

## QUEST FOR INTEGRITY A READING OF BAMA'S KARUKKU

\* M. Koteswar Rao \*\* Dr. Uttam Bhagavan Ambhore

Bama Faustina Mary was born at Puthupatty near Madurai in 1958. The name Bama generated from the author's real name Faustina Mary Fathima. In Tamil, Fathima is pronounced as Bathima and from that the name Bama comes. Her family was converted to Christianity way back in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Her father was Susairaj and mother Sebasthiamma. Bama began to be noted as a writer with the publication of *Karukku* (1992), an autobiographical novel was first published in 1992 in Tamil. It was immediately translated into English (2000) and many other Indian languages. It won the Crossword Award in 2000. Her works include *Kisumbukkaran* (1996). It is translated into English as *Harum, Scarum Saar*. The third one is *Sangati* (1994), which is translated into English as *Events*. The fourth one is *Vanman* (2003), translated into English under the same title in 2008. The works of Bama in Tamil exemplify the emergence of the Dalit writings. She hails as the first Dalit woman writer in India. Bama now works as a teacher in a school at the small village of Uthirameroor near Kancheepuram. Bama's *Karukku* is the first autobiography of its kind in Tamil Dalit literature.

The book was extremely well received by readers and critics alike. It begins with the first person narration. The narrator moves from the past to the present in exploring the varying manifold sets of different incidents, which have taken place in her life. It is a powerful portrayal of Dalit suppression. *Karukku* portrays the Dalits' life and their exploitation and suppression, as its author believes, "Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creations.

The central part of the chapter is the story of Bama's life as a Christian. It is parallel to the story of the nation because Christianity was considered a way for her liberty. It is an offer of freedom addressed specifically to the Dalit. As a child Bama's life fuses into the festivities and rituals of her family and community. But as she moves out of this largely self-

consolidating world into school and then consecutively into the convent, she finds only the crudest self-interest. The caste prejudices that seems worse than anything she has encountered before. For the Dalits in modern India, especially in Tamil Nadu whether they are Christians or not, the Church and its activities play an important role in their community.

The part of Bama's story is that of her betrayal by the promise of freedom and dignity as an Indian. The more riveting account is the story of her betrayal by the convent and the Church. *Karukku* traces a child's life of spiritual development as a Catholic and realisation of herself as a Dalit. Even in that spiritual life, religious rituals, festivals that became part of yearly cycle of crops and seasons, structure the child's life. Later on, she deals with the religious and social life, which detains Dalits as untouchables. The Tamil word *Karukku*, embryo or seed also indicates freshness and newness. In her foreward, Bama draws attention to the symbol. She refers to the words in Hebrews, New Testament in the Bible, "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two edged sword." In her life she had bitter experiences. We can see and observe her feelings and expressions about *Karukku* in her own words. As Bama herself reveals in the preface of the book: "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 spilt then; all these, taken together."<sup>2</sup>

*Karukku* focuses on two essential aspects namely: caste, and religion that cause great pain in Bama's life. Bama has never heard of untouchability until her third standard in school. The first time she comes to know her community's pathetic state, which is ironically tinged with humour. As Bama was returning from school, she finds an elder from her

\* Ph.D. Research Scholar Dept. of English Kakatiya University Jalna, Warangal.

\*\* Head, Dept. of English J. E. S. College, Jalna.

street. He was holding out a small packet of snacks. This packet of snacks is tied in a string. The elder was bringing the snacks by holding the strings without touching the packet and was giving it to a Naicker in the village. Bama was unable to control her laughing, looking at the funny sight. Bama says: "Just then, an elder of our street come along from the direction of the bazaar. The manner in which he was walking along made me want to double up. The self-questioning has begun in Bama with wonder. Bama writes: "What did it mean when they called us 'Paraiya'? had the name become that obscene? But we too are human beings. Our people should never run these petty errands for these fellows. We should work in their fields, take home our wages, and leave it at that"(13). Bama starts to look out for means to uplift herself and her community from this trampled existence. Her elder brother shows her the right path and tells her that education is the only way to attain equality. Bama's elder brother opines: Because we are born into the Paraiya jati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect. 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" (15).

Bama's elder brother's counsel makes a very deep impression on Bama. She wants to prove herself. Ever since her brother speaks to her, she studies hard with all her breath and being. Bama takes her studies very seriously. She sees to it that she always stands first in the class. Bama writes: "In fact, because of that, many people become my friends, even though I am a Paraiya." (15) Throughout her education, Bama finds that wherever she goes, there is a painful reminder of her caste in the form of untouchability. The government offers the financial grants and special tuitions to the Harijans. These grants and tuitions were more of humiliation than consolation, mainly because it singled out her caste identity. Once the identity is revealed, Bama opines: "Among the other students, a sudden rustling; a titter of contempt. I was filled with a sudden rage." (19) It was against the odds that Bama completes her under graduation and B.Ed. Subsequently, she decides to become a teacher. She works in a convent. Bama finds that the nuns working there constantly oppress the Dalit children. When she is in the hostel after completion of her eighth class,

Bama painfully recalls the nuns commenting on the Dalit children. Bama expresses her grief: The warden-sister of our hostel could not abide low-caste or poor children. She'd get hold of us and scold us for no rhyme or reason. If a girl tended to be on the plump side, she'd get it even more. These people get nothing to eat at home; they come here and they grow fat, she would say publicly. When we returned to the school after the holidays, she would say, look at the Cheri children! When they stay here, they eat the fill and look as round as potatoes. But look at the state in which they come back from home just skin and bone (17-18).

In fact, Bama is very happy teaching the children because most of the children in the convent are Dalits. She enjoys teaching with some skill and success. Nuns used to suppress Dalit children and Dalit teachers very much. On seeing the oppression at convent it is Bama who is suddenly struck with the idea of becoming a nun. She decides to sacrifice her life, help the poor and Dalit children. I wanted to be like her, living only for the poor and down trodden; so I entered that particular order." (20-21) Bama works in a Christian religious order where the Tamil nuns are treated inferior and lower. And especially the Tamil Paraiyar nuns are considered lowest of the low. The Paraiya caste nuns are not given any kind of respect and positions in the convent. Bama notices the casteism in the convent. She thought convent is the only exceptional place. She starts realising that one can tolerate outside discrimination from society. But it is very hard to face politics and casteism inside the convent. Because of the purpose of her survival, she has to pretend there. It is a kind of artificiality. Their treatment is different towards Dalit nuns. They do not consider Dalits as human beings. Dalit Christians are fighting against this. In Catholic Christianity partiality is shown... The Christian Dalits have formed Christian Dalit movement and now they demand equality with upper caste Christians. In Tamilnadu eighty percent of the Roman Catholics are Dalits. But in the Tamilnadu Catholic Church, Dalits are not given high positions."<sup>4</sup>

Though the crucial circumstances are like this in the convent, Bama continues to stay in the convent because of her strong determination and perseverance towards the poor and the Dalit children. Those who are taking training with Bama to become nuns are anxious to find out to which caste Bama belongs. Whoever asks Bama about her caste, she answers

honestly without any hesitation. The religious order itself has its own reservation about the Harijan women to become nuns. In a particular class a sister tells Bama that there is a separate religious order for Harijan women to become nuns. Sister says: "They would not accept Harijan women as prospective nuns and that there was even a separate order for them some where." (22) Bama is admitted in the religious order only after she gets confirmation from the convent. The convent has asked for her services. When The nuns in the convent constantly threw insults and abuse against the Dalit students."<sup>5</sup> Christianity stands for love, service and helping others. Convents are service oriented but their orientation is different towards upper castes and Dalits. They could not admit Dalit students in their convent school. Because their standard will fall. They marginalise all Dalits as poor quality. The nuns in the convent speak very insultingly about low caste people. They speak as if they do not even consider low caste people as human beings. About low caste people the nuns' notions are: "Low caste people are all degraded in every way. They think we have no moral discipline nor cleanliness nor culture." (22–23)

Bama reflects over the words of her grand mother who works as a servant for Naicker families. When she works in the fields, even small children would call her by name, order her and command her. The little boys do all these things just because they belong to the Naicker family. Bama's grandmother, like all the other labourers, calls the little boys as Ayya, which is another name for master. When the Paraiya or Dalit women ask drinking water, the Naicker women pour out the water from a height of four feet, while the Paraiya women and others drink water with their cupped hands. One day I went with Paati to the Naicker house. After she had finished all her filthy chores, Paati placed her vessel that she had brought with her, by the side of the drain. The Naicker lady came out with her leftovers, leaned out from some distance and tipped them into Paati's vessel, and went away." (14) When Bama tries to protest, her grandmother tells her: "These people are the Maharajas who feed us our rice without them, how will we survive? Haven't they been upper-caste from generation to generation, and haven't we been lower-caste? Can we change this?" (14) Listening to this Bama feels terrible and concerned about the past generation for their services to the upper caste as slaves and the way they are oppressed in the name of untouchability, casteism, suppression,

domination and whatever it may be.

Bama has bitter experiences at the school. One day all children along Bama were playing at the school in the evening. At that moment somebody has stolen the coconut. The guilt is thrown on her. Everyone says that it was Bama who had plucked the coconut. Actually she was not guilty but the headmaster treats her badly. He scolds her in the name of caste. When she protested, the head master tells her: "You the people of low caste like the manner you have... we can not allow you inside this school. Stand out side." (16) Because of this incident Bama is in agony. She has been ashamed and insulted in front of all the children. After that she gets suspended from the school. When she is crying, a teacher advised her to meet the Church priest for an apology letter. Bama goes to the priest and tells him the whole story in detail. She begs him to give her permission to go back to school. When she takes a note from the priest requesting the principal to allow her in, he abused her thoroughly. Priest says: "After all you are from the Chery, you might have done it. You must have done it." (17) Though she does not commit wrong, she has taken the letter from the priest. Then she gets the permission to sit in the classroom. When she enters the classroom, the entire class looks at her in a strange way. She express: "When I entered the class room, the entire class turned around to look at me, and I wanted to shrink into myself as I went and sat on my bench, still weeping." (17) It is very shocking incident and she is confused by listening to the caste name particularly when she is not mature enough to understand it at all. She does not harp on the humiliation. In the very act of remembering the scene she has encoded the mode of resistance that constructs her in opposition to the hegemonic structure of the caste system."<sup>6</sup>

As a girl she comes across many hurdles in her early life, which makes her think of the casteism. Later she is determined by the words of her brother who tells her the value of education and the respect given to an educated man. Impressed by the words of her brother she studies hard and stands first in the class; because of this she has many friends. Even though three quarters of the school are Harijans the teachers do not hesitate to use Harijan children as labourers to carry water to the teachers' house and for the plants. Dalit children are asked to do all the work at the school. Bama studies up to eighth class in her village. Later she goes to the neighboring town for higher

education. She stays in the hostel where the students wear smart clothes. They have all things what they needed. When one of the nuns sees Bama's poverty the nun convinces Bama's mother and lend her earrings and some money with which she continuous her studies. She joins in college with the cloths what she wore. She wears same dress for a week. Though she is a bright student her caste still haunts her. Her warden sister often used to talk rudely and abuses her about the caste. The class teacher sometimes would ask all the Harijans to stand up during the assembly, which makes her humiliated to stand before thousands of students. When she is awarded as the best Harijan student for S.S.L.C exams, Bama and her mother stand side by side with great pleasure and feel honoured. This incident in her life gives more inspiration. She feels that it is not impossible even for a Harijan to study and from then onwards she excels in her studies with a desire to prove her ability as equal to or better than other students.

Life as a Paraya is hard to live from the very childhood. Everyone has to work in order to earn their living by labouring either for the Naickers or in the fields. Apart from this, they work as construction labour by digging wells, carrying loads of earth, gravel and stone and even if this work is not available they go to the hilltop to gather firewood. They work at the kilns making bricks because more than three quarters of the land belong to the Naickers. Each Paraya family is attached to a Naicker family as bonded labour. Like every other child Bama used to work along her grandmother. Grandmother is a real and proper servant. She used to hire labourers for Naickers. She used to bring workers to work regularly. She supervises them and makes sure they receive their wages. Grandmother has to rise before the cockcrow, gets water and does all household chores. To do all these things Bama and other women used to wake up well before cockcrow. They pour some millet gruel into carrying vessel and go to the fields. The next thing is when there is no fieldwork Bama would collect four annas from her mother. She gives four annas to gardener.

There are Nadar men who have shops in the Paraiyar streets. Paraiyars would exchange the goods, which are brought by them and in return Nadars used to give what the Paraiyars needed. The Paraiyars are badly swindled during their bartering session. They exchange the harvest grain, cotton pods. Every time they take the advantage. But, the Dalits are the ones

who toil hard all life to make good. At the high school hostel, the warden sister makes humiliating remarks against Paraiya children. The upper caste women refused to sit by the Paraiya girls in the bus. These constant reminding of her caste at the school, at the church and at the various institutions instill the awareness about her as a Paraiya in this village girl. These reminders voiced by the headmaster, the priest and the upper caste women. Even after death caste differences does not disappear. Wherever you look, however much you study, whatever you take up, caste discrimination stalks us in every nook and corner and drives us into frenzy. It is because of this that we are unable to find a way to study well and progress likes everyone else. And this is why a wretched lifestyle is all that is left to us." (23) The overwhelming nature of caste and the inhuman proportions to which it develops and pervades in the societies is portrayed here.

When Bama is in the convent, she feels angry at the upper caste convent authorities, because all the menial jobs are done by Dalits. The Dalits are abused all the time and treated in a shameful and degrading way. She is pained to see even older Dalit people trembling, shrinking like small children when they see and talk to the upper castes priests and nuns. Dalits are frightened by the power and wealth that nuns have. After seeing all these things Bama feels uneasy among the unfair and cruel upper caste nuns. Bama writes: "I was dying several deaths with in." (23) Bama carefully examines nuns' thoughts, feelings and behaviour in a particular way. The need for introspection becomes too important to Bama. She looks back on her own attitude towards Christianity and religious faith. She comes to know that religion is forced on the Dalit communities.

It is observed that religion itself is made up of fixed ideas. After Bama finishes her schooling in her village, she joins the convent boarding school to study class IX. So, at this stage, Bama does not feel fear of God anymore. Though the belief is left on God, Bama used to go to prayer every day. She attends retreat programmes. She receives communion. She makes weekly confession with a longing and accepting mind. She decides to become a nun to serve Dalit children. She wants to dedicate her life to God's service. After Bama finishing tenth class, she reveals her wish to one of the sisters. Bama writes: "The fear bhayam, that I felt towards God gradually left me, and love

paasam, grew. I tried to the best of my ability to pray at all times; to go to Jesus, look at him, and talk to him frequently; not to behave in a way that would cause him pain; not to commit sinful deeds; to be good...when I finished my exams after the tenth class, I told one of the sisters about my wish. But she told me that I should only be considered after I had finished my college education.” (87-88)

Despite all the mechanical drills Bama still has faith in Christian religion. She believes in Christian communion. She wants to spread the message of love and brotherhood. Her experience in the convent shatters her illusions about the religion. The nuns themselves do not treat equally. They treat each other based on their caste, language, and wealth. Among the nuns there are divisions. Bama writes: “And even amongst themselves there were caste divisions, divisions between the rich and the poor, and even divisions over the languages that they spoke.” (89) According to Bama God shows the greatest compassion for the oppressed. Jesus associates himself with the poor. But nobody stresses on this point. In the convent no body really insists that God is righteous and he would get angry with those who do injustices and falsehood. So there is a great difference between Jesus in the Bible and Jesus who is known through daily prayers and worships. Bama writes: “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.” (90)

In spite of all her criticism of the nuns, the thought grows more and more in Bama’s mind to become a nun. Later, she resigns her job and enters the religious order. In the end she is disappointed by the order. For the first three years she studies about people’s hardships and suffering. She learns about the human attributes of Jesus. She learns about the woman who found their religious order and how she shows her love and concern for the poor, and how she lives and dies for the poor sake. According to Bama one has to be true to oneself. After realising the situation in the convent, Bama comes to know that there is no connection between the ‘convent God’ and the ‘suffering poor.’ Bama’s mind is suffered for three years in the convent. She is completely alienated from her environment. Bama decides to leave the religious order.

She decides not to live a play acting life. Bama writes: “How long can one play act in this way? Any way it wasn’t possible for me I had to leave the order and come into the world. And I do not know if they have become so habituated to their play-acting that they can no longer distinguish between the role and the reality.” (93) In this connection Holmestrom writes: “Bama thus leaves one community of religious woman in order to join another community as a Dalit woman.”<sup>8</sup>

After coming out from the religious order, Bama feels a sense of fulfillment and belonging to the community of Dalit women but, in spite of the fact that she is economically insecure. Bama writes: “I am now in the position of having to endure the hard ships of being alone in the outside world, and of having to seek work, and even food and drink for my self. I came out into the world. And although it is so hard to make a living, yet I am truly happy to live with a whole and honest mind. I feel certain contentment in leading an ordinary life among ordinary people. I can breath once again, independently and at ease, like a fish that has at last returned to the water, after having been flung out side and suffered distress.” (101-104)

In the Churches, Dalits are the most, in numbers alone. In everything else, they are the least. It is only the upper caste Christians who enjoy the benefits and comforts of the Church. Even amongst the priests and nuns, it is the upper-castes who hold all the high positions, show off their authority and throw their weight about. And if Dalits become priests or nuns, they are pushed aside and marginalised first of all, before the rest go about their business. It is because of this that even though Dalits like me might wish to take up the path of renunciation, we find there is no place for us there (69).

In this connection Ajay Kumar observes: “The condition of a Paraiya under Catholic Church is not different from the ill treatment that he or she suffers within Hindu society. Irrespective of their religious affiliations or even financial position the lower caste people suffered humiliation from the dominant sections of the society.”<sup>9</sup> She being aware of this precarious condition Bama writes: “Even if we are as good as they are, or even better, because of this one issue of caste alone, we are forced to suffer pain and humiliation.” (24) Bama exposes the irony of religious life and Christianity. The nuns in the convent speak very insultingly of the low caste. She does not tell them that she too was from a lower caste. She does

not have the courage to retort. Earlier, as laywoman she could fight and argue with them freely but the etiquette of a nun demands her to be quiet. Bama writes: “The convent too was a well endowed one. And the Jesus they worshipped there was a wealthy Jesus. There seemed to be no connection between the God and the suffering poor.” (90) She wants to question the attitude of the nuns but in the name of her vow of obedience she is silenced. Stella writes: “She was disturbed and shocked to find that the convent and the Church are completely deviated from the doctrines they preached.”<sup>10</sup>

After three years she is transferred to a different place Even if we were to do something for them, they will never make progress. Their natures are like that.” (99) Bama is very much ashamed to hear these words. But she could not question this attitude of the nuns. When Bama enters the convent, she learns more of God and the teaching of Jesus but the Church seem to be hypocritical. This makes her angry with the priests and the nuns. Bama opines: “They, the Dalits, have become aware that they too were created in the likeness of God. There is a new strength within them, urging them to reclaim that likeness which has been so far repressed, ruined, obliterated: and to begin to live again with honour, self-respect and with a love towards all humankind. To my mind, this alone is true devotion.” (94) Priests preach in the Church that God is born in a poor family, lives among the poor and dies for the poor. In the same way they always concentrate on worldly things not on spiritual things. Bama writes: “Always the discussion was at the level of what to prepare, what to eat, what to celebrate and how to enjoy, what to build and what to break, what to buy

where and how to sell it.” (96) When she sees these things, she thinks of her own people living in misery, taking in only gruel all the time. So she decides to leave the convent with a view to liberate the Dalits from the clutches of poverty and serfdom. Stella opines: “The vow of obedience and the virtue of humility become subtle tools of intimidation and she found herself caged in that special world of bondage.”<sup>11</sup> So one fine day in the year 1992 she leaves the religious order. Bama deals with the larger areas such as education, development of Dalit children, Dalit women and on the whole the liberation of the Dalits. As a result of her humiliating experiences as a Dalit, Bama realises that through the right type of education the whole community of Dalit can be empowered and they can gain human dignity. Bama passes through many emotional encounters and experiences. The whole process is a trail of discovery, which makes her a self-made woman.

The life as portrayed in *Karukku* throws light on the most agonising and hapless lives of the Dalits. Bama’s portrayal needs to be understood as representative of the experience. It 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. The journey is tedious, the encounters are painful and the experiences reveal agony. But the process of self-discovery, identification and empowerment has to be necessarily an ordeal. The unpleasant experience and an oppressed soul have to compulsorily undergo a traumatic change. The individual’s act of commission or omission is not individual but that of the society or the land in which she has no option but to be born.

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