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EXPLORATION OF DALIT AND CHRISTIAN IDENTITY: *KARUKKU* AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY
BY BAMA

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ABSTRACT

There were many Dalit communities in India which converted to Christianity due to the humanitarian efforts of the missionaries. Many thought that conversion into Christianity would bring about liberation from the clutches of the caste system. The Gospel was also preached and promised to dissolve inequality and oppression in the society. And for the first time, by converting to Christianity they could acquire a holy book and read it, because so far, the Muslims had the Koran, the Hindus had the Bhagavad Gita, and the Sikhs had the Guru Granth Sahib but the Dalits had none. Unlike most autobiographies, Bama's narrative is not linear. She does not describe events only in terms of the impact they had on her later life, but writes of the experiences she had as moments of oppression that composed her daily lived reality. In the book, one sees Bama's quest to understand and present how her multiple identities as Dalit, Christian and woman have impacted her oppression.

Keywords: Discrimination, Identity, Christianity, Self Exploration, Oppression.

Introduction

Karukku is an autobiography that chronicles Bama's life, from her childhood to her early adult life as a nun, and beyond. The book was originally written by her in Tamil in 1992 and translated into the English version that I read by Lakshmi Holmstrom in 2000. *Karukku* is one of the first autobiographies of a Dalit woman written in Tamil.

Karukku is an elegy to the community Bama grew up in. She writes of life there in all its vibrancy and colour, never making it seem like a place defined by a singular caste identity, yet a place that never forgets, and is never allowed to forget its caste identity. She writes simultaneously of humorous incidents she remembers from her childhood, the games she used to play with her

friends, good meals with her family and the oppression of her community by the police, upper-castes, and the convent. In this manner, she presents the pervasiveness of caste oppression – how it not only punctuates everyday life, but is an integral part of it, even in the memory of a community.

About the author

Bama (born 1958), also known as Bama Faustina Soosairaj, is a Tamil, *Dalit Feminist* and novelist. She rose to fame with her autobiographical novel *Karukku* (1992), which chronicles the joys and sorrows experienced by Dalit Christian women in Tamil Nadu. She subsequently wrote two more novels, *Sangati* (1994) and *Vanmam* (2002) along with two collections of short stories:

Kusumbukkaran (1996) and *OruTattvumErumaiyum* (2003).

- *Karukku* (1992; 2nd ed. with postscript, 2012)
- *Sangati* (1994)
- *Kusumbukkaran* (1996)
- *Vanmam* (2002)
- *OruTattvumErumaiyum* (2003)

Review of Literature

As Ambedkar writes "*Caste is not just a division of labour, it is a division of laborers.*" Bama's work speaks to this statement as she describes the servitude with which her family members were bound to the upper-caste families they worked for, including the beseeching obedience they had to show to them. "*All the time I went to work for the Naickers [upper-caste] 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. I often felt pained and ashamed. But there was nothing that I could do,*" she writes, of her experience working for a Naicker household in high school. "*To this day, in my village, both men and women can survive only through hard and incessant labour,*" she notes.

Bama also speaks of the humiliation she experienced in high school, being Dalit and poorer than her classmates. What struck me, in particular, is the symbolic importance of clothing as a marker of social capital that she writes of. She describes a college party that she did not attend because she could not afford to buy a new saree, hiding in the bathroom until it was over. While education spaces are supposed to be emancipating, free of all markers of identity and privilege, equalizing spaces, they are anything but. The same oppression that Bama faced outside, she faced in school and college, making it all even harder to pursue an education she could barely afford and that she had to fight hard for as a woman. Her narrative is nuanced in exploring her intersecting identities as Dalit and woman in detail. As Bama says in this interview with Githa Hariharan, Dalit women are exploited 'thrice,' on account of their caste, class and gender – 'triple monsters.'

The book is also Bama's story of looking for a sense of belonging and connection to something meaningful, which she finds lacking in her community at home. She leaves home to join the convent in her twenties, after working for a few years as a teacher, hoping to contribute to a cause larger than caste, class and identity. However, she finds the convent in not such a sanctuary and is just as oppressive as the spaces outside.

Dalit and Christian Identity

Being one among the notable personalities among Dalit writers in India today, Bama's first book recreates her past life as a Paraya girl, a teacher and a nun. *Karukku* with its serrated edges on both sides becomes a symbol of Dalit resistance. *Karukku* is a poignant subaltern novel that speaks of the childhood experiences of the author. The significance of the novel comes from its social message. The author's childhood is interspersed with events that repeatedly bring to the fore the harrowing experiences of a Dalit child.

There are many congruities between the saw – edged palmyra karukku and own life. 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 (*Karukku* 13).

It is true that the scratches and tearing on her body and mind formulated the embryo from which the book originated. Memory often serves to create a tradition for oneself. But in *Karukku*, it becomes an attempt to break the existing tradition and to identify ways of defining one's own identity. In this process of delving deep into the past, Bama identifies herself with the Dalit community, which almost becomes an expansion of her own self (Interview, Namratha Mogaral).

Conclusion

Her illustration of culture within Christian convents is shocking. She writes of the oppression she faced within the convent to practice her religion and daily life in a particular manner. She recalls how she was treated differently from others as a Dalit woman and admonished harshly every time she

tried to stand up for herself, think for herself or speak on behalf of those the convent was actually meant to serve. Even leaving the convent proved a Herculean task as she was constantly stopped by the more senior nuns.

What I loved the most about the book is how Bama writes an honest, vulnerable version of herself in it. Its nuance is incredible, as she describes not only her experiences as Dalit and a woman, but also the loneliness of her everyday life. In the end, she writes about life after leaving the nunnery. "Yes, after I found a job, I would be alone. And yes, that is how it had to be. It is now, for the very first time that I must learn to be truly alone." I find courage in her resolute acceptance of loneliness because of the lack of community she can experience in an urban place like Madurai, where life is not formally divided according to caste, but still performed the same.

I have always loved reading about the emotionally open and evocative relationships that women share with themselves, their bodies, their several identities. This is what drew me to *Karukku* and this is why the book will stay with me. Bama is unabashed with her admissions and her random musing in her writing. Never does she attempt to tie all the loose ends of herself, her life or her view of the world together. The power of her narrative is in that she leaves the question of how women, Dalits, and in particular Dalit women will ever live in an easier world, unanswered.

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