

A DALIT LEAP: RECONCEIVING CASTE AND GENDER PERFORMATIVITIES.

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Abstract

Karukku is a private chronicle publicizing the Dalit personal experiences to a broad spectrum of people born with silver spoons in their mouths. The stinging struggles by Bama – a Tamil Dalit woman born in a Roman Catholic family – and her fellow people to make a living out of their stinking existence is the part and parcel of this autobiography.

Bama's restructuring of her performativity – both as a woman and a Dalit writer – bestows her work a unique stance in the tradition of Dalit writing. The genuine rendering of a soul of double marginalisation, untouchability and financial hegemony, Bama's narrative is the tale of every Dalit who fall prey to the brutality of the prosperous upper castes. The narrative style of the plot is never cut off from the readers as they feel one with the author and literally witness the spiteful discriminations while treading on through the plot.

Direct, open and courageous exposure of a Dalit heart with tremendous confidence and composure, *Karukku* - as the name suggests, like the palmyra leaves - becomes a double edged sword cutting deep into the flesh of false caste consciousness, wealth and power. *Karukku* – the influential manifesto of Dalit consciousness – delineates the plight of every Dalit born human trying to carve out a life of him/her. This paper attempts to delve into the nuances of Bama's performativity and her resilience after the traumatic experiences.

Keywords: Dalit consciousness, performativity, double marginalisation, untouchability and financial hegemony.

Introduction

“The concept of Dalit itself suggests suppression, exploitation, oppression and humiliation”— opines Dr N. Shanthanaik (1). Every Dalit born man is the victim of caste hierarchy and marginalization whereas a Dalit born woman is marginalized even more primarily by caste and ultimately by gender. As Paswan notes, women could aptly be defined as the ‘dalits among dalits’ or the ‘downtrodden among the downtrodden’ (271). Dalit women are denied of any ‘basic amenities’ like ‘drinking water’, ‘health care’ or ‘land ownership’ and they are forced to do all the household chores, look after the children and go for some coolie works to meet the needs of the families. “The majority of the Dalit women do not even know the smell of education and schools due to their impoverished situation, their third class position in society” (Paswan 272). Paswan further notices:

Women who constitute half the human race have been oppressed to a greater or lesser degree in every country, in every class of society. The nature and degree of oppression varies in the different socio-economic, political and cultural systems. In India, the situation of women is complex because we are divided not only by class but by caste also. Dalit women who

constitute the major working force are thrice alienated and oppressed on the basis of class, caste and gender. (271-72)

The women born in Christian Dalit community are neither liberated nor completely enslaved, but they are simply tolerated as breeders of babies, care takers, cooks and bread winners (Paswan 271). *Karukku* by Bama is the life of a community who are weighed down by the burden of their identity. Being a Tamil Dalit Christian woman, born into the distressing setting of caste, class and gender discriminations, Bama's education and her intellect form the two edges of Bama's psyche making her a double-edged sword – 'karukku'. Her people are the narratives of agony, distress, pain and never ending toil. They are the folk who live their life never ever dreaming of future prosperity. They are the group whose dreams have been withered down by their feudal lords. As Bama in *Karukku* sets it, "[a]ccording to their [upper castes] notions, low-caste people are all degraded in every way. They think we have no moral discipline nor cleanliness nor culture. They think that this can never be changed. To aid us is like aiding cobras" (26).

Bama notes down the misery of the Dalits in agonizing letters:

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, though? It seems we have to swallow our anger and just carry on with our troubled lives. (27)

Karukku becomes a living testimony of the traumatic existence of the Dalits as Bama states: "From the time I was a small child, I saw people working hard; I grew up amongst such people. At home, my mother said my grandmother laboured from sunrise to sunset, without any rest. And to this day, in my village, both men and women can survive only though [sic] incessant labour" (48).

Untouchability was the severest of the injustices the Dalits were forced to tolerate. The pain of a Dalit is well captured in Bama's recollection, "I should not touch their [Naickers] goods or chattels; I should never come close to where they were. I should always stand away to one side. These were their rules. I often felt pained and ashamed" (53).

Bama dexterously depicts various classes of people within her community who followed the professions provided to them by the society based on their castes, hardly dared to raise their voice. The Koravar or the gypsies and the Chakkaliyar made their living by sweeping the streets and by cleaning the drains. At times these people even 'wove winnowing trays, boxes, baskets for carrying paddy, and chicken coops', to earn a bit more. Each and every one of her community had to toil hard for their livelihood. But a few families in the community, especially of teachers', got a degree of comfort (49). Unlike the people of her community only Bama was a being with some sort of a questioning attitude who dared to make a leap above her traditionally given performativity.

As the famous American philosopher and the gender theorist Judith Butler proposes, "performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration" (*Gender Trouble* xv). Each human being is shackled within the performative acts of gender – of

masculine and feminine traits. “The view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body” (xv). Borrowing from Butler, it can be stated that just as the gender is constructed in a human being, any of the identity is constructed in her/him through a set of repeated acts performatively constituting that particular identity.

All the characteristic traits of a Dalit imbibed are the result of a set of acts which are repeated over a course of time. Each of her/his identity is the result of the performativity thrust upon her/him by the social circle. As a woman meekly accepts her ‘femininity’, most of the Dalits without a second thought, accept their downtrodden position. There is an instance in the novel which confirms this perception. Bama recollects her childhood experiences and cites that both her grandmothers worked as the servants of the *Naickers*. She says that she had seen one of these grandmothers being addressed by her name by the little *Naicker* children just because she belonged to the low caste. The grandma on the other hand called these little children ‘*Ayya*’ and ‘*Master*’. Bama further notes: “Even the way they [Bama’s grandmothers] were given drinking water was disquieting to watch. The *Naicker* women would pour out the water from a height of four feet, while *Paatti* and the others received and drank it with cupped hands held to their mouths. I always felt terrible as I watched this” (16).

Bama is the only soul in her community who longs for a radical change from all these meaningless rituals. She remembers *Paatti* bringing home the left-over rice and curry from the *Naicker* family like the ‘nectar of gods’. Bama realizes only later that the food brought home was the ‘unwanted food the *Naickers* were ready to throw away’ (16). Bama precisely notes in *Karukku*:

One day I went with *Paatti* to the *Naicker* house. After she had finished all her filthy chores, *Paatti* placed the vessel 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 *Paatti*’s vessel, and went away. Her vessel, it seemed, must not touch *Paatti*’s; it would be polluted. Sometimes later, I said to *Paatti* she should not lay herself open to such behavior; it was ugly to see. What *Paatti* said to me in return was this: 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? (16-17)

Born into the caste that forms the lowest of the lowest strata in the society, the Dalits never got a chance to educate themselves as poverty forced them to abandon the dreams on education and do any of the menial jobs available. Bama was one among the very few Dalit women of her times to get a fairly well education as she was stubborn in becoming independent through education. The condition of the little children of her community was worst beyond imagination. Bama recounts the plight of the little skinny children who willingly subjugated themselves to their ‘fate’:

These tiny, crab-like children pour their *kuuzh* into their carriers half asleep, totter along to the van, climb in and go off to work. They work at sticking on matchbox labels; they make firecrackers and use chemicals; and they return home exhausted, at seven in the evening. At an age when they should be going to school, studying like everyone else and playing about in the

evenings, they are shut up in the factories instead. . . . But these little one's fate is the smell of matchbox solution, not the smell of knowledge or learning. (55)

Bama also talks of the inequalities faced by women on the grounds of gender as they were always paid lower wages than men though they toiled equally. The people of her community suffered like beasts in terms of their work burden and it is an aching reality that they managed to move on feeding on the stinking broken-grain gruel something which they could afford. At the rate of the work they had done, these people were sure to progress in their lives. But their progress was inhibited by the cunning employers who deceived them paying the least wages (54). The Dalits never dream or at least muse over the possibility of an escape from this hell of an existence. Bama remarks: "This is a community that was born to work. And however hard they toil, it is the same *kuuzh* everyday. The same broken-grain gruel. The same watery dried-fish curry. It seems they never reflect upon their own terrible state of affairs. . . . [I]t's only when they fall asleep at night that their arms and legs are still . . ." (55).

Being a Dalit woman, Bama constantly felt doubly marginalised as she was always behind the bars of caste and gender. In her eternal search to quake the foundations of the threatening existence of the Dalits, Bama at first chooses to be a girl with better education, finally to be a teacher and then a nun. The treatment she received even as a teacher was not a happy one. Attempts to leap over the performativity bestowed to her by the society are always seen in Bama. She reminisces over the experience: "At my first place of work, a nun asked me, 'Are you a *Nadar*?' I said, 'No, we are *Parayar*.' When I recall the expression that came over her face, I want to laugh, even now" (23). It was Bama's own choice to be a nun so that she could change the desperate condition of her fellow people. But the sore reality came to Bama when she realized from a nun that "in certain orders they would not accept *Harijan* women as prospective nuns and that there was even a separate order for them somewhere" (25). Bama reveals her agony; "I lamented inwardly that there was no place that was free of caste" (25).

To her dismay, the nunhood provided Bama all the comforts and luxuries that a nun should forsake in her life—in the life of spirituality and sacrifice. Only gradually did Bama realize the corruptions within the convents which always supported the wealthy few. Fed up with the financial hegemony and the extravagant life, it was her daring which guided Bama to bounce over her traditionally given performativity and create a new one for herself. Knowing that she couldn't do anything free being a nun, Bama dares to shake off herself from the garb of nunhood. It was the same courage and vigour which made her to dedicate her entire life for the needy people of her community.

Conclusion

Karukku is the candid expression of a Dalit mind with the least amount of fictional elements or dramatic expressions. The narrative smells the sweat of the people of Bama's community who worked continuously day and night without rest. It smells the blood of the people who became the scapegoats of caste rivalries within her village. Bama's new found performativity is the keystone of this autobiographical narrative which elevates her to the level of a double-edged sword – a '*karukku*'. With the sole purpose of cutting across the injustices on the basis of caste, gender and wealth, Bama reconceives her pre-given performativities. Apart from a mere subversion of the status quo, the woman in

Bama uses the traditionally bestowed feminine performativity to shatter the same ultimately to transcend the barriers of gender and caste.

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