

Resistance, Resilience and Recognition of Dalit Culture in Bama's *Karukku*

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Abstract

Culture and History are the twin concerns of Postcolonial as well as Postmodern writers. In broad terms culture means forms of life and social expression. However culture has become a challenging concept in social sciences after the emergence of a new branch of learning called Cultural Studies. It is a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. Culture Study has acquired prominence in the present scenario as the oppressed communities have started emerging out, breaking the shackles of subjugation, slavery and oppression. The marginalized demand their voices to be heard, their roots to be recognized and their culture to be reclaimed, recognized, respected and appreciated. One such voice is the voice of Dalits in India. Bama is a leading Tamil Dalit woman writer who emerged as a champion of Dalits in 1990s with her first novel *Karukku*. This paper focuses on aspects of resistance, resilience and recognition of Dalit culture in *Karukku*.

Key words:Dalit, Resistance, Culture, Recognition, Subjugation

Literature indeed reflects the society, its good values and its ills. In its corrective function, literature mirrors the ills of the society with the view to making the society realize its mistakes and make amends. It also projects the virtues or good values in the society for people to emulate. Culture is a reflection of a particular society. It comprises of the characteristics feature of a particular group of people, language, religion, social habits, music and arts. The word “Culture” derives from a French term, which in turn derives from the Latin “colere”, means to tend to the earth and grow or cultivation and nurture. The culture of one community differs from the culture of the other community. Culture can be defined as a social behaviour and norms found in human societies. Richard Velkley states thus: “...originally meant the cultivation of the soul or mind, acquires most of its later modern meaning in the writings of the 18th century German thinkers, who were on various levels developing Rousseau’s criticism of “modern liberalism and enlightenment”.(web)

Bama, also known as Bama Faustina Soosairaj, is a Tamil, Dalit feminist, committed teacher and novelist. She rose to fame with her autobiographical novel *Karukku*, which chronicles the joys and sorrows experienced by Dalit Christian women in Tamilnadu. Being born in a Dalit family, she endured lot of difficulties in her life. She writes it down in her autobiography, *Karukku*. She writes that not only Hinduism has the Varna system but also the modern Christianity has the same as Hinduism. The Varna system is very much exposed in the Hindu religion where as in Christianity it is very much invisible but it is as strong as Hinduism. The writer herself was a victim to this. She entered into the nunnery hoping to bring about some changes in the society but the reality was not the same as she expected. She in one of her interviews said she was working as a teacher before joining the convent. She was in the convent for seven years but could not endure her life in the convent. The nuns in the convent treated the Dalit candidates very badly. Bama could not accept this, because when she desired to join the convent she dreamt of bringing change in the society. This had been an unquenchable desire within her. She pens it so beautifully in the Preface, “There are other Dalit hearts like mine, with passionate desire to create a new society made up of justice, equality, and love. They, who had been oppressed, are now themselves like a double-edged *Karukku*, challenging their oppressors” (xxiii). Here at this point the author herself becomes *Karukku*, and she writes:

There are many congruities between the saw –edged palmyra karukku and own life. My own life. Not only did I pick up the Scattered palmyrakarukku in the days when I was sent out to

gather firewood, scratching and tearing my skin as I played with them, but later they also became the embryo and symbol that grew into this book (13).

Due to some unacceptable occurrences in the convent she left the convent. After coming out of the convent her mind was not yet in peace. She wanted to bring all her experiences to the society to show how a poor Dalit woman from a small village suffers with the majority. One of her well-wishers Fr. Mark suggested her to write all the experiences that she had in the convent. *Karukku* was a result of this.

In 1992 when Bama left the convent and wrote her autobiography, the Tamil publishing industry found her language unacceptable. So Bama published her milestone work *Karukkuprivately*- a passionate and important mix of history, sociology. *Karukku* broke all the barriers of traditions in more ways than one. It is the first autobiography by a Dalit woman writer and a classic of subaltern writing. *Karukku* revolves around the main theme of caste oppression within the Catholic Church. It also portrays the tension between the self and the community, and presents Bama's life as process of self-reflection recovery from social and institutional betrayal.

Resistance leads to cultural and linguistic self-definition and collective political awareness. Resistance is a counter hegemonic move. There are acts of conscious resistance on the part of the oppressed. Gayatri Spivak has constantly focused on the subaltern- the category of those who are lower in social position. Spivak employs this Gramscian term "subaltern" to describe the lower layers of colonial, postcolonial and neo-colonial society such as "men and women among the illiterate peasantry, the tribals, the lowest strata of the urban sub-proletariat" ("Can the Subaltern Speak?" 283).

Subaltern classes include all the marginalized- peasants, workers, women, Dalits, Blacks, tribals and such groups of unfortunate people who are under the social, economic, political and cultural domination of the oppressor. They are cut off from the mainstream of power and privilege. Though they cry out in angry, anguished voices, they remain unheard. Of all the subaltern, the Dalits in India have undergone centuries of inhuman treatment from the so-called upper classes, under the social curse of untouchability.

The subaltern Dalits have started asserting themselves through the process of resistance. They demand their voice to be heard. They roar, in no way lesser than any human being in the

society. They have begun to move from the side to the centre. They are rewriting their hidden history and deconstructed the myths which subjugated them. They speak through their purposive, revolutionary, liberatory and transformational literature. Resistance is a spontaneous response to oppression. James Scott, in his celebrated work, *Weapons of the Weak*, discusses the concept of resistance whose essence drives one “to exert oneself so as to withstand or counteract the force”(289). There are individual acts of resistance-formal and informal, public and private and so on. Resistance gives voice to the voiceless, space to the excluded and attention to the exploited.

Bama, the champion writer, employs the act of resistance into her writing. Being a Dalit Tamil Christian woman she never wanted to compromise with any act that oppress or suppress the self. When she was doing her third standard, way back home she saw an elderly man of her community bringing a parcel of vadai for a Naicker man, holding the strings without touching the parcel, which initially amused her. Bama on reaching home recounted this incident to her elder brother who did not find it amusing but made her realise the devil of untouchability. Bama writes “when I heard this, I didn’t want to laugh any more, I felt terribly sad” (15). This incident gave Bama the fire to speak and work for the community which she belongs to.

In *Karukku*, Bama focuses on the vulnerable condition of Dalit people and how they are victims of circumstances due their poor economic background. The Dalit people work as agricultural labourers to the caste people. They remain powerless even politically. Bama throws light on the issues such as untouchability, discrimination in the religion. Most Dalit victims of abuse are landless agricultural labours. Lack of access to land makes Dalit economically vulnerable. Their dependence is exploited by the upper class land lords. She painfully reveals that their identity had been snatched away.

Dalits are even under the impression that the upper class people are their masters and they cannot decide on anything without the consent of them. Bama records her grandmother working for the Naicker community. Bama, whenever got time, she accompanied her grandmother. Her grandparents were not given any basic respect of a human being. The upper class people compel them to work hard for meagre wages. Apart from this, they may provide them the leftover of the previous day. So Bama questioned her grandparents. Her grandmother tells her, “These people are the maharajas who feed us our rice. Without them, how could we survive? Haven’t they been upper caste from generation to generation, and haven’t we been lower caste? Can we change this?”(17).

In *Karukku*, Bama records her nature of aggressiveness and her brother's as well. Whenever her elder brother comes home for holidays, he goes to the library to read and to borrow books. One day on his way home, because of his unfamiliarity, one Naicker man enquired about his name and then where he lived to know him. She records, "Annan's reply was sharp, like a slap in the face, 'I am a Paraya from the Cheri Street' (17). While doing her degree, on a weekend, she asked permission to go home to attend the First Communion celebration of her younger brother and sister, the Principal and the Warden denied her permission to go home. Whereas they permitted the rich children go home. This infuriated her and challenged them go home. "So I stood my ground obstinately. I managed to get my way at last by insisting that there cannot be different rules for different castes, only the same rule for everyone"(22).

Hard working is an important element in the Dalit culture. They work in the fields from morning till evening sometimes till night. They never get any rest between. There are various kinds of works- agricultural labourer, sweeper, *kotthal* and so on. Bama writes, "This is a community that was born to work" (55). These people were not paid any proper wages instead were given the leftovers. The Naicker women used to keep distance from the Dalit women while giving them the leftovers because they would be polluted. No time they grudged against those upper caste people for treating them like animals even less than animals. The Naickers and the other high class people prospered because of these people's hard work. Even though they work so hard the pity of their life is they never had good food but the same old *kuuzh* and broken-grain gruel. Even after going to the higher grade, Bama goes to collect the firewood with his mother. On one occasion her mother brought home a bundle of firewood and leaned it against the wall and started vomiting blood. Bama recollects this with great pain, "but it was only by toiling like this, without taking any account of their bodies as human flesh and blood, that people of my community could even survive"(52).

Though *Karukku* is not written chronologically, it brings out all the experiences she had as moments of oppression that composed her daily lived reality. *Karukku* is an account of her community where she grew up. Bama writes 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. She also brings back to her memories the festivals they celebrated as one community. When the men were released from the

prison, they wanted to offer thanks giving mass such was their faith. But Bama could not digest the irony that the nuns in the convent considered the Dalits faithless.

In *Karukku*, Bama gives the account of games played by children in the village. Even when the children played games, they most often played the roles of the oppressor, they find joy in this. Thus Bama says “Dalits have been enslaved for generation upon generation, and been told again and again of their degradation, they have come to believe that they are degraded, lacking honour and self-worth, untouchable;...This is what even little babies were told, how they are instructed”(28). Two or three boys would play the role as Naicker. The rest of them played the role of pannaiyals. The boys would show as they have lots of power and humiliate the other co-players. Sometimes the children kept shops. The boys managed the shops, pretending to be Nadar Mudalaali. Sometimes they played the roles of nuns and priests who came and gave blows. All the characters in the games represent their oppressors. In spite of all the atrocities done to them, they remained happy celebrating their lives. They always enjoy their life by singing and dancing. This is another important aspect in their life.

The lifestyle in the convent was not like anything she had in her village. Bama could not help but wonder why the nuns and priests who are chosen to serve the people of God especially, the oppressed and the needy be so prejudiced. When she started to work again as a full-fledged nun, she had to teach students from wealthy families. She noticed that in the school, Dalits, “were looking after all the jobs like sweeping the premises, swabbing and washing the classrooms, and cleaning out lavatories” (25). For Bama the convent was a symbol of the hallow promises of the church. There was no human touch in the imparted to the society. Thus she came out of the convent to live a new life for; she had a strong devotion to Jesus and Our Lady. She started reading the Bible through the Old Testament and the New Testament. She felt that “God has always shown the greatest compassion for the oppressed. And Jesus too, associated himself mainly with the poor” (104). Her reading the Bible had given her the real person, Jesus. “There is a great deal of difference between this Jesus and the Jesus who is made known through daily pieties. The oppressed are not taught about him, but rather, are taught in an empty and meaningless way about humility, obedience, patience gentleness”(104).

Bama’s *karukku* portrays her as a champion of her society. “After I dared to leave the convent, it was as if I had no connections. Having sheltered within the safety of the convent, eating

at regular meal times and living a life with every comfort, I am in the position of having to endure the hardships of being alone in the outside world, and of having to seek work, and even food and drink for myself”(118). A Paraya village girl, poor and down-trodden gave hope to the world. There was a great transformation from oneself to the community. Knowingly or unknowingly she grasped the words of Ambedkar, who declared ‘educate, organise and agitate’(qtd. in Das and James Massay viii).With the help of education, as evident in Bama’s life, one can organise oneself and others to get the rightsof the self. That’s what Bama did she educated herself and organised her thoughts and revived her culture and made it known to the world. The culture of Dalit is acclaimed and recognised all through the reading world.Bama leaves one community (of religious women) in order to join another (as a Dalit woman). Now Bama is not only of the Dalit community where as she belong to the whole of society. *Karukku* will continue to hurt those handle it in a wrong manner, at the same time energizes them to face the odds.

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