



AN ANALYSIS OF CASTE AND GENDER IN BAMA'S KARUKKU

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Abstract

The research paper is titled "An Analysis of Caste and Gender" about Bama's "Karukku" novel. The present situation of Dalit women and their exploitation in the name of gender and caste bears utmost importance and it needs attention as women in reality are the most deprived of all the communities in the scenario of our hierarchical society for centuries. The sufferings of Dalit women are extensive as it is dually affecting them, one from the perspective of being a Dalit and a woman. The patriarchal system of society which is being followed in the families makes the women easy prey for exploitation. The sexual assault of Dalit women at their workplace and ill-treatment by their husbands make their condition pathetic. An attempt to throw some light on the exploitation of Dalit women by the priests of the church and the nun and their humiliation by their people in the society has been made by the researcher, about Bama's "Karukku".

Key Words: - Caste, Inequality, Exploitation, Gender and Humiliation

Introduction

An unchangeable and closed system in our societal stratification can be termed a caste. In Hindu society, caste and gender are regarded as indispensable parts and as an icing on the cake, our Indian caste system is an evil eye that gives birth to privileged and uplifted on the one hand and marginalized, oppressed, and voiceless on the other hand. Our Indian caste system has given birth to Dalit which is associated with voiceless, untouchable, low caste, oppressed, etc.

The dynamics and structure of caste and religion are highlighted by M.N. Srinivas in his work.

Some questions about women's status with the law of marriage, property rights, and the right to practice one religion have been highlighted by Uma Chakravarti in her works. She further asserted



about subordinate rights of women in India and emphasized that due to the limited focus on women's rights, a major lacuna in the understanding of societal processes has arisen which has given rise to the shape of women, men, and societal institutions of India during the early period. (Deshpande, 305). Women have been subjected to humiliating conditions in our Indian society.

The works like *Caste in India*, *Annihilation of Caste* and *who were the Shudras?* Gives a glimpse of Ambedkar's side as regarding caste system. A critical analysis of the caste system has been made by Ambedkar through his works. In his works caste can be defined as an artificial chopping off of the population into fixed and definite units, each one prevented from fusing into another through the system of endogamy (Dhanaraju, 111). The caste cannot be termed merely a division of labour in the words of Ambedkar but it can be described as a hierarchical position in which one is graded over the other. According to Ambedkar, many efforts to rescue Dalits from their pathetic condition have been made by many reformers but more efforts are desirable for their upliftment as Dalits are deprived of their basic needs of life. These types of people are bound to live on the village outskirts as they do not have their shelter and can be said to be the victims of atrocities of high-class society since independence.

The literature that is written by Dalits themselves depicting their miserable condition is known as Dalit literature. It was initiated in the Marathi language in 1960 and simultaneously spread its roots in other regional languages. Some prominent Dalit writers include Dohara Kakkaiah, Gora, Chokha Mela, Madara Chennaiah, Ambedkar, Jyotiba Phule, and others. However, the current day writers have also put up their valuable inputs to the existing literature.

The contribution of women Dalit writers to Dalit literature is commendable. The Dalit women dually face oppression in the Dalit community- firstly by patriarchy and secondly by aristocratic society. The women Dalit writers have initiated the process of writing literature because their plight was overlooked by male Dalit writers.

An Autobiography can be regarded as a significant mode of literature in the 20th century. The style of autobiography should be made adaptable as it needs elaborations for expressing the life experiences of the subject accurately and introspectively. This structure is desirable in Dalit autobiographies as they are filled with emotional outpourings due to reactions to the humiliations and



indignities. However, the autobiographical contents are viewed with suspicion as these are subjective documents and are not based on statistical data and that's why they can't be considered authentic for rational understanding. As a result of this, the autobiographical accounts are suspiciously taken as far as their contribution towards society and institutions are concerned. Further, the Dalit autobiographies depict the sufferings faced by human beings which are inflicted upon them by fellow human beings under the pattern of an age-old system of exploitation. A variety of shades and concerns are presented by Dalit women writers in comparison to their male writers. The women's position in society and their apprehensions are depicted in their novels, poems, and autobiographies though they are small in their output. Their works have a major focus on caste which is affecting their lives and outlook and yet it cannot be regarded as a question of their existence. The issues that affect them most are domestic violence, their family relations, children-their education and upbringing, domination of sex, etc. Out of the two, patriarchy and domestic violence, the latter has become the pain of life for most of them.

Bana is a name in the list of Tamil Dalit writers who have written Dalit fiction in English and she is one among them who has written about the Pariyar community, which is regarded as one of the prominent communities of Dalits in Tamil Nadu. Karukku, an autobiography of Bama, seems to be tracing her own life in the Pariyar community, her decision to get into the convent, and consequently her disillusionment from the church. Being interwoven in her Dalithood experiences, she identifies herself as a Dalit woman who is fighting to locate her place in a society full of handicapped and disabled persons. The narration of the story is done from the point of view of a feminine voice that has been similar to the writer herself. The natural beauty of the village has been described by Bana in the beginning but it doesn't blind us to the reality that casteism was prevailing under the surface of lush green fields and mountains of Arcadia. The fields of the Naicker community are worked upon by the Dalits. As per her view, when the ponds and rivers are flooded with water in the monsoon season, it is difficult for a common man to catch fish but even then the rich ate Ayarai, Viraal, and Keluti fishes. The Dalit had to be satisfied with cheap food. Bama elaborates, "*People sold all sorts of fish like silabikendai, paarukukendai keluti, ayirai, koravi, viral. But in our own street, we mostly bought and cooked curries out silibikendai and paambukendai. 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 street of society cannot be changed for anything even after the division of village into upper caste and lower caste. As far as the availability of important Government offices and amenities along with the availability of Naicker School is concerned, a great inequality can be seen between lower caste and upper caste. As per Bama

"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 stay edinours. 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 the stood in their street. So why would they need to come to our area? Besides, there was a big school in the Naicker Street which was meant only for the upper caste children"(Bama 7)

The sting of untouchability being faced by Dalits can be viewed from the perspective of elder, Paraya holding a bundle of vadai by string and handing it over to Naicker. As written by Bama,

How could they believe that it was disgusting if a Paraya held that package in his hands, even though firstly the vadai had been wrapped in banana leaf and then parceled in paper? I felt so exasperate and got irritated that I wished to go and touch those deplorable vadai myself, straightway. Why are we required to fetch and carry for those people, I got surprised. 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 (Bama15). The glimpse of the callous practice of untouchability can be seen through the practice of handing the leftover food or pouring water in the cupped hands of Dalits without being touched.

Bama has been advised by her brother to study in order to remove the indignities generated by casteism on the Dalits. As said by her *Because we have taken birth into the Parayjati, we are never been given any respect or dignity. We are disposed of all that. But if we study and make progress, we can remove the so 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).*



The discrimination has been faced by Dalit children in every field of life. The Dalit children were blamed for anything wrong that happened in school. This bitter experience was faced by Bama herself when she was charged of stealing a coconut and the deaf ears didn't pay any heed to her protest. She was not even helped by the priests as they were chained in caste prejudice and told her that *"after all, you from cheri. You might have done it"* (Bama 19). Bama realized that education is the only means through which she can overcome these caste afflictions and can progress in life. She had completed her B.Ed. and there also she has faced discrimination. Bama describes

Yet, as I was educated and I had the potential, I have the courage to speak up for myself; I didn't pay any heed about caste. Whatever the situation, I held my head high. And I finish the task whatever I took charge of, successfully. Soboth teachers and students showed me affection and respect. In this way, because of my education alone I managed to survive among those who spoke the language of caste differences and discrimination (Bama22).

In most of her Dalit works, an emphasis on education has been laid as a means of upliftment. In comparison to their male counterparts, the upper caste female are more exploitative and are having very prejudiced behaviour. These upper caste women are vocally more aggressive in exploiting in the name of caste and do not believe in any type of sisterhood bond with Dalit women. Even the warden sister blamed the Dalit children that they eat too much and are becoming fatty when they stay in hostel.

The Warden-Sister of the hostel could not comply with lower caste children or the poor children. She would catch us and rebuke us for none of our fault. She'd get it even more, if a girl turned out to be chubby. 'These people get nothing to eat at home; they come here and they grow fat,' she publicly announces this. 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 humiliating. 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).

The upper caste women neither offer seat to Dalit women while travelling in bus. On knowing that the narrator was a Parayar, the nun of the school was shocked. The life of Bama enters into the stream of new awareness about the prejudices of caste that were prevalent in church and its



associated institutions when she decided to enter convent. Her desire to help Dalit children prompted her to take her resolution to undertake holy orders.

The children in my class and all the school children liked me. Some of the children there were Dalits themselves. I enjoyed teaching the kids and also having arguments with the nuns. I enjoyed standing up to authorities and teaching with some skill and success...it struck me over whelming that the sinus 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 Bama got annoyed at the suffocating atmosphere of the convent. She was assigned the duty of teaching the students who belonged to well to do families and it defeated her purpose of serving the poor and marginalized. All the jobs of low-level class like “sweeping the premises, swabbing and washing the classrooms and cleaning out the lavatories (Bama 24) are done by Dalits only. Not only this, the Dalits expressed the aggrieves “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 pathetic to reveal that all the lowly jobs were made to be performed by Dalits for nuns. The unjust and exploitative structure of power of the convent is merely a reflection of casteism in outside society, where role of upper caste people has been played by the nuns. The Dalit women need to work hard tirelessly for earning their living in order to bring up and look after their children. The touching picture of the lives of Dalit women has been presented by Bama by giving the exemplification of herpaatti who used to work from dawn till late night. As written by her

Everybody said that my Paatti was an authentic and precise servant. She not only worked as a labourer to a Naicker family, but shealso worked as a Kotthaal—shehired labourers for the family, made them work regularly, had proper supervision and also ensure that they receive their wages. She'd rise before cock-crow at two or three in the morning, draw water, see to the household chores, walk along distance to the Naicker's house, work till sunset and then come home in the dark and cook a little gruel for herself (Bama 49).



The poor paatti was working endlessly every single day without any break. Though the inequality in the distribution of work between Dalit men and Dalit women was not mentioned by the narrator but she points out that *“as soon as children grew upto be tenor 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 narrator emphasized the back-breaking work being done by the women. Though the Dalit women share the burden of outdoor work with Dalit men but they are required to do the household tasks themselves alone without any help from their male counterparts. Along with this an inequality of pay between male and female Dalit workers is also visible. As a result, the female workers had to contend with lesser wages while the males receive more wages in comparison.

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