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## Exploring Caste and Gender in Bama's *Karukku*

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### Abstract

This paper titled 'Exploring Caste and Gender in Bama's *Karukku*' is discusses on caste, gender and dalit women by examining Bama's *Karukku*'. It is significant to talk about the existential situation of Dalit women and how she was exploited in the name of caste and gender. They are the most deprived community left out the bottom of the hierarchical caste society for centuries. Compared to Dalit men, women suffer more due to their dual disadvantages, first, for being a Dalit and second, for being a woman. They become victims of the patriarchal social order in their families and outside. The Dalit women are separated at three levels- their caste, class and gender position, while the upper caste men sexually exploit them in their workplace, at home they are beaten up by their own men. In this paper mainly focused on how dalit women exploited and treated inhumanly and humiliated by the priests and nun in the church and their men folk and in their society with reference to the Bama's *Karukku*'.

Key Words: Humiliation, Alienation, Subjugation, Inequality, Caste, Gender and Class.

The term caste in India is often regarded as unchangeable and closed system of social stratification. Caste and gender are the central part of the Hindu society. Indian caste system is a curse. The privileged, uplifted, oppressed, marginalized, voiceless are the outcome of the of this caste system. Dalit is a term which is the result

of Indian caste system. The terminology like low born, low caste, untouchable, oppressed, voiceless, marginalized, poor etc, are associated with dalits.

M.N Srinivas talks about the caste and religion to highlight the structural functional aspects and the dynamics of caste system. He introduced the term *Sanskritization* to reflect the social mobility present in Indian society. According to him,

*Sanskritization* is a process by which a 'low' Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently, a 'twice' born caste. It is followed by a claim to a higher position in the caste hierarchy than traditionally concealed to the claimant caste by the local community. Such claims are made over a period of time, sometimes a generation or two before they are concerned (Dhanaraju 110).

Uma Chakravarti raised some questions about status of women in her essay '*Conceptualizing Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India Gender, Caste, Class and State*', such as marriage law, property rights and rights relating to religious practice, normally viewed as indices of status. The limited focus has left a major lacuna in our understanding of social processes which have shaped men, women and social institution in early India (Deshapande 305). She further talks about the subordination of women in India. In Hindu society for the social stratification women and lower caste have been subjected to humiliating conditions of existence. As she writes,

Caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy are the organizing principles of the brahmanical social order and despite their close interconnections neither scholars of the caste system nor feminist scholars have attempted to analyze the relationship between the two. I will explore here the relationship between caste and gender, focusing on what is possibly the central factor for the subordination of the upper-caste women: the need for effective sexual control over such women to maintain not only matrilineal succession ( a requirements of all patriarchal societies) but also caste purity, the institution unique to Hindu society. The purity of women has centrality in brahminical patriarchy, as we shall see, because the purity of caste is contingent upon it ( Deshapande 305).

Ambedkar's idea of caste can be seen in his works such as *Caste in India, Annihilation of Caste and Who Were the Suddara?* In these works, he has critically analyzed the caste system. He defines caste as "an artificial chopping off the population into fixed and defines units, each one prevented from fusing into another through the customs of endogamy"(Dhanaraju 111). According Ambedakar caste is not merely a division of labor. It is a hierarchy in which division of laborer is graded one above the other. Many reformers came to rescue dalits from their pathetic conditions but still more provisions need to be made in their favor for their upliftment. These

downtrodden deprived from the all fundamental needs of life. These people live at the outskirts of the village even though don't have their own home. Dalits are the victims of the aristocratic class since decades.

The literature that is written by the dalit who are expressing their own miserable condition of their life is called dalit literature. It appeared in the 1960s, first in Marathi language and soon started in other regional languages. Some pioneers of the dalit literature are, Madara Chenniah, Dohara Kakkaiyah, Gora, Raidas, Chokha Mela, Jyothiba Phule, Ambedkar and others. However, the present writers of dalit literature have added great assets of literature to the already existing.

Women writers too became a part of dalit literature. In dalit community dalit women are oppressed and subjugated in doubly; first by patriarchy and then as dalit by the aristocratic class of Indian society. As their actual plight male writer could not be writing there for they started to write themselves.

An autobiography is primarily a subjective document, a confessional narrative in which the reader can see an objective structure of experiences. It is true that this structure is informed, particularly in the case of dalit autobiographies, by emotional outpourings as reactions to the suffer indignities and humiliations. It has led to a sort of conventional wisdom among those who study social reality that autobiographies should be taken less seriously than statistical data, because they are not free from the interference of emotion. Generally, the researches of social reality charge the subjective documents like autobiographies with being marred by emotional baggage. The argument is that without the interference of emotion reality can be brightened up by, to use a Cartesian phrase, 'the natural light of reason'. According to this view, both the interpreter's emotions as well as the emotions of the subject to be studied are to be removed for a rational understanding of reality. Another point of view is that emotions outpourings should be taken lightly for the purpose of sociological research for they are mere subjective feelings lodged in human hearts and as such can only be explained in terms of individual psychology. As a result of these views, autobiographical accounts are taken with suspicion as far as efforts to gain knowledge about society and its institutions are concerned. The dalit autobiographies help us to understand the sufferings inflicted on human beings by the fellow human beings under the age-old system of exploitation of man by men.

The work of dalit women writers presents different world of varying shades and concern than their male counterparts. Their poems, autobiographies and novels, though small in output, explore vexed questions of their position in the society, their apprehensions and disquietudes in forceful way. Caste remains an important concern affecting their lives and outlooks and yet it is not ‘the question’ of their existence. The immediate concerns such as domestic violence, sex as instrument of subjugation, menstruation, family relations, sustenance of children and their education etc. become mo0re important. Secondly, inter-personal relations are explored more on the level of individual and ‘the person’ takes precedence over the caste specific denominations. Thirdly, there is more richness in the language as well as in the experience being shared. The emphasis is on continuity and flow of life and not on its dissection into tiny bits to emphasize a preconceived notion about society or life. Out of patriarchy and caste, the former is greater villain and domestic violence is the bane of most of their lives.

Let us begin our examination of the autobiography of Bama who is one of the most important Tamil dalit writers of the dalit fiction in English. She belongs to the established group of dalit Tamil writers writing about Paraiyar community which is one of the major Tamil dalit communities in Tamilnadu. *Karuuku* is her autobiography which traces the story of her own life that grows up in a Paraiyar community, her subsequent decision to enter into convent and consequent disenchantment from church. Interwoven into her experiences of dalithood is her awareness of herself as a dalit woman who is seeking to find a place for herself in a society full of an assortment of handicaps and disabilities. She focused is more diffused as far as dalit feminism is concerned. It falls largely on caste as a crippling reality in Indian society and inter-caste rivalry between different dalit sub-castes. The story is narrated through a feminine voice having marked similarities with the writer herself.

Bama describes the natural beauty of her village in the beginning of *Karukku* doesn’t blind us to the stark reality of casteism waiting beneath the surface of Arcadian lush green fields and mountains. Dalits are working in the fields of Naiker community. As she says, “Most of our people are agricultural laborers. When there is no call for work in the fields, they go up to the wood on the mountains, and make a living by gathering firewood and selling it” (Bama 2). In the monsoon season when the ponds and rivers were full, people could get any amount of fish, yet while the rich ate ayirai, keluti and viraal, the dalits had to be pleased on cheap food. Bama describes, “People sold all sorts of fish like silabi kendai, paaruku kendai, keluti, ayirai, koravi, viral. But in our

own street, we mostly bought and cooked curries out silibi kendai and paambu kendai. Because that was the cheapest we could get. The upper castes bought and ate ayirai, keluti, and viral. But we couldn't to pay that much for what we ate" (Bama 3). The division of a village into upper caste settlement and lower caste settlement is once and for all, you cannot change the street for anything. Further, there is great inequality between the two as far as important Govt. offices and facilities are concerned together with the Naicker School, exclusively for their children. She questions herself that,

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. We only went to their side if we had worked to do there. But they never, ever, come to our parts. The post-office, the panchayat board, the milk-depot, the big shops, the church, and the schools-all these stood in their street. So why would they need to come to ours area? Besides, there was a big school in the Naicker Street which was meant only for the upper caste children" (Bama 7).

Bama becomes aware of the demeaning presence of untouchability among dalits through the spectacle of an elder Paraya carrying a bundle of 'vadai' by its string and giving it to a Naikar. As Bama writes,

How could they believe that it was disgusting if a Paraya held that package in his hands, even though the vadai had been wrapped first in banana leaf, and then parceled in paper? I felt so provoked and angry that I wanted to go and touch those wretched vadai myself, straightway. Why should we have to fetch and carry for those people, I wondered. Such an important elder of ours goes off meekly to the shops to fetch snacks and hands them over reverently, bowing and shrinking, to this fellow who just sits there and stuffs them into his mouth (Bama 15).

They practice of handing over the leftover or pouring water in the cupped hands without touching them gives the writer further glimpse into this callous practice.

Bama's brother advised her study hard if she wants overcome the indignities heaped by caste system on dalits. As he says,

Because we are born into the Paray jati, we are never given any honor 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 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 (Bama 18).

Dalit children face discrimination in every field. Whenever something wrong happened in the school, dalit children were invariably blamed for it. Bama too had had bitter experience of it when she accused of stealing a

coconut and all her protests fall on deaf ears. Even the priest, whom she appeals for help, is not above caste prejudices and tells her honestly that, “after all, you are from Cheri. You might have done it. You must have done it” (Bama 19). Despite all such handicaps, she finds education as the sole means to overcome caste affliction and a way to progress and she finished her B.Ed. degree there also same kind of discrimination. Bama writes,

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. And I completed whatever I took up, successfully. So both teachers and students showed me certain affection, respect. In this way, because of my education alone I managed to survive among those who spoke the language of caste differences and discrimination (Bama 22).

This emphasis on education as a means of upliftment is a recurrent theme in most of dalit works. Upper caste women are as much exploitative and prejudiced against dalit women as their male counterparts. These women are vocal partners in exploitation in the name of the caste and do not share any clannish sisterhood with dalit women. The Warden Sister had the habit of blaming dalit children for eating too much and thus becoming fattish when they are in the hostel,

The Warden-Sister of our hostel could not abide low-caste or poor children. She'd get hold of us and scold us for no rhyme or reason. If a girl tended to be on the plump side, she'd get it even more. 'These people get nothing to eat at home; they come here and they grow fat,' she would say publicly. When we returned to the school after the holidays, she would say, 'Look at the Cheri children! When they stay here, they eat their fill and look as around as potatoes. But look at the state in which they come back home- just skin and bone!' it was really embarrassing. We too paid our fees like everyone else, for our food, for this and that, yet we had to listen to all this as well (Bama 20).

While traveling in bus, the upper caste women on learning about the caste of dalit women either give up the seat or ask them to move. When the nun at the school comes to know that the narrator was a Parayar, she is out rightly shocked.

The decision to enter into Convent by Bama leads her life into a new awareness about the caste prejudice prevalent in church and in its allied institutions. Her resolution to take holy orders is prompted by her desire to help dalit children. She writes,

The children in my class and all the school children liked me. Many of the children there were Dalits themselves. So I happy teaching the children and arguing with the nuns. I enjoyed standing up to authorities and teaching with some skill and success...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 the people who are humiliated so much and kind under such strict control”(Bama 23).

But soon she discovers to her chagrin that the atmosphere in convent was stifling for her. The school, where she is assigned to teach after taking orders as nun, is full of students from wealthy backgrounds, thus defeating the very purpose of serving the poor and destitute. All the lowly jobs like “sweeping the premises, swabbing and washing the classrooms, and cleaning out the lavatories” (Bama 24) are done by dalits only. Not only is this, during discussing in the convent, the dalits talked about insultingly, “According to their notions, low caste people are all degraded in every way. They think we have no normal discipline nor cleanliness nor culture. They think that can never be changed. To aid us is like aiding cobras” (Bama 25). The narrator finds it revolting that dalits were made to do menial jobs for nuns. The exploitative and unjust power structure within the convent is just an imitation of the caste system in outer society where the nuns play the roles of upper caste people.

Dalit women have to work tirelessly to earn a living and bring up the children. Bama presents a poignant picture of their lives thoughts example of his patti who works from morning till late in the night. As she writes,

Everybody said that my Paatti a true and proper servant. She worked as a laborer to a Naicker family, but she was also a Kotthaal—she hired laborers for them, brought them to work regularly, supervised them, and made sure they received their wages. Except for Sunday, Pusai before daylight on Sunday, and then run to work. She’d rise before cock-crow at two or three in the morning, draw water, see to the household chores, walk a long distance to the Naikar’s house, work till sunset and then come home in the dark and cook a little gruel for herself ( Bama 49).

She went to work every single day. Sometimes, if the Naicker insisted, she would rush through. Though the narrator here doesn’t out rightly mention the unequal distribution of work between dalit men and women, she points out, as if in afterthought, “as soon as children grew up to be ten or twelve years of age, they’d go and find some way of making money. Until that time, they’d go about carrying their younger siblings on their hips. They’d even gather a few twigs and sticks, and learn to boil a little gruel. It was always the girl children who had to look after all the chores at home” (Bama 52). The exclusive emphasis on back-breaking work had done by women amply show narrator’s intention. Though the outdoor work is shared equally by dalit men and women, the household work is left entirely to women who, together with their work in fields and factories, had to take care

of children and food also. With it, there is another inequality in terms of payment for the same kind of labor. While men received more wages, women had to be content with lesser salary.

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