

# Powerful Imagery and Symbol in ‘Karukku’ and Traumatic suffering of Marginalisation

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## Abstract

The present paper presents traumatic suffering of Dalits in society. Through the analysis of symbol and imagery, the theme of marginalization has been brought into focus. Paraiya Dalit Christian community is the most neglected community in society. They suffer double or triple marginalization. While analyzing its symbol and imagery, we discover this kind of outlook of society towards Dalit people in Tamilnadu. The trauma of marginalization is suffered both by men and women. Bama herself was humiliated several times only because she was a Dalit Christian.

**Keyword:** Trauma, marginalization, pathetic image, untouchability

The word symbol is derived from ‘symbellein’ meaning ‘to throw together from the Greek ‘symbolon’ which meant token, sign. A symbol is a sign whether visual or verbal stands for something else in a speech community. It is part of our literary competence that we draw out of symbolism. It stands for our interpretation of the imagery from the context. Poetic symbols are characteristically metaphoric in structure. In a novel, symbolism may be more diffuse in the realization of character and objects that require a symbolic force and helps toward an understanding of the theme of the work as a whole. Through these symbolic codes, we draw our understanding of a text. Hence it refers to anything animate or inanimate that represents something beyond what is perceived.

As Perrine states ‘a Literary symbol’ is something mean more than what it is. It is an object, a person, situation, an action or some other item that has a literal meaning in the story but suggests or represents the other meaning as well. In literature, images sprung up in language and through them, a writer evokes instances of physical, sensual perception. Language could therefore, be considered a bridge linking the external world and human mind. While analyzing Bama’s writing, powerful and pathetic images are

found an important feature of her writing. An image is a word or phrase in a text that appeals directly to the reader's taste, touch, hearing, sight or smell. The image refers to sensual experience. An image is thus a picturesque phrase that evokes a particular sensation in the reader's mind.

Let us see the author's preface, Bama herself explains symbol that function as the title of the novel. "There are many congruities between the saw-edged palmyra 'Karukku' in the days when I was sent to gather firewood, scratching and tearing my skin as I played with them; But later they also became the embryo and symbol that grew into this book(Author's Preface, Karukku)."

Palmyra leaf is used as cooking fuel and as material for the roof in South Indian village. But the word 'karu' means embryo in Tamil is brought into play. The above lines of preface, speaks poignantly about Bama's state of mind when she wrote her autobiography. Palmyra leaf has its sharp edge that symbolizes the cruelty of system that gives Bama her pain. The realization of the tentacle of caste at every level of society is a profound shock to her.

In 'Karukku' Bama observes inhuman treatment of upper caste given to grandmother in the Naiker's house. One day she went with her Paati to the Naiker's house. After she finished all the filthy chores, she placed her vessel by the side of the drain which she had brought with her. Her grandmother was given unwanted food. Naiker women "dropped the stale food into her vessel by the side of drain from a distance (Karukku, 16 )." It seemed as if her vessel would be polluted if it is touched by Bama's Paati. The image of unwanted food suggests their identity in India showing their wretched condition. Bama raises question against the system of inhumanity in form of casteism that has permitted this kind of injustice in society. But her grandmother has internalized these propositions of society. So she does not react and asks even Bama to be silent.

'Karukku' focuses on two essential aspects namely caste and religion. Paraiya Christian community suffers marginalization on the basis of these two aspects that are the main cause of their suffering. Until her third standard, Bama never heard of untouchability. But one day she was returning home from school. She saw an elder man of her community with the packet of vedai. "He came along, holding out the packet by its

string, without touching it (Karukku, 15).” He “ 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 vedais (Karukku, 15).” At this funny sight, she could not control her laugh. But her Annan explained that Naiker were upper caste and must not touch upper caste. That is why he had to carry the package by its string. Now the image of ‘man holding the packet of Vedai’ arouses the feeling of hatred in her heart toward upper caste and self-questioning starts “What did it mean when they called us ‘Paraiya’?. Had the name become so obscene? But we too are human beings (Karukku, 16).”

Paraiya Christian community is treated partially both by police and church. In society they are considered the lowest caste. Though Pallar and Chaaliyar are also Dalit community but these feel themselves higher caste to Paraiya Christian community. Over the dispute of cemetery between Paraiya and Chaaliyar, Bama presents the pathetic image of Paraiya people. These Paraiya people are whipped like an animal while no Chaaliyar is questioned. They walk out freely with an air of victory. Police act upon the false report of Chaaliyar and beat Paraiya people mercilessly. Alphonso was beaten so much that he could not stop vomiting blood and died on the second day. The headman who hid in the earthenware was dragged by the policeman. He was dragged and kicked. If one policeman slapped the headman’s face, all the rest followed and slapped him in the very same spot. “We continued to hear the thuds as the police struck their heavy blows, our men screaming in pain and women shouting and yelling in protest (Karukku, 38).” A ten-year boy died in this strangling atmosphere. The women went with a sari to the hiding father and disguised him in a sari. Some women dug the grave at night and buried the boy. The father was not able to weep due to fear of the police. The men who were hiding in the belfry of the Church were caught and taken away. The priest was relaxed. He could not lend even a trivial loan of five rupees to the Dalit at this crucial condition. Images are realistically portrayed and evoke sympathy in the reader. These pathetic images of men and women during riot depict their miserable condition in society. How they are encircled by Priest, Police, Chaaliyar and Naiker with their attitude of hatred and jealousy. Bama sketches the image of Dalit to make the reader aware how the cruel and inhuman social order crushed them and made their life sorrowful and

unbearable in society. She has sketched powerful images reflecting their real condition in the following lines:

In those days, my mother too used to go collecting firewood. On one occasion she brought home a bundle of firewood, leaned it against the wall, and then began vomiting vast gobs of blood. But it was only by toiling like this, without taking any account of their bodies as human flesh and blood, that people of community even survive (Karukku, 52).

Here Bama through her mother's description presents images 'as leaned against the wall', 'vast gob of blood' which reveal the fact of the hard life of Dalit women and their miserable condition. Even after doing so much hard work it is difficult for them to survive.

Social structure and economy contribute to suppressing the poor as our society is constructed in such a way to nourish only the wealthy. Because of poverty, they pay their whole attention to the question of how to survive. The social structure is such that in spite of hard work they don't get enough to fulfill their basic need. Poverty contributes in a major way to the ineffectiveness of the educational system. Due to poverty, children are forced to support their family by working. Dalit poor girls are usually found to be school dropouts. As labourer either they become involved in agriculture or some strenuous jobs like working in match factories, construction- works, well digging and so on. Even if some girls study as soon as they get period, they are married leaving their study.

The casteism is such a disease that is a blot on our Indian society which is reflected in Bama's statement "We are also human being (Karukku,16)." Even after forty years of independence, these people are not able to live an ordinary respectful life. These Dalits are subjugated and receive heartless treatment at the hand of upper castes. Bama finds dual standard existing even in Church and convent. On the one hand Christianity preaches the lesson of equality but in reality, they support caste system through their partial treatment and Brahmanic vision. Bama describes how these Dalit Christian are not allowed to bury their dead in the cemetery which is in the village churchyard. They are made to use the different graveyard outside the village. Nun's focalization on low caste poor children "Look at the cheri children! When they

stay here, they eat their fill and look as round as potatoes. But look at the state in which they came from home-just skin and bone (Karukku, 20).” The image of skin and bone has become the identity of their physique and its exception becomes the cause of jealousy and tension for other.

Marginality is a term that refers to those people who are living in miserable condition due to poverty and whose access is denied to the general luxuries of life. In ‘Karukku’ Paraiya people are the most neglected community in society. They suffer double or triple marginalization. Karukku is being analysed through its symbol and imagery that reveal this kind of outlook of society toward Dalit people in Tamilnadu.

Dalit women suffer the lowest status in society and are brutally marginalised. Dalit men face unjust social domination outside which they impose on their women inside their home. Men folk after fight the between Paraiya and Chaaliyar went to hide in the forest. But in order to survive women were forced to work at very low wages. They were the most vulnerable to sexual harassment and abuse in the world of work. A girl child always had to look after all the chores at home. The landless Dalit women are compelled to work in the field of upper caste Naiker.

The term Dalit connotes trauma, marginalization, discrimination and otherness. The trauma of marginalization is suffered both by men and women. Their traumatic experience is repetitive and this is cumulative experience rather than an unexpected catastrophic event. A traumatic experience is such a situation or event that brings agony, distress and disruption. Bama’s Karukku can be said a trauma narrative as it focuses on suffering and resistance of the oppressed Christian Dalit community. The paper focuses on victimization from socio-political sphere through the help of symbol and images.

Bama had to fight with various odds of society in her study. After completing study she decided to serve the people of her community by teaching in the convent. She was inspired by Jesus Christ in her life and became a nun to serve people in the convent. But here too she finds the same obstacle existing for people from the lower castes. Bama herself was humiliated several times only because she was a Dalit Christian. When it became impossible for her to tolerate, she resigned and went back to her village to join community life. She never regrets that she had to resign from the convent. But on the other hand, she

celebrates her newly found freedom at the end of the narrative. The embryo Bama refers to is the Dalit consciousness and symbolizes new revolution that aims at bringing about a new social order based on non-violence, justice and equality. Apart from having its sharp edge 'Karukku' has other function that is to regain their lost dignity. As Bama writes: "There are other Dalit hearts like mine, with the passionate desire to create a new society made up of justice, equality and love. They who have been oppressed are now themselves like the double edged 'Karukku' challenging their oppressor (Author's Preface, 'Karukku, )."

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