

Quest for Identity through Self in Bama's Karukku

¹ Suman Bala, ² Dr Kalpana Rajput

¹ Research Scholar, Jyoti Vidyapeeth Women's University (Jaipur)

² Supervisor, Jyoti Vidyapeeth Women's University (Jaipur)

Abstract : Bama is one of Dalit female writers of the oppressed classes. She has written many books. Her first novel titled *Karukku*, a semi-autobiographical book was published in 1992. She wrote two collections of short stories one titled 'Kisumbukkaran' appeared in 1994, and the other "Just One Word" published in 2017. Her novel titled *Sangati* was published in 1996 and 'Vanmam' was in 2003. Bama herself has experienced the exploitation and suppression because of her caste and gender in the patriarchal society. She tries to expose the miserable life of her 'Paraiyar' community and issues like caste, religion and gender in all her novels. Her stories and novels have given a graphic description of the lives of the Dalits. Bama gives expression to the sub-human treatment meted out to the lowest of the low castes – the Parayars. Bama's work is a powerful voice of whole Dalit communities who struggle to overcome inequalities, suppression and exploitation which they been facing since times immemorial. In my paper, I shall try to highlight the exploitation and marginalisation against Dalit women because of caste and poverty and being Dalit women outside and inside the house.

IndexTerms - Caste, gender, self, anger, resistance.

Identity generally means the qualities, looks, beliefs or expressions that distinguish a person from other persons on the basis of his individuality or distinction of his family, community, race, religion from others. However, Bama seems to believe that there are two factors that decide a person's identity. One factor is caste and the second is religion. These two factors are the deciding factor behind Bama's concept of identity.

Dalit identity means awareness of his pride, self-realisation, self-affirmation and self-love. Dalit identity develops Dalit perspective means searching for a new identity, self-awareness, self-esteem and social-equality. It rejects the stereo-typed morals and values of the caste system. Dalit identity brings consciousness and awareness of his place in society. Dalit consciousness means Dalit identity which is an assertion of his equal status as a human being. Upper castes established a hierarchal order in society. They left the untouchables outside the varna system. It is very obvious that untouchables were baptised with different titles such as 'Dasa', 'Asura', 'Dasyu' etc. Various titles were given to Dalits at regional level. For example, 'chuhra' in Punjabi, 'Bhangi' and 'Lalbegi' in Hindi, 'Mahar' in Maharashtra, 'Mala' and 'Madiga' in Telugu, 'Periyar' 'Pallan' and Chakkiliyar in Tamil etc. These names were used during the Pre-Vedic and pre-colonial period. During colonial period Dalits were called 'Depressed classes' 'Backward Classes' 'Untouchables' 'Schedule Caste' and 'Harijan'. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar used the title Untouchables and M. K. Gandhi, the pioneer of the welfare of untouchables, branded them as 'Harijans'. These titles are not given to Dalits by their choice but these are imposed upon them by the Hindu caste system. In 1972, a group in Maharashtra used the word 'Dalit' as the title for their movement 'Dalit Panthers'. In 1980, untouchables picked this title slowly and gradually and they accepted it generally. After that untouchables identified themselves as Dalits. The word 'Dalit' has now become a metaphor of change and revolution. Dalits don't choose the names themselves that are given to them. They are given to them by the upper castes.

Bama in her autobiography *Karukku* has exposed the hypocrisy of the upper castes, church and school, exploitation by upper castes and within her own community. Wherever she went, she faced discrimination being a Dalit. Dalits may be economically empowered but their *Dalitness* remains with them till death. Socially they are not accepted by upper castes as equal human beings.

Bama in her autobiography has expressed the question of Dalit identity through various stages of her life. *Karukku* focuses on Bama's life as a child, a Christian and a Dalit woman. She has expressed her past life as a Paraya girl, a teacher and a nun. Her autobiography has become a symbol of resistance. It describes the childhood of the writer. Bama observes:

There are many congruities between the saw-edged palmyra *Karukku* and own life. My own life. Not only did I pick the scattered palmyra *Karukku* in the days when I was set out to gather firewood, scratching and tearing my skin as I played with, but later they also become the embryo and symbol that grew into this book." (13)

Karukku has become an emblem to break all the old traditions and Dalit efforts to assert their own identity.

Bama has recorded some of her own personal bitter experiences that moulded her character and made her what she is today. The pain and anguish she had been subjected to since her childhood, she expressed in her Preface to *Karukku*. She writes:

In order to change this state of affairs, all dalits who have been deprived of their basic rights must function as God's word, piercing to the very heart. Instead of being more and more beaten down and blunted, they must unite, think about their rights and battle for them". She further continued "the driving force that shaped this book are many: events that occurred during many steps of my life, cutting me like 'Karukku' (rugged edged palmyra leaf) and making me bleed... (xiii).

Dalits since the ancient times have submitted to the atrocities by the upper castes. They believed that it was their destiny to submit to upper castes and work like animals. In *Karukku* Bama has depicted how Dalits were exploited by upper castes because of their caste. It is believed that caste is as pure as religion. P. Mohan Larbeer has very rightly pointed out: "Caste is the one and only criteria for identifying anyone in today's caste-ridden society." (322) Because of their caste, Dalits were not treated as human beings by the upper castes. Bama's grandmother worked in the houses of upper caste Naikers. Even the small children didn't give any respect to elder Dalits. They called her Patti by her name. But Bama's grandmother addressed the small one as 'Ayya' like the other labourers. Bama says: "And this grandmother, like all the other labourers, would call the little boy Ayya." (16)

When Bama was three years old, she became aware of the caste-discrimination. She narrated an incident of caste-discrimination to her elder brother Annan. Bama remarks: "...an elder of our street came along from the direction of the bazaar. The manner in which he was walking along made me want to double up. I wanted to shriek with laughter at the sight of such a big man carrying a small packet in that fashion...The elder went straight up to the Naiker, bowed low and extended the packet towards him, cupping the hand that held the string with his other hand. Naiker opened the parcel and began to eat the vadais."(15) After reaching home, she told everything to her elder brother. Her brother observes: "He said everybody believed that Naikers were upper caste, and therefore must not touch Parayas. If they did, they would be polluted."(15) On listening to all this, the writer retorts: "How could they believe that it was disgusting if a Paraya held the package in his hands, even though the vadai had been wrapped first in a banana leaf, and parcelled in paper?"(15)

What did it mean when they called us Paraya? Had the name become that obscene? But we too are human beings."(16) One day Bama's elder brother Annan was returning from the library to his home. On the way one of the upper caste men was behind him. The upper caste man asked Annan, his name and whereabouts. Her elder brother replied sharply: "I am a Paraya from cheri street."(17) The upper caste Naiker considered the way he answered, as a slap in the face. He enquired about Annan and spoke to Patti angrily: "How dare your grandson talk to me so arrogantly?" (17) This incident shows that Dalits don't have any right to live with dignity. Although her brother was educated, yet according to the upper castes, he didn't have the right to talk confidently. Annan told the writer: "Because we are born into the Paraya jati, we are never given any honour or dignity or we are stripped of that all."(17-18) He insisted on education to overcome indignities heaped upon Dalits. He said that education could bring respect and dignity to dalits: "But if we study and progress, we can throw away these indignities."(18)

Bama has also given other incidents of untouchability. She says that when any of the Dalit women asked for water to drink, the upper caste woman poured water into their cupped hands from a distance: "Even the way they were given their drinking water was disquieting to watch. The Naiker women would pour out the water from a height of four feet." (16) When Bama's Patti went to fetch the leftover food from the Naiker's house after finishing the filthy chores, the upper caste women dropped the leftover food in Patti's vessel from a distance. Bama observes: "After she has finished all her filthy chores, Patti placed the vessel that she had brought with her, by the side of the drain. The Naiker lady came out with her leftovers, leaned out from some distance and tipped them into Patti's vessel, and went away. Her vessel, it seemed, must not touch Patti's, it would be polluted."(16) After seeing all this, Bama asked her Patti about such humiliating behaviour. At this her Patti remarks: "These people are the maharajas who feed us our rice, without them, how we will survive? Haven't they been upper caste from generation to generation and haven't we been lower caste? Can we change this?"(16) This shows that Dalits think that it is in their fate to submit meekly to the upper castes. Bama's *Karukku* depicts the Dalit women in different situations and their struggle against the system of male domination. Bama praises Dalit women for their creativity and their ability to resist even though they faced humiliation and exploitation everywhere. Miserable condition of Dalit women is due to their lack of education. In this autobiography, she has given graphic picture of humiliation and exploitation of dalit Christian women by the church. They were denied the opportunity to sing during the church service. They were made to study in a separate school for poor and dalit children while the upper class children studied in a separate school with better facilities. Bama also describes sexual harassment and exploitation of dalit women. She opposes and questions the male perspective from the point of view of a woman.

Bama, in her fictional autobiography pointedly depicts the work generally done by dalit women not only at home but also outside, for her own family as well as the upper classes. She points out that violence against women is considered a normal routine by the family, church and the government. In *Karukku* she describes how dalit women do hard labour in the fields of upper class landlords and still are brutalised by upper castes as well as their own family members. A dalit woman has to work hard right since her childhood to the last breath of her life. She documents here dalit woman's struggle for education and empowerment and a dignified existence. Dalit girls were treated as inferior and were given a subordinate position even at play. Bama in her autobiography has described in detail the games played by children in a dalit village. At play, the boys enacted the role of Naikers (upper class landlords) and dalit girls played the role of farmhands. In another situation, the boys acted as shopkeepers and girls played the role of dalit customers who had come to buy grocery. In the play about church, the boys would act as priests and the dalit girls played the part of Dalit nuns. Sometimes, the dalit boys would pose as drunken husbands and dalit girls as wives subject to violence. Thus even at play the patriarchal system prevailed and caste discrimination would continue.

Dalit girls are not looked after properly at home and they have to look after themselves. They often go in search of food without any protection. They are not given any opportunity for education. Dalit girls go to school only for mid-day meals. But dalit girls who like Bama get the opportunity for education have to face caste discrimination at school. She has given a graphic description in *Karukku* of being felt humiliated at being born in a dalit family while studying in 3rd standard. But return from school was an enjoyable experience for her. She could go to the bazaar and enjoy the scenes of monkey dance and snake charmer. The sweet smell coming from different eating stalls, magic shows, and puppet shows the scene of gypsies selling their goods appeared very refreshing.

Karukku is a fine example of patriarchal society, caste-discrimination and untouchability at church. Laxmi Holstrom in the Introduction to *Karukku* writes: "Church rules, such as the one against the divorce, militate against women and keep them under control; parish priests are not sympathetic towards women's individual choice of life-partner; they are given the meanest job in the church with the promise of a reward in heaven." (xviii) Laxmi Holstrom in the Introduction to *Karukku* remarks:

Karukku is concerned with the single issue of caste oppression within the Catholic church and its instructions and presents Bama's life as a process of lonely self-discovery."...The tension throughout *Karukku* is between the self and

the community: the narrator leaves one community (the religious order) and affirms her belonging to another (a Dalit community, particularly of women). (xvii)

Kurukku is not only an autobiography but a tool of revolution. Bama fought bravely everywhere: at school, church, and against the rotten caste-system. After completing her B. Ed, Bama became a teacher and taught for about five years in a school. She fought for social equality and dignity of Dalit children. For the betterment of Dalit children, Bama decided to become a nun. She thought that she as a teacher could help Dalit children in a better way. But it was only a misconception of Bama. Church was not untouched by the leprosy of untouchability and caste-discrimination. After the completion of her training at church, Bama was anointed as nun. But church had separate order for Dalits there. The convent school was full of caste-division. Bama remarks: "In that school....people of my community were looking after all the jobs like sweeping the premises, swabbing and washing the classrooms, and cleaning out the lavatories....They spoke as if they didn't even consider low-caste people as human beings."(25) At church Dalits were suppressed and tortured in the name of Jesus. They were not appointed on higher positions in church. They were assigned the lowly jobs there. Bama remarks: "Far worse is the attitude within our church. They have made use of Dalits who are immersed in ignorance as their capital, set up a big business, and only profited their own castes. In the churches, Dalits are the most in numbers alone. In everything else, they are at the bottom. It is only the upper-caste Christians who enjoy the benefits and comforts of 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."(80)

It was obvious that Dalits were not treated equally at schools. The Nadar schools only admitted Nadar children and Naiker schools admitted only Naiker children and Aiyar schools admitted only Aiyar children. Catholic nuns and priests said that if any one of their schools admitted Dalit children, their standard would fall. Bama remarks: "...if Dalits accept that nobody else will take any notice of them, and ask for admission in the schools run by Catholic nuns and priests, they are told that if they take Dalit children, their standard will fall. They marginalize all of us Dalits as being of poor quality."(119) Dalit children were always the culprits at school. Whatever bad happened at school, Dalit children were considered responsible for it. Bama says: "If ever anything bad happened, they would say immediately, and without hesitation, 'It must be one of the Cheri's children do it.'"(18) At school, Dalit children did all the chores for their teachers like slaves. They were used as cheap labourers. Bama remarks: "...they didn't hesitate to use us for cheap labour...we carried water to the teachers' house; we watered the plants. We did all the chores that were needed about the school."(18) Bama has documented another incident at school. When one day, she was plucking the coconuts from coconut tree along with other students, the coconut tree dropped with a thud. It was said that she plucked it. When next morning she came to school, she was summoned to the assembly and humiliated there in front of all the students. Bama remarks: "The next morning at assembly, the headmaster called out my name. 'You have shown us your true nature as a 'Paraya'.'"(18) Bama told that the headmaster belonged to Chaaliyar caste and there was a conflict between Paraya and Chaaliyar castes. The headmaster again comments: "After all, you are from the Cheri. You might have done it. You must have done it."(19) This clearly shows that Dalits were not only humiliated by upper castes but by their own men also. Similarly Omparkash in his autobiography *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* has pointed out that govt. schools were opened for the upliftment of the Dalits. Even today the attitude of the upper caste teachers towards the Dalit children is harsh and humiliating. Valmiki suffered a lot during his stay at schools. The headmaster of school, Kaliram, assigned him to clean the rooms and verandas and sweep the playground for three days. On the last day, the writer went to the class and sat quietly. Seeing him the headmaster, Kaliram shouted 'Abey Chuhreke, motherfucker, where are you hiding...your mother....' (5)

Bama has described her experiences at hostel. At hostel, the warden sister was as cruel as upper castes. She rebuked the Dalit children for no rhyme or reason. If any of Dalit girl grew plump, it was intolerable for the warden sister: "These people get nothing to eat at home; they come here and they grow fat."(20) When the Dalit children returned to school after vacations, they received the same remarks by the warden sister: "Look at the Cheri's children! When they stay here, they eat their fill and look as round as potatoes. But look at the state in which they come back from home—just skin and bone!"(20)

Bama was very angry at whatever she experienced at school, at church and in her community. She retorts: "In this society, if you are born into a low caste, you are forced to live a life of humiliation and degradation until your death. Even after death, caste-difference does not disappear. Wherever you take up, caste-discrimination stalks us in every nook and corner and drives us into frenzy."(26)

"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 contempt."(27)

Bama believes that education can play a very significant role for Dalits in claiming treatment as human beings. Bama has laid emphasis on education. Education to some extent has given Dalits a kind of power to fight against such atrocities. In one of her interviews Bama states: "Education is supposed to change the society but it is an institution which caters to the caste system."(6) Again she remarks in one of her interviews about *Kurukku*: "When *Kurukku* came out, at that time, it fed that fire of social awareness."(4) Again Bama in one of her interviews remarks about assertion of Dalits: "It is a struggle. It hasn't started now. We have been resisting from the beginning. Now because Dalits are politically more aware, educationally a little better off, these become threatening to the oppressors. Dalits want change; whether it is in religion, politics or in literature, but their oppressors don't want it. When they want to celebrate their freedom and assert themselves, upper castes want to oppress them again. That is what Bhima Kaoregaon is about. Una showed that a cow is more important than a Dalit life. It shows that they are treated less than animals."(6)

To conclude, it can be said that caste and religion are the strongest factors to decide a person's identity. Bama in her autobiography has exposed the hypocrisy of the upper castes the church and in religion. She has depicted her struggle for her dignity and social-identity and equality. She not only fights for herself but also for the whole Dalit community. *Karukku* is not an autobiography of a single woman but it is a representation of the whole Dalit community.

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