



## Exploring Dalit Women's Quest for Identity in Bama's *Karukku* : A Feministic Study

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### Abstract

*This study delves into the feminist perspective of Bama's famous work Karukku, highlighting the intricate layers of socio-cultural subjugation, economic exploitation, gender discrimination, sexual oppression, and untouchability depicted through her narrative. In this famous autobiography, Bama paints a vivid picture of her life experiences, marked by poverty, destitution, and discrimination, ultimately emerging as a self-reliant, determined, and resilient woman. She boldly rejects the oppressive social and religious institutions that sought to confine her, carving out her own path in a world stacked against her. Bama's narrative is a powerful testimony to her journey as a Tamil Dalit Christian woman, navigating a relentless pursuit of integrity amidst a deeply flawed society. Dalit women, often doubly marginalized due to both gender and caste, find a voice in her work as she articulates the dual oppressions of casteism and patriarchy. By exposing the harsh realities faced by her community, Bama unflinchingly reveals the darkest aspects of human behaviour and the miserable conditions endured by Dalit women. In this text, Bama addresses a thrice-layered marginalization—stemming from her gender, caste, and class—which intensifies the isolation experienced by her community. This paper shines a spotlight on the emergence of a self-discovered, strong-willed, and battle-hardened Dalit woman, representing the most underprivileged group at the base of the hierarchical caste system. She calls upon her oppressed peers to rise against the societal and religious forces that have long sought to oppress and dehumanize them, urging them to reclaim their dignity and assert their rightful place in society.*

**Keywords:** Dalit women, autobiography, subjugation, identity, quest.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Women across the world face subjugation. The case is no different in India where the situation of women especially that of Dalit women is more alarming. "They suffer from triple oppression because of their gender, economical condition and their low caste." (Nageen 1). All Dalit autobiographies conceive the notions of the term Dalit Womanism. The word 'Womanism' was coined by Alice walker in 1983. It is defined as a consciousness that incorporates "racial, cultural, sexual, economic and political considerations". The womanism of Dalit's is entirely based on their lives, experiences and consciousness. They are attempting to speak out their

painful experience as well as theorizing their suffering, anguish in these autobiographies. Dalit Feminism designates the place of Dalit women at both the intersections of gender and caste and feministic movement and Dalit movement. Until 1990s The Dalit women were marginalised within the mainstream feminist writers of India (the metropolitan feminists) who did not discuss the plight of Dalit women and were blind to caste. Dalit women problems had become unnoticeable and unspoken. They exclusively focussed over the issues of upper caste/middle class women. And there was the male dominance in mainstream Dalit movement also. Thus Dalit women were unfairly treated by the society and

even they were reprimanded and dehumanised by their own men. There was a great need to formulate Dalit feminism to give voice to their miserable conditions. And Dalit autobiography became the most potent means for women to speak out freely and articulate their unheard and unspoken voices. This intense suffering gave rise to resistance literature. Amala Dasarathi writes:

*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. (Dasarathi 2017).

## 2.METHODOLOGY

In this study, the researcher will analyse the selected autobiography using a qualitative research approach focused on thematic textual analysis. This means the researcher will closely examine the content of the autobiography, looking at its themes

and how they are expressed through the text. Techniques like close content analysis will be employed to interpret and compare the primary sources the researcher select. Additionally, the researcher will attempt to critique, contextualize, interpret, and appropriate the autobiography to conduct a thorough analysis. Our research will involve closely reading the autobiography itself and consulting secondary sources that discuss similar topics. This analysis will help us gain insights into the autobiography and its broader implications.

## 3.ANALYSIS

Autobiography is “...enjoyed as a literary genre all over the world and its literary significance is recognized by all and sundry.” (Nageen 1). *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 by Lakshmi Holmstrom. It is one of the first autobiographies of a Dalit woman written in Tamil. is an autobiography of Bama’s wounded self, her personal crises and rift between her Christian belief and practice. She gradually grows from innocence to experience and explores the atrocities done on the part of society and religion and thus the process of self-discovery starts out in her. This text shows the inner strength of the Subaltern woman, her inner plight of freedom from ingrained patriarchal and Brahminical values, social and religious institutions and her desire to educate Dalit children. Here Dalit women are not running after power, position and status. They are craving for their identity, self-

recognition and constitutional right. They are opposing to an act of negation of their human identity. Bama and her ideas in this autobiography do not solicit for pity and solace but reckon with inner powers to continue with respect. So far their oppression had been exempted by the Mainstream feministic literature of upper class writers in their writings, now they have started protesting against all that which is inhuman and narrating their tales of suppression. Here Bama fights for her personal autonomy and freedom.

The social and religious order of the society disturbs her and affects her psychology whenever she confronts any oppression, untouchable scene or humiliation. She grows up in a society where there is no regard for Dalit community either, where they are treated as the “other” human flesh. Bama has shown a just picture of women who are brave, courageous and enthusiastic enough to tackle every odd and hard situation. She has brought forth the positive side of Dalit women. Amidst awful situations of quarrel and fighting between Bama’s own community ‘the Parayas’ and ‘the Chaliyas’, Dalit women come forth as saviours and manage to hide their men from the police. Once these men are caught, police would beat them ruthlessly and drag them under bars. They are strictly beleaguered by Police. Police would always support the chaliyas (upper caste) and wander in search of parayas’ door after door. Bama while narrating this incidence says that, “In spite of all these atrocities, it turned out that in two or three houses, the women managed to hide their men and save them.”(39) These women are so strong that they

work in fields in absence of their men and feed their children. In spite of bearing the heavy work as house wives they do not shy away from working outside their houses either, “The Police were furious that the women were smart enough to continue working and taking care of their children even without their men”. (40).

Dalit women go through many hardships and incessant labour to survive. The chapter iv of the autobiography depicts Dalit women as laborious as men. They go to work in the fields, reaping the grain, planting groundnuts and even climbing the steep mountain slopes to reach the jungle. They would work from sunrise to sunset in and outside their homes without any rest. Bama herself would go to work in the fields during school holidays. This proves women as more competent, skilled and self-employed who can design their own world and work independently. Bama has given a prominent tool which serves a dual purpose for women in male dominated society, which is “Education”. It is that instrument which could eradicate and resolve all the ills and iniquities of society. And it is that force which strengthens women and inculcates the power of protest within them. Through education Dalits can progress and get back their lost dignity. And they can also live a self-governed, respectable life and get a similar position in society. Bama affirms the importance of education when she says:

If we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities. So study with care, learn all you can. If you are always ahead in your lessons, people will come to you of

their own accord and attach themselves to you.(18).

Bama stands out an example and proves herself as the role model for all Dalit women and women in general. Education makes Bama an experienced woman who in her whole life manages to protest every injustice and takes decisions on her own bluntly. In her college Bama starts raising voice and protest against Schedule caste reservations which make them little in the eyes of others. One day while announcing the special scholarship for Harijans Bama confronts her teacher in a sudden rage, "At once I told the teacher that I didn't want their special tuition or anything else, and sat down. It stuck me that I would not be rid of this caste business easily, whatever I studied, whatever I went".(22). Although Bama struggles during her whole career of education, goes through poor financial insecurities and social turmoil, she does not hold back her passion of learning and acquiring knowledge. Education makes her enough wise to differentiate between good and bad and chooses her own way of living the self-reliant life. It makes her well known and recognised person in her society and she proves her worth when she scores well in exams. She proves that a whole world can turn friendly when a woman proves her real worth and position. She is the one who shuns off all the material pleasures and absorbs all humiliation and indifference which she gets being poor. But as she achieves a commendable stature in education all those voices muffle off and get dumb. She is accepted and praised by all. While narrating her story she says,

When they saw my marks they realised how alert I was at my work, the teachers and nuns praised me. And a week later, my mother brought me my clothes, my box, and my bedding. After this my classmates began to be friendlier towards me. (75).

Another most important aspect of this autobiography is the „religion“ which Bama adheres and cherishes for seven or eight years and then go away with it after experiencing its confinement, authority, dependence and corruption. This denial to the religious set up and authority bring out the feministic trait of self dependence and self-moving. Bama undergoes a drastic change after experiencing religious institutions. She becomes a nun and enters a convent with the intension of educating her poor Dalit children. But she calls this desire "foolish" as there seems to be no difference between Brahmans and Convents in terms of treating Dalits. Bama narrates her experience as, "After I entered the order, that the convent I entered did not even care to glance at poor children, and only wished to serve the children of the wealthy". (77). Bama looks at nuns as mere slaves and nunnery a web of confinement and jail.

The last chapter of this autobiography turns out to be the most reliable source and representation of women in general whose rights are offended and crushed under the walls of patriarchy. The desire to unshackle the severe treatment of indifference and set off the journey of independence, freedom and individuality becomes a prevalent theme of this chapter. With the extreme

intensity of emotions and vehement cry of freedom in Bama, this text turns its subjective matter to the universal level. After coming out of the shackles of religion Bama says,

[I]t is very hard to return to a life in this world after seven or eight years of hiding away from reality....Because I had been caged within that special world, it was difficult, when I came outside to find a way of dealing with the energy of the real world. The strategy of the convent had been to transform my identity completely.(119-120).

Even Bama's criticism to the religious life indirectly refers to the same kind of enslavement which women experience under their husbands. She not only displays the dreadful side of her religion but brings out the exploitations and discriminatory obliviousness and atrocities of Dalit men which they exercise over their women. Therefore this call of freedom from enslavement is to get rid of both the social discrimination and religious slavery. She feels herself as a bird whose wings were broken, "I am like a bird whose wings were broken".(121). If we delve deep into the whole discourse of Feminism, we reach at certain point of resolution which becomes visible with the advent of economy. We see that all the differences come to an end when a woman begins to earn, when she begins to compete in different fields and when she lets her real person to dive in action. All the differences are over when she acts like a man. And there lies her real world. But it is only possible when you let person free and

gain the experience. And this term gender discrimination is likely to be bridged with the help of money and income. It is said that money can buy miracles. As Money has that power of empowerment, development and building. When you start earning and living by yourself, the concept of difference gets belittled. Bama sings the value and power of money in chapter IV where she says;

Once I finished my B.Ed. and started to work, life became comfortable enough. It was really good to earn enough money every month and go to about independently, and as I pleased... I became aware that if you have a little money in your hands you can gain some authority, and status and prestige...And I realised that those who have the cash to spend can always afford to live in comfort.(76).

In Karukku, the rebellious spirit of the Dalit Paraiya community and Bama herself shines through powerfully. Their relentless hard work and unwavering protest against systemic discrimination illustrate a fierce determination. They do not merely accept the social indifference they face; instead, they confront it head-on, transforming it into a challenge. With resolute courage and a clear mission, they strive tirelessly for equality, seeking to carve out a place of dignity and respect in a society that has long marginalized them. Their journey is marked by a bold refusal to be silenced or subdued, embodying a profound resistance and a passionate quest for justice.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Bama's autobiography *Karukku* stands as a powerful testament to the resilience and struggle of Dalit women in India. Through her narrative, Bama meticulously unravels the layers of oppression faced by Dalit women, addressing not only gender discrimination but also the intersecting forces of caste and class hierarchy. Her journey from poverty and marginalization to self-discovery and empowerment challenges the norms imposed by society and religion, exposing the harsh realities endured by her community. *Karukku* serves as a beacon of Dalit feminism, advocating for the rights and dignity of Dalit women who have long been silenced and marginalized. Bama's narrative courageously confronts the systemic injustices embedded in both mainstream society and religious institutions, highlighting the urgent need for social reform and equality. Her portrayal of Dalit women as resilient, courageous, and determined individuals challenges stereotypes and reshapes the discourse on gender and caste in India. Through her critique of patriarchal structures and her advocacy for education and self-reliance, Bama inspires a new generation of Dalit women to assert their voices and reclaim their agency. Her autobiography not only documents personal struggles but also serves as a call to action, urging society to recognize and dismantle the barriers that perpetuate inequality and discrimination. In essence, *Karukku* is not just a memoir but a manifesto for social justice and feminist resistance, advocating for a society where every individual, regardless of caste or

gender, can live with dignity and equality.

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