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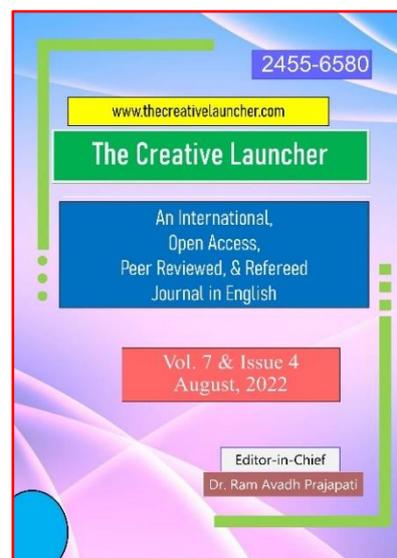
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Research Article



The Problematics of Ideological Construction and Repressive Interpellation of Caste in Bama's *Karukku*

Dr. Aarti Vishwakarma

Assistant Professor,

Department of English and other Foreign Languages

Mahatma Gandhi Kashi Vidyapith,

Varanasi, U.P., India

Email Id: aarti91mgkvp@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3208-8054>

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Abstract

The problem of caste in India is supposed to have commenced from the division of the Indian society into *Varna* system in the ancient times. It led to the marginalization of the people of *Shudra* Varna to the level of untouchability, discrimination, poverty, subjugation, subordination and exploitation. In the caste system, that was, and is, categorised as the upper

caste and the lower caste-- the two fractions that emerged after the Independence of India, many people of the upper caste became so antagonistic into their treatment of the people of lower caste that they designed a system of 'power' and 'control', both ideological and repressive, in order to exert their hegemony over them and dominate the consciousness of these people for the perpetuation of their privilege, authority and rule. The writings by Dalit authors, in the post-Independence era, have posed a resistance against this ideological and repressive structure of India society that enforces the people of the lower caste to accept their lot of being born to be ruled by the upper caste people. This resistance has been voiced through candour and boldness into the 'life narratives' of many Dalit authors. This article seeks to explore these designs and structures of ideological formations of the caste system and its repressive interpellation in the Indian society through the autobiography of Bama, *Karukku*.

Keywords: *Varna* System, Caste, Marginalization, Untouchability, Antagonistic, Ideological, Repressive, Resistance, Dalit, Interpellation

Bama is one of the renowned Tamil Dalit writers. Apart from being a Dalit novelist, she is a renowned short story writer, social activist and essayist. Born in a small village of Virudhunagar of south India in 1958, Bama became famous as a literary personality with her works such as *Karukku* (1992), *Sangati* (1994), *Vanman* (2002). She wrote some collections of short stories "kusumbukkaran" (1996) and "Oru Tattvum Erumaiyum" (2003). She wrote more than twenty short stories. She was greatly influenced by Jayakantan, Akhilan, Ravindranath Tagore and Kahil Gibran.

As Bama was born in a Roman Catholic family, her childhood name was Faustina Mary Fatima Rani. Later in her life she adopted her pen name "Bama". Her father Susairaj, was an employee in Indian army and her mother Sebasthiamma was a house wife. Her brother was a renowned Dalit theoretician and literary critic. Basically, her grandfather was Hindu by religion but later on he converted his region into Christianity. Since they belong to Dalit community, they worked as agricultural labourers.

It is a point to note that the first-person pronoun in this autobiography is not 'I' rather it is 'we'. It means she does not talk of her personal narrative only rather through her personal narrative she endeavours to portray the condition and plight of her community. The autobiography starts with the line: "our village is very beautiful" (*Karukku* 01). Thus, we see that throughout the text, whenever Bama describes about the village, she never writes "my village" or "my People" rather she writes "Most of our people and agricultural labourers" (*Karukku* 01). Bama has declared that the genre of her text is not personal autobiography rather it is a "collective archive of suffering". She moves from individual narrative to collective narrative by expanding her 'self'. The second chapter of the autobiography starts with the line: "When I was studying in the third class" (*Karukku*13, *emphasis added*). But as the narrative proceeds, she moves into the 'we' and by the end of the chapter two she writes: "we who are

asleep must open our eyes and look about us. We must not accept the injustice of our enslavement by telling ourselves it is our fate, as if we have no true feelings: we must dare to stand up for change..." (*Karukku*28). Other chapters of the text focus on the collective suffering of Dalit people of South India.

But it should not be regarded that the personal information has been eradicated completely from the text. In the first chapter, we find the description of the community to a great deal. She has described the story of Bondan-Maama (*Karukku*4-5) and the story of Kaaman (*Karukku*8-9), or that of Nallanthaugal (*Karukku* 09-10). These stories depict more about the people of the community than the author. We find no details about the biography of the author in the first chapter. In order to focus on the community, the author talks about the hard work of Dalit people who work in the field "driving cattle in pairs, round and round, to tread grain from the straw" (*Karukku*12). She raises several issues such as the spatial organisation of village, the tradition of the community, superstitions prevailing in the society. But it does not mean that the information regarding the author has been omitted completely. The personal pronoun 'I' has been often highlighted to document the feelings, agony, degradation and humiliation of the author. Contrary to the first chapter, second chapter begins with the personal pronoun 'I' and it describes the personal details of the author. Pramod Kumar Nayar writes: "Karukku is a powerful critique of Indian civil society itself: the educational system, the church and the bureaucracy and highlights the complicity between class and caste in post-independence India" (Nayar 84).

Caste system is not new. It is as old as the *Vedas*. It is not mere a division of labour rather it is a division of labourers. It is a hierarchy in which the divisions of labourers are graded one above the other. Because of this evil and inhuman practice of caste system, the Dalits in India suffer the most as they are at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. They suffer utmost level of discrimination and exploitation by upper caste people. It is quite difficult for them to lead a dignified life in society. About caste system, Ambedkar in his book *Annihilation of Caste* points out: "It is a social system which embodies the arrogance and selfishness of a perverse section of the Hindus who were superior enough in social status to set in its fashion, and who had the authority to force it for their inferiors" (241).

The practice of untouchability has been carried out in the Hindu religion from the Vedic period. Since it has been mentioned in the Hindu Shastras, it becomes difficult for people to go against it and think beyond it. Being a repressive ideology, religion does not allow its followers and believers to think "against the grain". Ambedkar also talks about how the tradition of caste system has been carried out through Hindu Shastras and how crucial it is to destroy the belief in the sanctity of the Shastras in order to annihilate the caste system and to bring about necessary amendment in it. In his book *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar says:

Caste may lead to conduct so gross as to be called man's inhumanity to man. All the same it must be recognised that the Hindus observe caste not because they are inhuman or wrong-headed. They observe caste because they are deeply religious.

People are not wrong in observing caste. In my view, what is wrong in their religion, which has inculcated this notion of caste. If this is correct, then obviously the enemy you must grapple with is not the people who observe caste, but the Shastras which teach them this religion of caste. Criticising and ridiculing people for not enter-dining or enter-marrying, or occasionally holding inter-caste dinners and celebrating inter-caste marriages, is futile method of achieving the desired end. The real remedy is to destroy the belief in the sanctity of the Shastras. (286-287)

Caste system is designed in Hindu religion in such a way that Dalits have been pushed at the bottom in the caste hierarchy, and as a consequence, suffer the most. Many of the Dalits, tried to convert their religion so that they can get rid of this caste discrimination as other religions such as Islam and Christianity claim to follow social equality. They claim that there is no such caste discrimination in their religion which leads to their mistreatment in the society. In this paper, an attempt has been made to highlight the point that in other religions also, the discrimination towards Dalits is not less rather it is very much intact there too. In Bama's autobiography *Karukku*, this point has been exemplified. Bama has talked about the theme of religious conversion which is adopted by so many Dalits only to avoid the inhuman behaviour of upper caste people. But after converting to other religions also they face the same discrimination and humiliation. The practice of untouchability can be found in those religions too which claim to have social equality among people. Thus, this autobiography projects the hypocrisy of other religions such as Christianity along with Hindu religion.

Being Dalit, Bama faces numerous discrimination and humiliations and because of these, she is not able to lead a dignified life in the society. She is the firm believer in Jesus Christ and, therefore, she prefers to be a nun and dedicate her life to serve the poor and the needy. The family members of Bama warned her not to convert her religion into Christianity but she doesn't listen to them and going against their wish, she adopts Christianity as her religion. But very soon she realises that in this religion too, there is caste-based discrimination. She finds that in the church also, there are upper caste people who hold the prestigious posts and they dominate and discriminate the lower caste people. Her stay in the convent school depicts her agony of being a Dalit teacher. Caste and gender discrimination are the pivotal issues of *Karukku*. Bama has dealt with the problems of caste discrimination which is practiced not only in Hindu religion but also in Christianity.

Literature is not only a means of expression of an author's personal accounts of real-life experiences including the discriminations based on caste and stigma on the basis of their gender and sexual orientations. It is also a means of liberation that provides a platform where the subdued voices could be given a strength and loud resonance. The autobiographies of many of Dalit authors in India have been some of the best examples of such kind of literature. Through this autobiography, Bama has tried not only to narrate her sufferings, problems, stigma and torture but also has expressed her complete 'being' in order to reinvent her own new identity, at the same time sensitise and make the reading public aware of the harsh

realities of the current society in which she lives. Apart from narrating her own experiences, she has also turned out to be a liberating beacon or voice that has tried to speak the collective experiences of a scheduled tribe, caste, community or a society in general that has always been looked down upon and put into the margins of the mainstream society (*KarukkuXI*).

As a woman Bama seems to be aware of the fact that she is not to limit the horizons of her identity and social/personal responsibilities by being dependent on the members of her family. She makes efforts to come out, find education and a job and become a feminist *rani*(champion) or role model for the women of her own community. She lives with the consciousness and spirit that

... women are equal to men-equal in access, opportunity, and respect. Feminism is saying that women should be paid the same as men, and that men shouldn't have to pick up each restaurant bill. It's saying that a woman can step out of the kitchen, and a man can step into the kitchen. It's saying that a woman can be an army jawan, and a man can be a Kathak dancer. It's about saying that a woman should not give dowry, and a man shouldn't be indicted in a false dowry case. It's about saying that a woman can fight, and a man can cry (*Feminist Rani x*).

The autobiography also tries to raise the issue that the abolition of untouchability is still a great concern that can liberate the untouchables from menial jobs and caste discrimination. Even though the removal of untouchability was a main thrust, of the nationalist movement before the Independence, led by Mahatma Gandhi and others and depicted by Mulk Raj Anand in his novel *Untouchable* and Raja Rao in his novel *Kanthapura*, still, it has just remained a matter for reading and discussions in books and academics, instead of being practice in real life. India could not get rid of the problems of untouchability and still millions of people face this kind of discrimination. As the writer Bama rightly depicts in her autobiography, the society of her own village was structured in a way that Naikers were privileged caste people who never took any kind of food that was touched by the Harijan or Paraiya caste people (*Karukku15*).

Bama tries to show that the hegemonic structure and the power relations in her society are so exploitative and hierarchical that the people of the lower caste community were much inclined to the service of the Nickers who always hated, discriminated and exploited them, at the same time tortured them if any kind of conflict arose against these lower caste people. But still these lower caste people remain faithful to the service of these upper caste people in order to serve them better so that they can get the left-over food from their family and certain monetary help if they needed in emergency. On the other hand, the upper caste people have tried to maintain their ideological dominance through discursive formations of their own hegemony and control that can make them believe that the lower caste people are born to be ruled and governed by the upper caste, while the upper caste people have the inborn tendency to rule and control as it is already inherent into their blood (*Karukku16-17*).

Such kind of discrimination that is based on caste system in India is deep rooted into the inner consciousness of people of both the oppressed and the oppressor community, as it

is more perpetual and perennial form of hatred inculcated into their consciousness through the cultural upbringing (of the upper caste people against the lower caste people). It alienates the whole consciousness of lower caste people and makes them feel totally 'unhomed' and lost. They never find a respect into their own society even if they are educated sufficiently, well behaved and have performed certain good deeds which are of the importance of society. Education seems to have failed to remove these kinds of inequalities into society, even after half a century of the Independence.

Not only men face discrimination on the basis of caste, it is women also who face this kind of discrimination for being born into the family of a Paraya— such kind of discrimination becomes a double oppression for women of the lower cost communities: first, they are marginalized and discriminated on the basis of their gender into the patriarchal system, and second, they are discriminated on the basis of caste into a society like this (*Karukku19*).

It is worth noting that the nationalist movement leaders and activists who make a great man's history did not have a very balanced notion of gender equality. Mahatma Gandhi himself was very much reluctant to include prostitutes into the main thrust of the nationalist independence movement and showed his resentment by calling them 'obscene'. Radha Kumar writes:

The idea of their [prostitute's] engaging in 'humanitarian work' before they reformed themselves and lived like 'Sanyasins' was described as 'obscene' by Gandhi, who said these women were worse than an 'association of known thieves', for they stole 'the virtue of society'. Only through reforming themselves, taking to the charkha and khadi, and welcoming suffering and self-denial, could they be accepted (*The History of Doing* 83-84).

Similarly, the condition of Dalit women in most of the Indian societies is no better than that of prostitutes metaphorically. They are never accepted into workplaces as they seem to be odd people out and doubly discriminated against as in most of the institutes which are run by either government or private agencies, Dalit men hardly get access and job at that time while the struggle of a Dalit women to get a job is no less than the struggle that a prostitute makes to become a normal woman into her society.

The treatment of Dalit children at institutions like schools and churches or religious places is full of discrimination, intimidation and hatred. It breeds a kind of guilt and alienation among these children and people for being born into a lower caste, which is beyond their control. They are born as the outcaste people which is their destiny, not choice. Even though they work harder to change it, they are discriminated against, discouraged and dissuaded in order not to access education facilities, national resources, infrastructure that can help them change their life for good (*Karukku21*).

The whole idea of discrimination of these lower caste people is based on the Indian social structure that is more exploitative in nature. These people work as the labor, maid and workers for menial jobs into the houses of the upper caste people since millennia. But now

they have started voicing and resisting because of the right to education to these people after the Independence and certain privileges given to them into the Constitution of India which recognises their special rights so that they can grow into the country and be equal to the upper caste and community people. Though the politics of discrimination is making these people disadvantaged, yet things are so strategically designed that they don't have any way out of their problems.

They find themselves disillusioned with choosing another religion and rejecting Hindu religion which is based more on caste and varna system. Their choice is out rightly proved wrong. When they enter the religious doctrine, and get unfair treatment in Christianity. They find that they are still being discriminated against on the basis of their birth, their lifestyle and their caste as Christianity itself is not a means of liberation for them.

Bama tries to show that the Indian society is governed by both ideological state apparatus and repressive state apparatus which are in the hands of the upper caste people. The reason behind this is that they control the power, so they control the ideology. In the whole narrative of the autobiography *Karukku*, Bama has tried to depict that the Dalits do not have any institution, community, organisation and society that can protect their rights and give them awareness about how to avail the rights and facilities recognised for them into the Constitution of India. The Clauses 1 and 2 of the Article 15 of the Constitution of India dictates the State:

- (i) The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them.
- (ii) No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them, be subject to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard to—
 - (a) access to shops, public restaurants, hotels and places of public entertainment;
 - or
 - (b) the use of wells, tanks, bathing ghats, roads and places of public resort maintained wholly or partly out of State funds or dedicated to the use of the general public (The Constitution of India 6-7).

They are tortured when they oppose the system of oppression constructed strategically by the upper caste people, at the same time they are constantly reminded that if they do not follow their pieces of advice and orders given to them by the upper caste people, they are unsafe, ignorant and good for nothing. Their complete existence is justified by their recognition as an outcaste by the upper caste people.

Bama shows that the only way to the emancipation of these Dalit people in Indian society is possible through education which should be more skill-based, oriented towards boosting their confidence, protecting them from being discriminated, harassed and distracted from their studies as usually happens with these poor people (*Karukku*22) who are constantly reminded of their misery, untouchability and poverty. In order to achieve the greatest success into their lives, they have to cope with the designs made by the upper caste people that

dissuade the Dalits. Their growth and identity lie into their exploration of their self to be different from that of the upper cast people. They might not be able to compete them in terms of political, social and cultural control over the resources of the nation but their participation into availing these facilities for their progress and emancipation is possible. At the end of her autobiography Bama finds that even changing religion and getting convert to Christianity is not a way out, rather it is like falling into afresh trouble after another one. The voice that she gets is the voice she earns through constant efforts, resistance and self-confidence. Gail Omvedt comments on the issue of caste and religion in India:

People are labelled by their caste and crippled and enslaved. Therefore, until the caste system is torn up from the roots, the caste ideology which discriminates among people will not die. Complete equality will not be established. This is our firm opinion. The caste system has been constructed by a handful of selfish people for their own interest (*We shall Smash This Prison*174).

Though education has shown a very slow change into society, it still holds potential to liberate the lower caste people in India from the inequalities and indignities that they always face into their daily lives. It seems, for the writer, the only way that can provide them respect into their society is education as the rooted discrimination of these people is based on the class division in which the upper caste people are well to do and educated that is why they controlled power, while the lower caste people were uneducated and poor, therefore, they lost power. Looking through the power dynamics and discursive formations that theorized whole power relations, and the 20th century European philosophy of epistemology and power, knowledge governs power and vice versa. While the lower caste people neither have knowledge nor power, the upper caste ones have both knowledge and power, therefore, they govern the other (*Karukku*18).

Bama prefers to call this text as life-narrative rather than autobiography- because it is “more inclusive of the heterogeneity of self-referential practices” (Smith and Watson 04). The life story of Bama fulfils this criterion of life narrative as she has stated in the ‘Preface’ to *Karukku* “(her autobiography) that the book stands as a means of strength to the multitudes whose identities have been destroyed and denied” (*Karukku X*). Thus, it can be observed in the text that Bama blends the sufferings of the narrative self-with that of the women of her community. While dealing with her own pain and sufferings as a Dalit woman, she also depicts the sufferings of the women of the Dalit community. In this way, this autobiography is not just a life narrative of Bama, rather it is a detailed account of the suffering of the entire Dalit community. It talks in detail the agony of the Dalit people who have converted their religion into Christianity only to avoid the discrimination and humiliation of being Dalit. But after their religious conversion, they felt that nothing has changed for them. They face the same caste-based discrimination in their converted religion. The humiliation stands intact for them there too.

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