedded in community advancement' (Gupta 662). Dalit women, in order to upgrade their status in the society, got inclined towards religious conversion. It became a way to procure the rights denied to them as Dalits. In part, Dalit women's conversion was motivated by desire, which supported the transformational politics of religious rights. They may have used conversions to fight against their associations with gender and low female value (Gupta 662). However even after the religious conversion, Dalits were deprived of the basic rights because of their descent.

Although conversion to Christianity to some extent improved Dalits' material conditions by giving them access to education and employment, it did not make any significant changes to the social status of Dalit communities, as converts continued to be identified by their caste rather than their religion (Borthakur 2).

Many Dalits have adopted Christianity, Islam and Buddhism to emancipate from the downtrodden social status. However, Bhardwaj concludes that "such conversions don't bring any substantial change in the existing socio-economic and political structures of the society" hence the Dalits "remained in the same economic stratum" (267). Bama also shares a similar thought in *Karukku*. The autobiography besides underscoring the upper castes supremacy over Dalits, also exposes the administration of Roman Catholic church in Tamil Nadu which discriminates against the Paraya community that proselytized to Christianity. Irked and piqued with the humiliation inflicted by upper castes, Bama's family adopted Christianity. To her astonishment, discrimination was an integral part of the convent. Despite the conversion, Dalits were unable to unleash the stigma related to their descent. While joining the convent, Bama's mind was rife with hope and determination to uplift the life of Dalit children, however to her utter disappointment caste discrimination also existed in the religious order. Lakshmi Holmstrom writes in Introduction of *Karukku*, "She discovers, however that the perspectives of the convent and the church are different from hers. The story of that conflict and its resolution forms the core of *Karukku* (xvii).

She was sent to a 'prestigious school' where children from wealthy families studied. The poor and lowly were not appreciated and if they appeared in the 'precincts of the convent or school,' the convent people would 'fall upon that person like rabid dogs' (Karukku 106-107). According to Bama, Church comprised of priests, nuns and their kith and kin from upper castes. She unravels,

They are the ones in positions of power. Yet when you consider the Christian people as a whole, most of them are lowly people and Dalits. These few assume power, control the dispossessed

and the poor by thrusting a blind belief and devotion upon them, and by turning them into slaves in the name of God, while they themselves live in comfort (Karukku 108).

The decision of working in a convent doesn't obliterate the stigma of her descent rather it accelerated her plight and agonies. In a class, she was told that Harijan (untouchable) women would not be allowed as Nuns in certain orders and there would be separate order for them.

In a particular class, a sister told us that in certain orders they would not accept Harijan women as prospective nuns and that there was even a separate order for them somewhere. I was thunderstruck... I lamented inwardly that there is no place that was free of caste. And so, at last I became a nun and was sent to a convent elsewhere (25).

Even the Dalit students in the convent were not relieved from discrimination. Nuns, as teachers, were least concerned about Dalit students. According to Eric Fraser, 'teachers at the schools are often members of upper castes who set low expectations for the Dalit children and rarely seek to provide them with a positive learning environment' (4). According to Bama, the Dalit pupils were made to do the jobs like sweeping and swabbing, washing and cleaning out the lavatories and classrooms. They received inhuman treatment and were addressed insultingly. Nobody knew that Bama is also a Harijan (untouchable) and she felt quite dejected but couldn't gather enough courage to retort sharply and continued the battle within herself.

And in the convent, as well, they spoke very insultingly about low-caste people. They spoke as if they even didn't consider low caste people as human beings. They did not know that I was a low caste nun. I was filled with anger towards them, yet I did not have the courage to retort sharply that I too was a low-caste woman. I swallowed the very words that came into my mouth; never said anything out aloud but battled within myself (25).

Bama's family proselytized to Christianity to unleash from the stifling caste system but the abusive treatment given to the Dalit children at the convent acquainted her with the inextricable stigma associated with their lives. To her dismay catholic church also observed the caste system as prevalent in Hinduism. The convent, like the other upper castes and class, perceived Dalits as a downtrodden community and looked down upon them. Bama becomes disheartened on witnessing the Dalit children and old people performing all the menial jobs at the convent 'frightened by the power and wealth the sisters had' (103). She swallows the humiliation inflicted on Dalit children and knew that the day her descent is known to them, she would also receive a similar treatment. She was hesitant to disclose her identity.

They speak such words all the time, without even thinking. And I sat there like a lump of tamarind, listening to all this and dying several deaths within. I would tremble to think how would they react if they realized that I was a Dalit. And being a coward, I survived somehow (26).

The monopoly of the upper castes in the convent infuriates Bama. She proclaims that Dalits have been consistently denied the basic rights hence are unable to establish an equal position

in the society. The convent mirrored the discriminatory social behaviour that existed in the society and the politics of caste prevailed in the convent. Proselytisation failed to liberate the Dalits from the stigma associated with their descent. She questions the upper caste for the inheritance of supremacy,

How did the upper caste become so elevated? How is it that we have been denigrated? They possess money; we do not. If we were wealthy too, wouldn't we learn more, and make more progress than they do? But when it comes to it, even if we are as good as they are, or even better, because of this one issue of caste alone, we are forced to suffer pain and humiliation...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? (27).

Bama also exposes the discriminatory functioning of the convent and the nuns 'who claim that their hearts are set upon service to God, certainly discriminate according to caste' (Karukku 27). Bama had a keen desire to raise the destitute children of her community but the real picture of the Convent rendered her hopeless of blissful utopia. Caste discrimination at Convent was an unanticipated experience for Bama. The teachers at Convent vow to uplift the Dalit and other children belonging to lower strata but in reality, they too advocated discrimination on the basis of caste and wealth. They lived a luxurious life and oppressed, humiliated, and moreover inculcated 'pseudo-Dalit consciousness' in children,

It struck me overwhelmingly that these nuns collectively oppressed Dalit children and teachers so very much; why should I 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...so I entered that particular order. But once inside the convent, it was like coming from the backwoods into the big metropolis (23).

Though caste discrimination compelled Bama's family to adopt Christianity yet it could not alter the stigma related to their descent. Bama recalls, "I lamented inwardly that there was no place that was free of caste" (Karukku 25). According to Bama the Church, the Convent, the schools, all are rife with luxury and discrimination based on caste and class. The rich children refused to sit next to the poor ones because 'they are dark-skinned, they are poor, they are ugly, they don't wear nice clothes. Even in a play or a dance performance the rich children didn't want to put on the costume of poor' (Karukku 112). The nuns, at the time of recruitment, are made to take three vows, of poverty, of chastity, and obedience. They are given these vows to liberate them from conservative ideologies and teach them to lead life in service of humanity. However, they too indulge in 'control and enslavement' of Dalits for the benefit of the convent. When I was outside, I had experienced poverty and had lived among those who suffered from poverty. But inside the convent I could not see even the traces and tracks of poverty. We could only go round, always within our luxurious cages, trapped in comfort (113).

Bama's experience, as a child, student and nun, brings a metamorphosis in her perception towards life and its goals. She decides to eschew the path of self-abnegation followed by Dalit

women and tread the path to self-actualisation by leaving convent and living an independent life. She decides to devote her life in the service of the downtrodden.

Wasn't it in the belief that my life should be useful to other, however few, that I joined convent? In just the same way, even though I leave the convent now and go into the outside world, I want to show that it is possible to live a life that is at least a little useful to society (131).

5. Conclusion:

Bama's life presents her Dalit-feminist standpoint. With gender and caste discrimination rampant in Indian society, it becomes challenging for Dalit women to transgress the boundaries of suppression. Devoid of agency, they are the voices unheard and unrecognized. The social power structures which give ample rights to men and upper caste/class sideline the existence of Dalit women. Female-Dalit consciousness has made women accept untouchability, ignominy, discrimination and debasement. Bama emphasizes on overcoming submissive Dalit psyche,

We who are asleep must open our eyes and look about us. We must not accept the injustice of our enslavement by telling ourselves it is our fate, as if we have no true feeling; we must dare to stand up for change. We must crush all these institutions that use caste to bully us into submission, and demonstrate that among human beings there are none who are high or low (28).

Bama's decision of helping the downtrodden Dalits also evokes a reformative idea of Dalits rediscovering themselves and breaking the centuries old submissive Dalit psyche. It also reflects the contribution a Dalit woman can make in the lives of the subaltern. Bama's Karukku denounces that Dalit women, who have the least agency among the existing social power structures, have the ability to empower the masses.

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