



Representation of Self and Dalit Society in Bama's *Karukku*

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(Abstract)

The present paper focuses on the life experience, major life events and development of Bama, a Dalit woman writer and her autobiographical work *Karukku* (1992), a poignant tale of life outside mainstream Indian thought and function. It is an effort to discuss the different life phases, aspects and representation of self in autobiographical work. Bama is the most celebrated contemporary Dalit woman writer who narrates her life journey through different phases of her life. Her autobiographical work is regarded a classic of subaltern writing and the first autobiography by a Dalit woman writer. The researcher analytically highlights the main thematic concerns of caste oppression within the Catholic church. The work is intense depiction of the tension between the self and the society. The paper is exploration to present Bama's life as a journey of self-recovery and recovery from social and institutional betrayal.

Keyword: Dalit, Society, Self-consciousness, Oppression, Catholicism, Church and The Naicker

Bama, a Dalit woman authoress, wrote her autobiography *Karukku* in a unique style in her native language Tamil in 1992 which was translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom in 2000. The depiction of self in autobiography in the western tradition of life-writing always emphasized on the larger concept of individuality. This sense of individual self is the soul of autobiography that inflicted the Western mind since the beginning of Renaissance and subsequently it has consistently become the hallmark of the genre. The modern Indian autobiographers or life writers usually follow the footprints of the Western establish authors and thus theorized self in autobiography as exclusive, isolate and "a discrete rational entity constituted in terms of individual achievement and personal experience" (Ramakrishnan 97). Although, this trend of selfhood is destabilized in the emerging and empowering autobiographies of Dalit woman writers where the notion of self often transcends individualism and is conceived in term of its society and plurality. The self is invariably relational, overlapping and continuous in nature as it encompasses other selves that faces similar tortures, social oppression like it. In other words, all Dalit faces same kinds of experiences weather as an outcaste individual or as an outcaste social group or community

and this is in continuity since ages. It is one of the best such classic literary creation in Indian life writing. Bama's *Karakku*, Dalit woman's autobiography, which is originally written in Tamil and later translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom. The present paper analytically deprived triply as a woman, Dalit and Christian in a rural society under the fangs of caste system. Dalit writings are the platform where Dalit writes expresses their grumblings and grievances against the societal hierarchy and communal hegemony. She reveals how her inner self and her community collect courage to confront the tough situation. Motivated by her conscious Bama resigns after seven years of service as a nun in a convent and returns to her village with a bold decision not to live a life of Nun and returns to her native village in order to live a life of ordinary Dalit woman instead of life of a Nun to serve her soil and her community. The lonely self and consciousness show how she expresses the pangs of alienation and deprivation in her experience. The autobiography acclaimed the attentions not only in the literary sphere but the political and social too. It is not a kind of life writing on the pattern of the Western trends in autobiography but a new and unique one. Bama herself shares the background of *Karakku* in an interview, published in *Mathrubhoomi* that Ajay Kumar mentions in his article:

Karruku is my first published book. It was in 1992. It was to a great extent autobiographical. It has to face severe opposition. When it was published. Actually, it was not intended for publication. I wrote about the atrocities that I faced in my life. I was a teacher. I resigned my job and join the convent to become a Nun. I came out after seven as I could not adjust with the life there. Those were the days in which I suffered a lot in my life. I lost my job and hand had no other way to live. I don't know what to do...I even thought that I was unfit to live in this society. My individuality has undergone total transformation during the 'formation' period. It was very difficult to come back to normalcy. I thought my thought needed an outlet. That is how I started writing (Bama 126).

Karruku is therefore an outcome of self-consciousness and identity crisis of the authoress. She restores herself through her life experiences and revelation. She admits in one of her Interview with P.P. Ajay Kumar, "I write because I draw strength from different characters of mine. It is that which keeps me going. I feel that it is my responsibility to use my writings as the weapon of week. Writing heals me and makes me free. So, I write" (Bama 115). She further adds, "Society has always marginalized us. And we are trying to come to the centre. The more we try, the more we are pushed to the margins. The society has the moral responsibility to support us. Writing for the Dalit is to asserts their identity" (Bama 113). The autobiography is no doubt a trend changing creation in the Dalit writing or Dalit autobiography. She talks at many stances about her 'self' and represents the self-consciousness and individuality in her assertions. Bama identifies presence of caste discrimination in every religion and society. Individuality in the deprived and marginalized classes term as Dalit self and Dalit identity constructed in Dalit women autobiographers is

expresses through their self-experiences. They depict their first-hand experience of self-humiliation, self-repression and self-subjugation and self-abnegation of the writers resulting from personal state of isolation and anxiety under the thrust of social disparities created by the upper strata of the society to fabricate their cunning designs and to fulfill their purposes. Kashinath Ranveer has a point:

These ruling classes “Brahmins...” have created ideologies that have fashioned them in such a way that these subordinated classes have been forced to look at themselves from the eyes of their masters, the ruling classes. Through the creation of the notions of caste...these subordinated and oppressed groups of the society have been made to suffer from self-scorn, self-hearted, self-abnegation and self-erasure. Hence, they were deprived from the very notion of their self, self-esteem, self-dignity and self-respect (Ranveer 108).

He further writes:

As they suffer from the loss of their self and also are the victims of self-hatred, self-scorn, and self-denial, quest for regaining one's own self and an attempt to reclaim it is one of the recurring themes in their writings. Hence through their art and literature they try to define their own self and attempt to explore their social, economic, political, cultural and religious history and the past (Ranveer 111).

Ravi Kumar, an activist of the Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu in an interview with Anand says in this context:

The early writings of a newly literate community, or a group finding its voice for the first time, have always been autobiographical—be they Aboriginal, women, black or Dalit. The aboriginal writers say that when their entire history is erased, the autobiographical stories they narrate become their history (Ravikumar 7).

The autobiography opens as, “Our Village is very beautiful. Even though you don't see much by ways of progress or anything like that here, I love this place for its beauty. Although it's only a small village, many different communities, I have a lot to say about the village” (1). The every opening shows the sense of community feeling is persuaded in her writings. Bama boldly speaks out about caste ridden society. She talks about the unequal distribution of wealth in the village on the basis of their castes. She asserts, “Most of the land belonged to the Naicker community” (6). The caste ridden society has far gone reflections and its very deep impact on the psyche of Bama: It was the same story at school, though. They always spoke in a bad way about people of our caste. If ever anything bad happened, they would say immediately, and without hesitation, ‘It must be one of the Cheri children who did it.’ ... Everyone seemed to think Harijan children were contemptible. But they didn't have to

use us for cheap labour. So, we carried water to the teacher's house; we watered the plants. We did all the chores that were needed about the school" (18).

The text *Karakku* which is actually full of painful memories and bitter experience in life. Some of the experiences are no doubt at individual level and represent the self of the authoress but in majority cases she carries the pain of her caste, class and marginalized people from society. She boldly raises those issues which are not usually spoken out so frankly before the publication of this book.

If you are born into a low caste, every moment of your life is a moment of struggle. People screw up their faces and look at us with disgust the moment they know our caste. It is impossible to describe the anguish that look causes. But along with the anguish there is anger too. What can our anger do to them... And in my heart I have even grieved over the fact that I was born as I am. Are Dalit not human beings? Do they not have common sense? Do they not have such attributes as a sense of honour and self-respect? Are they without any wisdom, beauty, dignity? What do we lack? They treat us whatever way they choose, as if we are slaves who don't even possess human dignity (27).

The autobiography is often recognized as a Dalit testimonial or a document of a Dalit woman writer in her own words. Roy has a point when she asserts, "Bama's *Karakku* has remained instrumental in bringing a social transformation and to create an egalitarian society devoid of high and low, of segmentation and nomenclature on the basis of caste through individual education, self-empowerment and collective action" (Roy 117). The authoress expresses for her victimized and marginalized caste and class through a journey of experience and process of reconstructing her fragmented and fractured self. Therefore, she chooses 'Karakku' (or in Tamil means palmyra leaf) the most suitable title for her life writing because the scratches, scrapes and wound on her body caused by the life like notchy palmyra leaves that she used to collect in her childhood days related to her later psychological and physical suffering that has irritated her body and disrupted her individual sufferings. She often deliberately interchange 'I'- narration with 'We'- narration just in order to convey that her individual suffering, pains and bitter experiences are inseparable from her caste and class people. Thus, the autobiographical work *Karakku* has a special rank in Indian life writing due to its unique style and substance it is the representation of self and the society as a whole.

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