

Three-fold subjugation and oppression: A study of Bama Faustina's Karukku

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Abstract:

If we talk about Fourth-World Literature, it becomes important to throw light on certain burning issues in the lives of those who are always suppressed and kept at margin in social, political and cultural affairs. They are known by the name of Dalit in India. Dalit literature has nothing to do with the world of imagination. It is all about the miseries, sorrows and insult of underdogs who are not considered as human beings with flesh and blood. Shame, anger and indomitable hope is the stuff of Dalit Literature. This paper attempts to deal with the Three-fold Subjugation and Oppression of Dalit women in Bama Faustina's Karukku. It will analyse how Dalit women are exploited both inside the four-walls of their domestic life as well as in the society. They have been subjugated as women, dalit, and poor. Caste and religion has become a double-edged sword in their lives. In Bama's opinion nothing can remove the tag of untouchability except education. Education is the only key that can lay any door open for dalit. Otherwise, caste becomes prevalent with the birth and lingered on till death. In other words, caste system in India is as old as mankind itself and it is very tough task to abolish it at all levels. Bama, even after her conversion to Christianity, found same kind of discrimination inside the Church also. But this paper will also throw light on the boldness and courage of the protagonist who retaliated through the power of pen. Through her strong will power she demonstrated great deal of resistance against age-old discrimination and exploitation, Dalit women have been facing from the time immemorial.

Keywords: Dalit, Exploitation, Discrimination, Caste, Poverty, Gender, Untouchable etc.

Caste as a structure is an age-old mechanism of hierarchy based on social constructs, economic manipulation, political power and cultural supremacy of a particular class of people, who are believed to be higher in the ladder than others. In every case there is a set of people who are higher and the other ones. Since caste still operates as a definite pre-condition for marriages, social relations and access to employment, millions of Dalit and other low-caste people remain behind in education, employment and access to wealth.

Although untouchability and casteism is banned in India, discrimination is still practiced almost in every nook and corner of India. As a matter of fact, there is a broad correlation between one's economic state and one's position within the caste hierarchy. Dalits continue to face the wrath of the caste lords and are denied of human dignity and rights, including a just share in the resources like land, water, forests, minerals, mines and aquatic resources. The indigenous people continue to fight for their identity and dignity. Their right to a decent and dignified life is under severe threat. There are many aspects of human rights violation being talked around these days such as atrocities, discrimination, untouchability etc.

'Dalit' is a Marathi word derived from Sanskrit, 'dala' meaning 'of the soil or the earth'. Another meaning is 'that which is rooted in the soil'. In other terms Dalit means broken, oppressed, untouchable, downtrodden, and exploited.

The caste system in India has isolated innumerable Dalits, from mainstream of life. The caste system in India is built on the standard of purity and impurity. Purity means rich and white, impurity means poor and dark. Being socially segregated for centuries, they are obliged to live a helpless life without menial facilities. In spite of the guarantee of civil rights and the special law enacted to prevent atrocities against them, the Dalits continue to be the victims of social discrimination and oppression across the country. In this context we can guess the miserable condition of Dalit, men and women. Dalits, in liberated India, are still barred to use the free amenities; such as water taps, schools, temples, restaurants, hotels etc. Dalit women as well as Dalit men have been beaten by their upper caste counterparts while filling water from public taps. Dalit women are being inflicted much more insult and shame as compared to their male counterparts because they have to bear both social humiliation as well as the male dominance in the family.

This caste system has been criticized not only by Indians, especially Dalit writers but also by

some western social activists and writers has hammered hard on the Caste-Hindu for their discriminatory and step-motherly treatments of their own brothers.

“Do you begin to see, then what kind of world we are creating? It is the exact opposite of the stupid hedonistic utopias that the old reformers imagined. A world of fear and treachery and torment, a world of trampling and being trampled upon, a world which will grow not less but more merciless as it refines itself. Progress in our world will be progress toward more pain.”

-By George Orwell, 1984.

When we talk about Fourth-World literature it means we are going, one way or the other, to have something about Dalit literature in it. Unlike other genres of literature it encompass authenticity and realistic touch at large.

“Dalit literature is experienced-based. This ‘anubhava’ (experience) takes precedence over ‘anumana’ (speculation). Thus, to Dalit writers, history is not illusionary or unreal as Hindu metaphysical theory may make one believe. That is why authenticity and liveliness have become hallmarks of Dalit Literature. These writers make use of language of the outcastes and under-privileged in Indian society. Shame, anger, sorrow, and indomitable hope are the stuff of Dalit Literature. Because of the anger against the age-old oppression, the expression of the Dalit writers have become sharp.” -Dr. Jugal Kishore Mishra

Karukku is the the first autobiography written by a Dalit Christian woman. Bama wrote this book to serve her sole purpose i.e, to get rid of the psychological trauma and to heal her wounded self, right from the childhood.

“...I left behind my life of renunciation and came out into the world. After that, I wrote my book Karukku. That book was written as a means of healing my inward wounds; I had no other motive.” (P-ix)

Karukku came into the attention of national and international readers as well as writers, when Bama won the Crossword Award for Karukku in the year 2001. This autobiography is a narrative of three-fold subjugation of Dalit Christian women. Bama is the spokesperson of all the Dalit women, especially of converted Christians who, in spite of conversion into Christianity, suffered at three levels: as women, as dalit and as poor. By portraying her insults and agony, Bama gives an accurate picture of social as well as historical India.

In the post *Vedic* period Dalit women are the most marginalized beings among the Dalits. They are treated worse than Dalit men. In the name of Devadasis and Jogins, Dalit women are sexually assaulted. In these practices once the village girls attain puberty, they are married to

God in the temple by their parents. Then they are sexually abused by the rich men or upper caste landlords and forced into prostitution. Much to their agony Dalit women are supposed to remain under the clutches of patriarchal Indian setup.

Thus, the main concern of Dalit women writers is not only confine to colour, creed or gender discrimination but to liberate themselves from the age old suppression and slavery. That’s what struck to Bama after her experience as a dalit, as a woman and as a nun during her stay at convent. In *Karukku* she has depicted all such incidents where she has experienced exploitation and suppression of Dalit women. There she realized that dalit women are subjugated or under-yoked almost in every sphere of life. But, this paper will try to throw light only on the major three types of subjugation i.e. as poor, as women and as Dalit.

Dalits, who are placed at the bottom of the caste-order, are pushed into the periphery at social, cultural, political and economic level in Indian, especially, Hindu society. Bama is one of the prominent Dalit writers who highlighted the plight of Dalits of paraiya community in general and the women in particular. Karukku focuses on the various aspects of paraiya community such as caste, gender, poverty and religion that caused a great pain in Bama’s personal life. The book describes Bama’s life from childhood to adulthood. She has witnessed caste discrimination very early at the time when she was in third standard. She saw an elderly man carries a package without touching it.

“...He came along holding out the packet by its string, without touching it. I stood there thinking to myself, if he holds it like that, won’t the package undone, and vadai fall out? The elder went straight up to the Naicker, bowed low and extended the packet towards him, cupping the hand. Naicker opened the parcel and began to eat the vadai.” (P-14)

Later, the protagonist understood that she and her community were prohibited by Hinduism and were cursed to remain as poor: cloth washers, cobblers, the one who cleans dead animals, conveys death news, grave diggers and drumbeat announcers.

Being a poor, Bama used to work in the farm during her school days. She revealed about her experience as a farm worker. Even though she went to school, she worked hard as a labourer for daily wages to meet her expenses. But women were not paid the amount as men were paid. They were denied the wages equal to their male partners.

“But of course, they never received a payment that was appropriate to their labour. And another thing. Even if they did the same work, men received one wage, women another. They always paid men more. I could never understand why.” (P-54)

Thus, poverty and gender of Dalit women plays an important role in their suppression, and exploitation at economic and social level.

Bama was baptized when she was in the second class level (at the age of six). However, the legacy of Christianity was brought to light. The nuns used Bama to wash and clean the church and its surroundings. They threatened her with the story of Devil. It made Bama familiar with confession. Therefore, even after conversion to Christianity Dalits were excluded or kept away from the philosophy of egalitarianism which is said to be the basis of Christianity.

Throughout her education the narrator finds that wherever she goes, there is a painful reminder of her caste, gender and poverty in the form of untouchability and discrimination. People always remain conscious about the identity especially upper-caste people. Once the identity of a dalit is revealed it creates sudden storm among the upper-caste people. When Bama finished her schooling and went for college education at some distance from her village she thought that at such a big college she would be far from such things, as caste and religion. But after few days, when a Lecturer announced,

‘Will Harijan students please stand; the government has arranged that Scheduled Caste students get special tuition in the evening.’ (P-21)

At the very moments when the protagonist and other Scheduled Caste students stood up:

“Among the other students, a sudden rustling; a titter of contempt. I was filled with a sudden rage...” (P-22)

Not only caste but poverty also played an important role in the ill-fate of Dalit women. When the narrator completed her nun training admitted about various caste discriminations in the Christian institutions. She worked in the school where both wealthy and poor Dalit students

studied. In that school Dalit Students were used for menial works.

“In that school, attended by pupils from very wealthy households, people of my community were looking after all the jobs like sweeping the premises...cleaning out the lavatories. And in the convent, as well, they spoke very insulting about low-caste people. They spoke as if they didn't consider low-caste people as human beings. They didn't know that I was a low-caste nun...” (P-25)

Therefore, dalit women, even after conversion into Christianity, are abused, insulted and exploited almost in every walk of life.

Bama gives importance to women identity. Women are more vulnerable to the assault by upper-caste people and were restricted from certain freedom. They were not allowed to see movies or walk in the streets with an open face. If any woman moves freely, she will be humiliated, assaulted and sometimes raped by upper-caste men. Teresamma, a dalit poet and a teacher by profession from Guntur, writes:

We go to work for we are poor
But the same silken beds mock us
While we are ravished in broad daylight.
Ill- starred our horoscopes are.
Even our tottering husbands
Lying on the cots in corner
Hiss and shouts for revenge
If we cannot stand their touch.

As she wanted to serve her community especially poor, Bama embraced Christianity. The reason behind mass conversion was to safeguard Dalits from the cruel injustice, discrimination, humiliation and caste bias of the Hindu religion. Dalits think that Christianity would treat them gently. But, quite surprisingly, they found discrimination in the church also. The church labeled Bama as Dalit Christian. When Bama completed her training of a nun with a strong will, at the end of training, a nun sister said,

“...in certain order they would not accept Harijan women as perspective nuns and that there was even a separate order for them somewhere.” (P-25)

According to Bama, as her brother opines:

“...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” (P-17)

[7] Out-caste.blogspot.com>2008/03. Assessed. 05 Nov. 2017.

Therefore Bama thought that education is the only weapon which can be used by Dalit women against all types of suppression and exploitations which they experience in village, buses, churches, nun's convent, hostels, recruitments and at so many other institutions as well as other work places. Bama's suffering is the suffering of Dalits throughout India. she comprehends that Dalit women have been forced to live a life of humiliation and degradation both as women, inside the four-walls of their domestic circle and as Dalits, outside in the society.

On the one hand, Karukku portrays the plight of Dalit women in general and Bama in Particular, as Bama herself told the tale

“The driving forces that shaped this book are many: cutting me like Karukku and making me bleed; unjust social structures that plunged me into ignorance and left me trapped and suffocating...” (P-xxii)

On the other hand, there are so many other people from her community who wanted to rose up the social ladder and are passionate to create a new society made up of justice, equality, fraternity and love.

“They who have been the oppressed, are now themselves like the double-edged karukku,

challenging their oppressors.” (P-xxii)

Thus, Bama's writing portrays the marginalization and subjugation of Dalit women at social, political, economical and cultural level in India. At the same time her writing celebrates Dalit women's life, resilience and creativity. Bama raises her voice, representing her community, against the subjugation of women in every sphere of life, their resistance and call for action. It has conveyed a message to the society that not only Truth is victorious but that only the Truth is the Truth.

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