



# Dalit Autobiography: Portrayal of Caste Discrimination in Bama's Karukku

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## Abstract:

Dalit literature is known for its revolt and struggle of lower caste against the high class people. Dalit women are especially doubly exploited. The importance of Bama in Tamil Dalit literature is not difficult to underscore for in its short history she has a place of her own. Her Karukku has been regarded as an epoch making book in Dalit writing, Bama's focus changed from invoking Dalit victimhood towards focusing on the interrelationship between caste and patriarchy in her writings. Unlike the victimhood articulated subjectively in Karukku. This paper gives overview of Tamil Dalit autobiography and importance and it explores the different phase's women struggle in the society and problems of caste exploitation with reference to dalit women Bama's Karukku.

**Key words:** Autobiography, Dalit Women, Dalit Christian, Caste exploitation, oppression.

## Introduction:

The Tamil Dalit writers to take to recording their experimental reality in autobiographical or fictional mode that Dalit managed to carve its own space in the Tamil literary space. The romanticized, sentimentalized Dalits of Poomani and Daniel find an authentic voice and affirmative presence in the writings of Sivakami, Edayavendan, Unjai Rajan Abimani, Bama, Anbadavan, Gunasekaran, Imaiyan, and others.

The first Dalit novel in Tamil written by a Sivakami was published in 1989. The novel Pazhiyana Kazidalum, discuss the issue of Dalit leadership and point out pitfalls inherent in an imitative model wherein Dalit leaders duplicate corruption and manipulative politics prevalent among empowered upper-caste politician. The novel advocates the need for an organized educated Dalit youth that stands untied by ideological commitment and sincerity of action towards empowerment of Dalits.

Sivakami's novel prepared the ground for a sustained critique of dramatic violence and abuse of Dalit women at home by Dalit men, father, brother, son's father-in-law brother-in-law, apart from sexual and

occupational harassment faced by Dalit women outside their homes at the hands of upper-caste men and the police.

In her second novel 'Aanadayee'(1992) Sivakami focuses on violent exploitation of women's body and points out how the family as institution is embedded in patriarchal, oppressive system that is blatantly unjust to women. Dalit women's sexually is violently contained and repressed Sivakami was one of the earliest Tamil Dalit women writers to draw attention to the dual oppression of Dalit women on account of their gender and caste at the hands of the upper caste men as well as Dalit men.

Among the Dalit women writing in India Bama's name foremost. Dalit woman's narrative finds a naïve and profound structuring in Bama's Karukku. The work radically subverts the codes and conversation of the male Dalit narrative thought its loose standard plots, volatile time frame, fragmented narration anonymous characters and use of the vernacular. Bama consciously break the generic structure of regular autobiography to make it suitable for expressing her sensibility as a gendered subaltern.

Karukku is the first autobiography published in 1992 and translated into English in 2000 by Lakshmi Holmstrom to appear for Dalit writing. Tamil has not produced any autobiographies as seen in Marathi. It is an unusual autobiography that has grown out of specific moments a personal crisis that drives the author to understand the meaning of being a Christian Dalit woman. The writing is in first-person narrative in which the events of the narrator's life are not arranged in a chronological order. Karukku deals with the life of a Dalit woman and in the process reveals the Casteism of an Indian village.

Bama's Sangathi (1994) Dalit women's dual oppression on account of gender caste oppression more specifically. The gendered subaltern's condition of unfold material misery and oppression could only be historicized through representative subjects. In this works the description of misery and historic experience of injustice of caste which dehumanizes them are present throughout the narration.

In the third work Vanmam (2002), inter-caste strife among Dalits is discussed and strategies are debated to resolve the same and raise an important aspect of Dalit life that has been recognized and acknowledged in Dalit writings Tamil and Dalit studies at large.

K A Gunasekaran's The Scar or Vadu (2004) is an autobiography by that master storyteller and prolific writer, once the director of International Institute of Tamil studies, Gunasekaran's award-winning Tamil novel Vadu translated into English by V Kadambari The Scar (2009) has documented the life customs, cultures festivals as well as their poverty, struggles, deprivation, oppression and exploitation by non-tribal or non-Dalit.

### **Dalit autobiography: Bama's Karukku**

Dalit women writers are a few in numbers. Among the Dalit women writers, Bama's contribution to Dalit Literature is significant in idea and volume. Her creative pen makes her one of the most generally translated Indian Tamil writers working in home-grown languages today. Her novels and short stories are regularly translated into English, French, and regional languages like Kannada and Telugu. She has grown to be popular among the readers both in India and abroad. Her narrative art certifies an outstanding place in the history of modern Indian writing in English. Her creative energy propels her artistic expression to the harsh realities of poverty and financial, political, and social exploitations of the present-day society. Dalit women writers share the same issues with Black women

writers from around the world who had also been struggling against human rights violations like racism, humiliation, discrimination, exploitation and gender oppression.

Christened as Faustina Mary Fathima Rani, Bama belongs to one of the southern villages of Tamilnadu namely, Pudupatti near Madurai. She was born in the year 1958, and she created a pseudonym Bama for her literary career. Her father, Susai Raj, was an Indian Army man and Sebasthiamma was her mother. Her ancestors were converted into Christianity in the eighteenth century. Her previous generations were servants in the houses of the upper caste Hindus. She completed her schooling in her village and pursued her collegiate education in St.Mary's college, Tuthukkudi. After completing B.Ed, she worked as a teacher.

She desired to serve her Dalit children and so she decided to propel the despondent souls from the bottom layer of the society. She has embraced the sisterhood and dreamt of uplifting the Dalit girl children. Unfortunately, she was appointed in a convent in North India. Dissatisfied and unfulfilled, Bama held on to her nun hood for only seven years. To have a wholehearted captivation in her approach as a social activist, she even abandoned her religious order. So she has chosen to extract the institute in condemnation against the convent for meting out discrimination to the Dalit Christians. For several years, she had been in disappointment and disillusionment Bama has slowly given out such weakening thoughts and resumed achieving will power to secure herself and her people. Now she regained her strength positively and for that, she had been indebted to Rev. Fr. Mark S. And Fr.M. Jeyaraj who motivated her to write and instilled strength in her for contributing new literary works. At present, she is working as a school teacher at Uthiramerur, near Kanchipuram.

She comes forward from all struggles and registers the ordeals of Dalit men and women in her literary narratives. Her powerful creative work brought her literary recognition in the form of many awards in India and abroad. As a writer, she is on record saying that her dedications occupy documenting the past and the continuing struggles of the Dalit people. Her belief lies clearly in a single word 'battle' against humiliation and discrimination. A humble attempt is made by the researcher to make a cult out of Bama. Behind every activity, there creeps around an embryonic theory. The critical theories or approaches which emphasize this research activity are sociological, feministic, psychological and realistic. In all her writings she portrays the socially marginalized Dalits, sexually exploited women, and economically underprivileged. Probably no other social group has been subjected to such an unedifying show of human humiliation and corruption as the cursed women.

According to Bama, she perceives female empowerment as a resource to well-built end, the advancement of society in common. So while gender is not a secluded issue, it is the crucial mode of tyranny suffered by women even as it is the basis of their potential emancipation. In her novels, Bama portrays the image of women against the background of constraints and this is what created her writings feminist in nature.

Bama holds her pen to write intelligently on the burning issues and pierce the collective conscience of her people. For this realist, writer pen has never been an ornament symptomatic of a writer's glorious mind. It has always been a burning weapon, hanging to face darkness, hypocrisy, fraudulent and defend those who have been muted. Her writings indicate the social issues related to the downtrodden and she delineates the peoples own voices, their songs, anecdotes that she has harshly experienced in her life. It is an inscription which employs itself to go ahead of itself, consistently carrying the reader to a blazing core, where an exploited Dalit soul has existed. The readers would feel ashamed of themselves and whether it would happen to the residents of the same globe as

them. The most uncomfortable truth is that they are real-life events of our recent history. She portrays the reality of south India as an unendurable reality of South India.

Bama depicts a wide range of topics like –discrimination against Dalit, women, atrocity on poor Paraiyars and Pallars, police atrocities, sexual harassment, effort for their self-respect, and dignity, etc., As a writer, she dedicates her experiences in documenting the past and the present struggles of the Dalit people. She is a writer who truly depicts what she experiences.

In order to highlight Bama's spirited crusade against the societal inequality meted out to the economically marginalized, politically fragile, and the less privileged within society the researcher has selected the following translated works of Bama; Karukku and Sangati are translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom and Vanmam is translated by Malini Seshsatri.

Bama has four novels to her credit, including three short stories namely, Kisumbukkaran (1996), Oru Thathavum Erumayam (2004) and Kondattam (2006). Her autobiographical work Karukku was published in 1992 and while her two novels Sangati and Vanmam were published in 1994 and 2002 respectively. They were originally written in Tamil. All her works have been translated into English and other regional languages. Karukku and Sangati have been translated into English, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam. The French translations of Sangati have won her international readership. Vanmam and Kusumbukkaran are translated into English. Her latest novel Manushi, the second part of Karukku, was published in 2013.

### **Caste Discrimination:**

Caste hierarchy takes an ugly turn when it enters the church in India is a more recent phenomenon when compared to America and other countries. In India, many Dalits converted to Christianity to escape the Varna-based caste discrimination. However, even after conversion, Churches carry out the cultural values and caste practices of Hindus. This leads to discrimination in the church.

The presence of caste discrimination is more evident with practitioners of the Roman Catholic faith and they raise the issues of the identity crisis within the church. The Dalit Christian face subjugation in many forms. In Tamilnadu, their residences are situated away from the higher caste Christians.

In Kerala, they are landless labourers who work for the Syrian Christian. There is no inter caste marriage among there Christian as rice Christian. The upper caste converts think that the Dalit converts to Christianity. To overcome economic deprivation and untouchability. It cannot be denied that Dalits converted to Christianity to gain better acceptance in society. The contemporary situation exposes that in many villages the Dalit Christian live separately worship in different church buildings and have separate cemeteries.

The Dalit Christian have lost the constitutional safeguards means for the scheduled caste and scheduled tribes. As S M Michacle remarks "In fact, a Dalit Christian today is thrice discriminated against by the state, by the church, and by the non-Dalit Christian" He argues that for a Dalit Christian the Dalit identity overshadows the Christian identity.

If any work is available in the upper caste people's house, the lower caste people have to go there and find out. Those upper caste people never entered the lower caste people place because they thought they are touchable. These upper caste people have marginalized the Dalit people. All the facilities available only in upper caste people street not in the lower caste. The children are always used the bare-bottomed both boys and girls. In water lap, people are always fighting for the water, which shows the pity of the poor people.

The elder went straight up to the Naicker bowed low and extended the pack towards him cupping the hand that held the string within the other hand” (p 15).

When Bama was studying the third standard in elementary school. She never heard “Untouchability” when she entered the school. She felt and experienced one day Bama had seen Naicker at the house when all Bama’s neighbors were doing hard works. Naicker was sitting in his chair an elder person who belonged to Bama’s street is considered as respect one. When he had been carrying tea and Vadai or bhajji from the tea stall to the Naicker house. The person has bent himself and gave tea and vadai to Naicker, Bama laughed herself.

“Naicker women would pour out the water from the height of four feet. While paapti and others received and drank it with cupped hands help to their mouths (P 16).”

Bama said this incident to her elder brother with comic details, her brother is an MA graduate, and her brother replied that they belong to low caste paraya community and they belong in upper caste, if they touch they would pollute some important elders of Bema’s street goes work at Nicker’s house, the upper caste people used to give some old food and other eatable items to them, they get it and bring it their one day Bama went with grandmother to the Naicker’s house.

Where Bama’ Grandmother does all the hard works after Nicker women have given water to her grandmother is an abnormal way. Bam felt terrible to watch it. She thought that her grandmother bought the foods from Nicker’s house, which are not unwanted. But later she has realized all the things are unwanted. But later she has realized that all the unwanted. So the Nicker woman has given all these things to Bama grandmother. When Bama asked her grandmother replies to bam don’t say like that they are superior to us, they are upper caste people and we are lower caste.

“There people were Maharajas who feed us our rice without them how will we survive?” (P17)

If any wrong incident happens in school or class. The scope always goes to Cheri children about the three-quarter of the children in the school who were built on Nadar Street. They gave all kinds of menial work. We are carrying the water for teacher’s house and school when bam was studying the seventh standard after the end of the class everybody evening she used to ply with her relative students one day they are playing on the big Neem tree after they play another game student-run fast towards the coconut everyone touch the coconut. When Bama’s turns she also touched the coconut which felt down.

All children were frightened everyone said that Bama had plucked the coconut (P.19)

The next day at the assembly time the school headmaster has called Bama and scolded her that she shown her true nature of Paraya, you only climbed the tree and plucked the coconut as he does not allow Bam to enter the classroom. At the time there was a fight between Chaaliyar caste and paraya. The headmaster belongs to the Chaaliyar caste. When one of Bama school teacher lived at Bama Street. She advised Bama to get a letter from the church pries the headmaster allow you to enter the class. But the priest reaction also different after all you are from Cherri Street. Resolutely you have done it finally priest wrote a letter to the headmaster for permission, headmaster allowed Bama to enter the class he used to hard word words on her community.

After the completion of her secondary education, she joined the ninth standard at neighboring towns where she was staying in hostel. There was holiday time Bama used to travel town bus when the Naicker woman was sitting beside Bama. When she asked Bama’s name and native place. Again the Naicker woman asked in that

village which street Bama belongs. Bama says that she is living in Cheri Street. Suddenly Naicker women moved to another place.

Bama joined as a Mathematics teacher in one of the schools. In that school, a man has asked Bama was a Nadar? After completion of B.Ed. when Bama replied herself as a Parayar. The Nun has shown different expressions at her face even now if Bam remembers she laughs, Majority of the students are Dalits. The showed great affection for Bama. She takes classes in a good way. Most of the Nuns are Telugu people they won't take of Dalit students they oppressed the Dalit students. So Bama decided herself to become Nun then only can serve for the Dalit students finally Bama has resigned the teaching post and entered religious order.

Caste discrimination in the Catholic Church became clear to Bama on joining the convent she decided to become a nun to serve the oppressed. The wealthy lifestyle of the convent disturbed her. The true essence of her vocation was in renouncing material pleasure and embracing simple living. After leaving the job of a teacher Bama joined the order with three vows (P122) she realized much earlier in her life that if you are born into a low caste every moment of your life is moment of struggle (P 27) this is further proven during her training period. During the last leg of training to become Nuns a sister told everyone 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).

The lifestyle at the convent was not like anything she had in her village Bama could not help but wonder why the nuns and priest who were chosen to serve the oppressed and the needy be prejudiced. When she started work again as a teacher after become full-fledged Nun she had to teach students from wealthy families she noticed that in the school Dalit "were looking after all jobs like sweeping the premises swabbing and washing classrooms and cleaning out lavatories" (25) The spark of resistance in her was fanned on seeing the Dalits do menial jobs and treated in degrading manner. The young and old alike kept their heads down and obeyed the sisters, self-respect, and pride was being sacrificed in every act of enduring subjugation.

Bama desperate to leave the convent due to disillusionment. It was not without the skepticism that she described to go back she writes "I have entirely lost faith in all the talk of service to the poor within the convent (P 121).

She was excessively worried about her social security as she would remain unemployed until she finds a prospective employer. The convent is a symbol of the hollow promises of the church. There is no human touch in the service imparted to the society. The rules in the convent damaged her consciousness and yearned for a time when she will be able to soar with the wingspread in the sky of freedom. The wounds received by Bama will take time to heal. She finds it largely ironic that the nuns considered the Dalit are so devout when it comes to religious matters every festival and ritual is observed with devotion and gaiety. Bama recollects various instances of religious celebration in her childhood where the village exhibits their faith. The disastrous phase of her life ended when the sister released her from the three vows.

In Karukku "Bama portrayed the oppression of Dalit life, How they are discriminated by the upper caste People, even Bama also discriminated in many places. Bama finally she didn't give solution for these problems in her autobiography "Karukku" Bama showed her anger through her work, she doesn't protest against in the public place, by caste discrimination Bama failed in society.

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