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Marginalization and Discrimination of Subaltern : Bama's *Karukku*

Abstract

The history of Dalit literature or *Fourth World literature* can be traced back to centuries. Dalit literature was not given any consideration at the beginning. But, Now a days, several Dalit writers' books have been translated to English and spread all over the world. Every Dalit writer struggles to attain a kind of identity through his/her writing. Now a days, especially in Southern India, which has diverse caste system, Dalit literature is written by various Dalit writers to reveal their trauma and sufferings they experience. We have an answer for Gayatri Spivak's never ending question "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*". The answer is "Yes. The Subaltern can speak". Dalit writers have began to write about their own identity, their own search for liberation. They express their struggles and their *Strategic Essentialism* through their writings. This paper will focus on *Marginalization* of Dalits and how they are discriminated by caste system in an Indian Dalit writer Bama's work *Karukku*.

Keywords: *Subaltern, Marginalization, Discrimination, Dalit, Inequality, Caste System, Untouchability.*

In *Karukku*, Bama has narrated her own life in Tamilnadu, where inequality and untouchability is practiced at its zenith. Though Caste system was legally abolished by Dr.Ambedkar, it still has its roots in certain areas of India. Bama's *Karukku* is a microcosm of various societies in Tamilnadu where the caste system still prevails. Bama, as an autobiographical writer expresses how she was *marginalized* and *discriminated* because of her caste and how injustice was done to her. Her anguish and pain is reflected through each pages of the text. The marginalization and discrimination experienced by the author is evident that still the caste system prevails in India. The work *Karukku* is an attempt of the author to express

herself. Both as female and Dalit, she experienced double discrimination throughout her life. Finally, the *Subaltern* begins speak through her writings.

Dalit literature deals with the writings written by the authors who are Dalit. Dalit Writers are the writers who have been oppressed by the Indian caste system. Indian caste system, in other words called as *Varnas*, exists more than three thousand years. The system divides Hindus into hierarchical groups based on their work. *Manusastra* also provides guide lines to divide castes further more. Brahmins are on the top of the hierarchical chain. The people belongs to lower stratum are supposed to be labours to those who are in upper stratum. Dr.Ambedkar tried to abolish this system. But, still the division is obviously seen in rural villages of India, particularly in southern parts of India. Dalit writings began in Marathi at first then spread to kannada and Tamil.

Bama is the pseudonym of tamil Dalit feminist writer Faustina Mary who belongs to a Tamil Roman Catholic family. She has published three works including her autobiographical work *Karukku* (1992). After Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, a dalit autobiography, *Karukku* can be considered as a milestone of Dalit writings. As a Dalit who has undergone various discrimination, she expresses her sufferings through the work. Being a Catholic Christian she is even marginalized in church. As a result, she attempts to travel towards the ways of liberation. This novel *Karukku* is her attempt to find an identity among the caste based context that she lived. In the Novel, she reveals the true nature of the society she lived. She has expressed the way how she was marginalized and discriminated to the core.

Even in the beginning of the novel she has mentioned how Dalits are marginalized in the affairs of religion. She says, in her village, there is separate temple for high caste people, where the *subaltern* or low caste people are not allowed to worship God. "On the top of another peak is a perumal sami temple. A temple where the naicker community worships" (Bama 1) It clearly visible that even in the affairs of God they are marginalized. It is evident that every caste is known for the job they do. "It is full of Nadars who climb palymra palms for living. To the right there are the Koravar who sweeps streets. (Bama7) Thus, based on their work their living place was determined. Parayar community, which is considered as the least of all, is marginalized and forced to live near graveyard. "To the east of village lies the cemetery. We live just next to that" (Bama 7). Moreover, she says that Naicker people won't even come to the place where Dalit people live. Because, all the facilities like post office, church and school

are there in Naicker Street. Whereas, low caste people are forced to depend upon higher class people. In certain schools they only allow high-caste children. Thus, lower caste children are denied good education. "There was a big school in the Naicker Street which was meant only for the upper caste children" (Bama 7). Moreover, when upper caste people scold somebody they will scold as "you are only fit to collect sniggers and slippers like chakkili boys." (Bama 8). They were not even given proper respect. Thus, Dalit people are marginalized and discriminated in *Karruku*.

There were Separate Streets for Pallas and Parayas. Narrator/ Author belongs to Parayar community. She experiences discrimination even before she knows what is discrimination is all about. In the Novel, Narrator sees a low-caste man holding a parcel of vadai with its string by not touching the packet. The parcel is handed over to naicker. The reason for the lower caste man's act is unveiled to narrator by her brother. "Naicker were upper caste and therefore, must not touch Parayas. If they did, they would be polluted" (Bama 15) the lower caste people are considered as uncultured and untidy. They are discriminated and seen as source of pollutant which causes pollution. In chapter two, she expresses her trauma of how badly her grandmother is treated just because she is a Dalit. "Even tiny children, born the other day, would call her by her name and order her about, just because they belong to Naicker caste." (Bama 16). Narrator's patti is humiliated and discriminated by Naicker family throughout the novel. They are only given wasted foods of previous evening. "Naicker lady came out with her leftovers, leaned out from some distance and tipped them into patti's vessel, and went away." (Bama 16) Thus, in this manner, Naickers treat Parayar people like dog which eats scraps and wastes.

The unnamed narrator, probably the author, is discriminated by Upper caste people's *generalization*. As Westerns generalized Orientals as uncultivated and barbarians, here, narrator is generalized by her Head master as a thief because of her caste. When the narrator is blamed of stealing coconut from coconut tree, she is generalized by the Head master as "You have shown your true nature as Paraya" (Bama 19). When Priest is asked permission, he also generalize Narrator because of her caste by saying "After all, you are from Cheri. You might have done it" (Bama 19). She experiences marginalization and untouchability even in public places like bus stand. Naicker women expresses their contempt and untouchability by refusing to sit with girls from cheri. They would even prefer to stand all the way than sitting with cheri girls. "They'd prefer then to get up and stand all the way rather than sit next to me or to any other women from cheri. They'd be polluted." (Bama 20) Thus, they are marginalized. Moreover, in school, every caste has different rules for taking leave. When the narrator asks

permission for her siblings' first communion she is denied permission by saying "What celebration can there be in your caste, for the first communion?" (Bama 22). She expresses her hatred on the higher caste society through her writings. *Karukku* can be taken as a satire on the society which marginalizes the Dalit people.

The discrimination goes further traumatic when upper caste people do not even consider lower caste as human beings. Narrator recounts her experience in the Convent as "And in the convent, as well, they spoke very insulting about low caste people. They spoke as if they didn't even consider low-caste people as human beings" (Bama 25). As what was done to Orientalists, here, High-caste people put an imaginary line between them and Dalit people by saying *Us and Them*. As Orientalists were thought as uncultivated, here, Low-caste people are also considered as uncultured and dirty. "They think we have no moral discipline nor cleanliness nor culture...In this society, if you are born into a low-caste, you are forced to live a life of humiliation and degradation until death." (Bama 26).

Moreover, in at most stage, marginalization continues even after death. Chapter three begins with a dispute between two castes for a burial ground. Even after death, not even the cemetery was given to low-caste people. "The Upper-caste Christians had their own cemetery elsewhere" (Bama 29). Moreover, Higher-caste people consider Subaltern, the lower-caste as a community which was born to work for them. "This is a community that was born to work. The same broken grain gruel" (Bama 55). All the facilities are provided to Upper castes, whereas, lower caste is marginalized. "The church, the school, the convent and the priest's bungalow were all in the place where the upper-caste communities lived." (Bama 88). When upper-caste people are asked about Dalit people, they say, "How can we allow these people to come into our houses? There is nothing we can do for these creatures." (Bama 115).

Thus, throughout the novel, the narrator and her brother are terribly humiliated by the high-caste society. They were discriminated in the name of caste. The only sin they did was to born in a low-caste society. Because of the caste, they were marginalized at village, street, school and even at bus and church. Bama, as a young girl, determines to become an educated woman to get out of the caste system. Even though she studied well and become a teacher in a convent, she could not get out of caste discrimination and marginalization. Therefore, the subaltern begins to speak through her writings. Like other Dalit writings, Bama's *Karukku* also has got a prominent place in Dalit literary arena. Thus, the subaltern, Bama could speak. Therefore, by using *Karukku*, the double edged sword, she could cut off the roots of

marginalization and discrimination of the society she lives. She managed to talk about how she was marginalized and discriminated in the hands of high-caste Naicker community. Though the places and characters seem fictional, there is an underlying truth under every fiction. Thus, *Karukku* reveals the marginalization and discrimination of Dalits.

Work Cited

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