

Identity Crisis and Dalit Literature: A Study of Bama's Karukku.

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Abstract:

Search for self, a sense of recognizing identity, is overtly seen in Dalit literature especially in autobiographies by Dalit writers. Dalit people have been exploited for many years at every level by upper caste people. Though the constitution of India provides the right to equality to all castes, yet the subordinate class people are deprived of their rights. The lower caste people victims of the hegemonic practices; motivated by caste and gender based social system, searched for their existence in this Dalit literature. As Indu B.C. in an article "Silence Speaks: A study of Bama's Karukku" defines Dalit literature:

Dalit literature is a writing that parallels the revolutionary movement spear headed by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar with a view to bring about psychosocial transformations in the minds of the oppressed. Dalit literature, a strong oppositional voice only raises important question but also narrate the ability of the people at the margins to fight against all odds and injustices. (The Criterion 1)

Key Words: Dalit, identity, upper caste, gender, marginalized, untouchability.

Introduction:

Dalit literature was mainly written in Marathi, Tamil and Kannada languages. Gyaneshwar, Chakradhar and Mukundraj were the earliest Marathi writers and later on saints like Namdev, Eknath, Ramdas, and Tukaram sang in the devotion of God but these writers kept intact the discriminatory system of Vedas, Smriti, Ramayana, and Mahabharata. These Marathi writers didn't reflect the true image of casteism rather than they glorified only God. It was after 1960 that this literature gained a new direction and became popular. As Tarakateertha Joshi says:

Dalit literature is that literature which in an artistic manner shows the agony of the Dalits, their painful perplexity, family deterioration, poverty, humiliation, and impoverished condition. (Dalit literature: Nature and Role 75)

Bama's Karukku, an autobiography, depicts that Dalit people are turn down to sub-human beings. They continued to face discrimination and social oppression, leading to a lack of relief; despite converting to Christianity. She herself faced the hypocrisy of the privileged caste society which makes her autobiography more real and powerful. Bama's Karukku has set a innovative approach in Tamil Dalit fiction and literature. Bama, a Dalit woman, a former Christian nun and now a school teacher tells about her experiences, her identity and her marginalized position in the society influenced by her gender, class and religious location. She describes about the oppression that operates in the lives of Dalits, and more specifically in the lives of Dalit women. Writings from the margins and about the marginalized is an attempt to empower Dalit people.

Karukku means leaves of Palm tree, that, with their serrated edges on both sides, are like double-edged swords. The author used a appropriate pun, and the Tamil word Karukku, containing the word Karu, embryo or seed, also means freshness. This book was written as a means of healing her wounds and pain, and Bama felt a freshness by reflecting reality in the book Karukku. It was done by its one edge, and the other edge inspired many Dalit people to raise their voice against their oppression. So, it became a symbol of two-edged sword. As Bama herself says in 'Ten years Later,' "that book was written as a means of healing my inward wounds; I had no other motive" (Karukku IX).

Karukku presents a firsthand account of the Dalits in Tamil Nadu. They are illiterate people. Due to lack of education, they are not aware to their suppressed identity. They work as bonded labourers and are very poor. They are the worst victims in the Hindu caste system. Some converted themselves into Christianity but they could not get equality and just treatment by the Christians. Karukku describes a lack of harmony among the people of different Dalit sub-

castes. When a communal fight between the Chaaliyar and Paraiyar castes takes place, the Pallars, another sub-caste, were found to be in favour of the Chaliyar. Pallar boys told the police about the hiding place of the Paraiyar people. Pallars are victims of the social discrimination, but they are unaware about their inhuman existence. Bama in this book makes an attempt to make Dalit people aware by saying that they should know the truth and uplift themselves. She has devoted her life to improve the pathetic condition of the Dalit community and has focused on the importance of education for the liberation of the Dalits.

In Bama's story, the promise of freedom and dignity as an Indian is betrayed. The version of her betrayal in the church and convent is the more prevalent one. Karukku describes a young girl's spiritual development as a Catholic and her discovery of her Dalit identity. Religious celebrations that became a part of the annual cycle of crops and seasons shaped her life even in that spiritual realm. She later talked about how Dalits were imprisoned as untouchables in the religious and social spheres. Bama experienced unpleasant encounters in her life. In the book's introduction, she herself shares her thoughts and sentiments toward Karukku, which we can see and observe below:

The driving forces that shaped this book are many: events that occurred during many stages of my life, cutting me like Karukku and making me bleed; unjust social structures that plunged me into ignorance and left me trapped and suffocating; my own desperate urge to break, throw away, and destroy these bonds; and when the chains were shattered into fragments, the blood that was split all these taken together. (Karukku XXIII)

In Karukku, Bama vehemently criticizes the practice of untouchability in the Roman catholic churches in particular and the casteism in Indian society in general. Her Dalit consciousness is reflected in the words she speaks. Use of colloquial, Tamil Dalit language instead of using standard/ mainstream Tamil language shows her faith in the strength of Dalit culture and language. The years of pains and sufferings have the power to encourage Dalits to protest and to revenge. Sufferings or pain is a double-edged weapon for Dalits. The sharp leaves of Palmyra trees can harm the hands that touch them but it can also defend them. The awareness to this very status of Dalits can also instigate them to raise their weapon against their oppression. For Dalits, their existence is a double-edged sword. They've been harmed by it, but they now understand that they can utilize it to protect themselves. Thus, Karukku represents the awareness and consciousness of the Dalits, which motivates them to fight for their survival. Bama realized this subverted consciousness which inspired the other Dalits and Paula Richman observes, "Bama uses Karukku to articulate the notion that pain need not be an ending point; it can spur realization and new growth, as it did for her". (VSRD 74)

The overwhelming nature of caste is portrayed here. When Bama lives in the convent, she feels angry at the upper caste authorities, because all the inferior jobs are done by Dalits. Dalits are treated in a shameful and degrading way. She feels pained to see even older Dalit men trembling like small children when they see and talk to the upper caste's priests and nuns. Dalits are frightened by the power and wealth of the nuns. Bama feels uncomfortable among the unfair and cruel nuns of oppressors. She realizes that religion is forcefully imposed on the Dalit communities. In her childhood, she worshipped God, and prayed in the church because she had faiths in God that all men are equal in the eyes of God but now, she comes to know that the upper caste communities oppressed them in the name of religion and caste. Now Bama has no faith in God and religion; and she does not feel fear of God anymore. She wants to spread the principals of Ambedkarite thought like love, equality and brotherhood. Her experiences in the convent shatter her faiths in the God and religion. The nuns, the priests of the church belonging to upper caste are themselves God and maker of religion. Among the nuns, there were caste divisions, divisions between the rich and the poor, and even divisions over the languages that they spoke.

The life as depicted in Karukku throws light on the most agonizing and unfortunate lives of the Dalits. The portrayal of her experiences is indicative of the unfortunate situation bequeathed in a greater degree of self-awareness and quest for achieving loftier and nobler things in the lives of Dalit women. Her journey is tedious, encounters are painful and the experiences reveal agony. But the process of self-discovery, identity and empowerment is an ordeal.

The unpleasant experience and a suppressed have to compulsorily undergo a traumatic change. Bama's act of commission or omission is not individual but that of the society. Bama endured caste prejudice, untouchability, poverty, and destitution, but the novel Karukku has given her strength and restored her love for life. It has been written as a means of strength to the multitudes whose identities have been lost and destroyed.

Thus, Karukku examines the wounded identity and dark territory of Dalit consciousness which accept their downtrodden state and tries to subvert that subjugated consciousness into a strong, self-sufficient and respected existence. It challenges the authority of the Swarna caste, which views members of lower castes as inferior, untouchable, filthy, and disrespectful. It is replete with double objectives of liberation and reflection of self-respect. It reflects over the tension which grows out of a constant battle between loss of identity and asserting of self.

It is the need of the hour that the suppressed or the downtrodden must convert themselves from their depressed existence into a confident and respective one. Indeed, Karukku spreads the defiant message that encourages Dalits, despite of all the oppression, to stand firm and revolt against all the indignities and the destructive factors that hinder the creation of an equal and just society.

The problem before Dalit is to survive. The question of existence has become very important in the 21st century. There are so many challenges before the human beings to meet with. The oppressed people have more challenges than the others as they have been oppressed for the centuries. In this century they have to compete with the elite class who have all the resources. For Dalit the resources and opportunities need to be created in order to become equal to the other society. Dalit writers in their works pose this question repeatedly. In this paper, the attempt is made to study the answer of this question posed by Bama in Karukku. Karukku is a mode of revolution that tries to liberate Dalits from the hands of caste oppression. The narrator herself suffered the pain of caste- discrimination, untouchability, poverty and destitution but the book Karukku has given her courage and helped her to love life once more. Bama is a first Tamil Dalit woman writer and has found a place in academic circles. So, she lays emphasis on education. This book has been written as a means of strength to the multitudes whose identities have been lost and destroyed.

CONCLUSION:

After reading Karukku, it can be said that there is a close link between education, writing and empowerment that Bama used as tools that could liberate Dalits from leading a degraded and repressed lives. Karukku is a mode of reformation of Dalits, release from the clutches of caste suppression. The narrator herself suffered the pain of caste-discrimination, untouchability, poverty and destitution but the book Karukku has given her courage and helped her to love life once more. Bama is a first Tamil Dalit woman writer and has found a place in academic circles. So she lays emphasis on education. This book has been written as a means of strength to the multitudes whose identities have been lost and destroyed.

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