

## FROM THE MARGIN TO THE CENTER: LOCATING IDENTITY IN BAMA'S *KARUKKU*

**Dr. Susan Nirmala. S**  
**Assistant Professor in English**  
**Karunya University**  
**Tamil Nadu**

Dalit literature brings out the quest for freedom of the Dalits who are othered by society. The word 'Dalit' means 'oppressed'. It means broken or reduced to pieces. The word is derived from the Sanskrit language which means crushed. Dalits are the people who are oppressed, crushed and marginalized in society for political, economic, cultural and religious reasons. They are denied to rise up by their dominants, the upper castes. Though the term 'Dalit' was used initially to refer to the lower caste people of the society, it has now become a generalized term referring to all those who are oppressed and othered.

Arjun Dangle, a Dalit writer-activist says,

Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows and struggles of those in the lowest strata of society. It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary. (*Poisoned Bread* 264)

One of the principal elements in Dalit literature is the idea of Othering. Othering is an unfair treatment of minority groups. The other does not belong and does not constitute the self and therefore is considered as different from the self. The othered people suffer exclusion at every level. In *Karukku* Bama considers the condition of the oppressed people, who are othered because of their caste and status in society. Her concern is for the marginalized community who are considered as others. As Clearwater says: "Othering is a way of defining and securing one's own positive identity through the stigmatization of an other" (Clearwater par. 1).

In general terms the "other" is anyone who is separate from one's self. The existence of the others is crucial in creating the image of the self. The other can be an individual or a group which is perceived by a recognized group as not belonging to them, and as being different in some fundamental way. Perceived as lacking the essential characteristics possessed by the recognized group the other is almost seen as a lesser or inferior being and is treated accordingly.

Asserting that Dalit literature is a kind of a revolutionary literature written against the othering aspect, Arjun Dangle writes:

It is significant that Dalit owes its origin to a revolutionary struggle for social and economic change. The literature is closely associated with the hopes for freedom of a group of people who as untouchables are victims of social, economic and cultural inequality. Their literature is thus characterized by a feeling of rebellion against the establishment, of negativism and scientificity. (*Poisoned Bread* 237)

Writing from the margin, Bama exposes the traumatic experiences of living the life of a Dalit through her autobiographical novel *Karukku*. She observes the othering process from a sociological perspective. The varied ways by which the Dalits are discriminated from the uppercastes are also described in detail. Bama invariably writes about the discrimination that she and her community people are subjected to, in her book *Karukku*.

The Dalits in the Indian community are those who have been broken, affected and exploited by the caste system which is prevalent in India. The caste system was initiated in the early Indian Hindu

society. The genesis of the early Indian caste system explores the occupations and classifies people based on their occupations. The four varnas occupations were at the centre of the Hindu social structure (Kolekar 11). In the book *The Word became Flesh: A Christological Paradigm for doing Theology in India*, the author explains in detail as to how the Dalits are discriminated in the Indian society on the basis of caste. He refers to the formation of the caste system and writes:

Concepts of purity and pollution were developed and systematized in the course of time. Consequently there is a large body of distinct jatis generally called as Scheduled Castes or outcastes, considered to be outside or even below the entire varna system. They did not seem fit to be included in the fourfold graded class structure of the Indian society. These people came to be known as untouchables . . . (24)

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed a lot of Dalit movements and writers have penned down their ideas in protest against anti-Dalit people and institutions, who have subjugated Dalits. The significant theme of Dalit writing is the marginalization of Dalits and its effects on the psyche of the people. Focusing on the othering aspect, Dalit writers have also vehemently brought out their own experiences and their resistance to the situations around them.

Bama, in *Karukku* gives a complete picture of the various forms of oppression that she meets within a caste-ridden society. She writes about her life as a woman who belongs to the Paraya community, a Dalit sub caste and further expounds the difficulties she faces as a convert to Roman Catholicism. What drove her and the people of her community to Roman Catholicism was the suppression and the rejection that they suffered as Dalits. It was a question of acceptance and belongingness that drove them to Christianity. But ironically, what they deemed to be a safer route to be taken from being marginalized turned out only as another space of marginalization. As converted Christians, they received what they least expected. Perhaps, they were othered and marginalized in the Church as well. In the preface to her book Bama gives an explanation of the title of her book and states that *Karukku* refers to Palmyra leaves that are serrated on both edges. As a child when she usually gathered firewood she had experiences of being scratched by the palmyra leaves and these leaves reminded her of “God’s Word” which is represented as a double edged sword in the Bible. The author quotes from the New Testament of the Bible “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (*Karukku* vii). *Karukku* is the autobiography of the writer who reveals that God is just and righteous and opposes injustices and unrighteousness. Through her novel, Bama calls upon her readers to react to the injustices in the world. The physical and psychic violence, which follows the othering aspect is another key theme of the book.

Each chapter of the novel uncovers the different aspects of life experienced from a Dalit perspective. It begins with a description of the topography of the village and moves on to the author’s own experience of living as a Dalit. The novel depicts the intercaste conflicts among the various sub castes and shows as to how the Parayas are physically abused and subjugated even by the clergy. Moreover, the novel delineates the helplessness of the Paraya community also.

Bama’s motive to write on casteism is clearly depicted in the beginning of the book when she says “But before I come to castes and communities, I have a lot to say about the village itself” (1) Each and every aspect of life in the village shows clearly that it is a place completely controlled and left disorganized by the caste system. People’s lives are determined by the caste system. Places in the village are named after the castes of people, which shows that that the people of that specific caste live there and that an intruder is never accepted.

Bama explains distinctly the traumas that she had faced as a young girl. It was when she was in her third class, that she had her first encounter with the scene of untouchability. It was an incident where an elder from her community gave a Naikar, a vadai wrapped in a paper held by a string. And this

incident as she observes, provoked laughter in her. But she couldn't laugh for long, as she realized sooner that it was the caste system that was behind the act.

The divide between the self and the other was apparent even at school, an institution of learning. Bama's experiences in school had brought about a greater impact in her life. When any act of indiscipline occurred in the school, the Dalit children were held responsible. The generalized remark was "It must be one of the cheri children who did it." (18)

Bama observes that the Dalit children were subjected to verbal abuse and social insult in continuum. Bama recollects an incident in school where she was put to shame in the assembly for accidentally breaking up an unripe coconut and was scolded by the teacher thus: "You have shown us your true nature as a Paraya" (16) And Bama reacts: "I was in agony because I had been ashamed and insulted in front of all the children." (19) Thus, even at a very young age, Bama understood the difficulty of living the life of a Dalit. Ironically, the school authorities and the teachers despised the Dalit children, when theirs was the task to uplift the downtrodden. Bama proposes that they "could have educated the Dalit children in many matters and made them aware of their situation in the world around them. But instead, everything they said to the children, everything in the manner in which they directed them, suggested that this was the way it was meant to be for Dalits; that there was no possibility of change." (101)

In an attempt to save herself from being ridiculed and branded upon as an other, Bama says that she strived hard even from a school going age. Her determination was to move forward to the center from the periphery and thus change her fate. She states: "What ever the situation, I held my head high. And I completed whatever I took up, successfully. So, both teachers and student showed me a certain affection, respect . . . because of my education alone I managed to survive among those who spoke the language of caste-differences and discrimination". (*Karukku* 22)

As a student, she could always score outstanding marks in her class and thereby was able to save herself from being ridiculed as a lower caste. When Bama wanted permission from the Principal and the warden sister to go home to attend her sister's First Communion function, she is replied thus: "What celebration can there be in your caste, for a First Communion?" (22) Institutions of learning become zones of marginalization, unceasingly. The higher castes are always appreciated and the lower castes are always humiliated.

The author's ideas on Christianity are also revealed in *Karukku*. The impact of a caste system, which has made an indelible mark in the consciousness of the people can be virtually seen by the way in which Bama exposes the rigid practices that followed in the Church. She clearly substantiates that the church in South India practices caste discrimination. As a nun, when she had an urge to help the poor children of her own community, she was prevented from doing so, by the clergy. Throughout her life as a student and as a nun she had only witnessed the upper castes illtreating and humiliating the lower castes. Therefore she concludes that even religion could not redeem the people of her community from the inhumane practices of untouchability. She sums up the collective experience of her people: "They marginalize all of us Dalits of being of poor quality." (119) Disclosing their status in the Church, Bama writes that her people "have become aware that they have been made slaves in the name of God, the Pusai, and the Church. (109)

Condemning blind religion, Bama brings to the limelight the meaningless rituals that are propagated by the catholic church and the way in which the Dalit community is allowed to participate in the ceremonies. According to her, religion has been customized in the name of God and it obfuscates rational thinking. She criticizes the unreflective way in which the Paraya community participate in the Easter function in the village. People completely depend on rites and rituals and become fearful and obedient to rigid laws and rules and therefore remain blinded to truth.

Upholding her own experiences of resistance and hostility to blind devotion Bama says that she chose to worship god in the private confines of her house rather than to practise religion which seemed to be

meaningless and to please only the clergy. Almost all the Christian festivals like Easter and Christmas in her opinion were made secular as they were celebrated in her village with entertainment and pomp, and not out of piety. In her opinion, it would have been better if rituals and rites were replaced by religion grounded with some reason.

Unable to forego the humiliation that her people are subjected to Bama writes:

Far worse is the attitude within our own 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 . . . And if Dalits become priests or nuns, they are pushed aside and marginalized first of all, before the rest go about their business. (80)

She concludes that her experience with the church and the convent had changed her outlook towards life, on the whole. She finds herself completely affected because of the ideology of the caste system which is followed in the Church and also realizes that she stands in a completely marginalized zone. Understanding the space in which her community people live, she writes:

When I look at the Church today, it seems to be a Church made up of the priests and nuns and their kith and kin. And when you consider who they are, it is clear that they are all from upper castes. They are ones who are in the positions of power.... In the name of God they actually rob from the poor who struggle for their very livelihood. (108)

It is the unpleasant and ugly remarks made on the Dalits by the self – by people who consider themselves as supreme, which push them to extreme marginality. The upper castes consider dalits to be people of no culture and decency. Emphasizing the status given to Dalits in society, Bama quotes some remarks made on them by the upper castes in her book. “There is nothing we can do for these creatures. And we should’nt do anything for them. Because to do so would be like helping cobras.”(115) “How can we allow these people to come into our houses? In any case, even if we were to allow them, they would not enter our homes. They themselves know their place.’ (115)

The Dalits are denied places of importance and responsibility in society. They are deemed to live their lives as others. Neither do they belong to any higher order nor are they supposed to help themselves to reach to higher positions in society. Hence, they stand othered in the society in perpetuum. As others, they may have a few or no legal rights, may be characterized as less intelligent or as immoral, and may even be regarded as sub-humans, as animals or beasts. According to Weis “Othering marks and names the other, providing a definition of their otherness, which in turn creates social distance, and marginalizes, disempowers and excludes” (19). The uppercastes claim is that if Dalits are educated, they would not have any regard or respect for the upperclass people. They would start living a life of luxury- a self dependent life. And therefore, the uppercastes would loose their identity, without an other. Without the other’s presence the self cannot exist and have any meaning on its own since it cannot be defined. The upper castes define their identity only by suppressing the lower castes, the inferior others. As Souda brings it out “Human experience can be part of material relationships and in order to subjugate others, society can often create false consciousness by valorizing certain perceptions, which basically serve its own interests. (Souda 2) Thus the existence of the others is crucial in defining what is “normal” and in locating one’s own place in society. It is apparent that if only there were lower castes there would be uppercastes. Otherwise the uppercastes would cease to exist.

Bred and brought up in a society, completely ridden by caste feelings- in the village, at the convent school and at the church, Bama realizes that hers is an identity which is completely marginalized and othered. Bama records an incident wherein while travelling in a bus she sits beside a Naicker woman who enquires her about her caste and on coming to know that Bama belonged to a lower caste, the Naicker woman moves to another seat. The author had to face the stark realities of living a life of a Dalit. Quoting the incident of being denied a rented house, she writes that such challenges are faced by the people of her community everyday. Understanding fully well, the traumas of untouchability,

she interrogates on behalf of her people, the authoritative attitude of the uppercastes : “Are we so despicable to these others?” (121)

It is the collective and generalized condition of the community that Bama portrays in her autobiography. In an interview she says, “The story told in *Karukku* was not my story alone. It was the depiction of a collective trauma-of my community whose length cannot be measured in time.” (“Recognition” para 12). Bama tries to reconstruct her broken identity by writing for herself. And by writing her life, Bama represents the whole Dalit community, at large.

. The subjugation of the Dalits in Indian society is an example of the othering process in practice. In *Karukku* Bama uses reason to contradict the discrimination against Dalits. She challenges the oppressive structures- caste and religion which govern the Dalits. She presents cases of oppression and suppression of the whole community, and in addition, she also brings out her own experiences of being othered. She discloses her motive behind writing her book *Karukku* in an interview “I could not take it (oppression) any longer. And I began writing to stop myself from taking my own life. (“Recognition” para 13)

Thus presenting patterns of the othering process, Bama brings out the dialectics of the caste system. She uses very distinct methods to interrogate the discrimination patterns to which the Dalits are subjected to. The driving philosophy of her writings is to revolutionize the prejudiced society. The main objective of Dalit literature is to create consciousness of the oppressed Dalits in the minds of the readers and to define the experience of being othered. Bama’s *Karukku* is the first one of its kind and it brought international fame and readership, bringing the writer to the forefront in Dalit literature. *Karukku* is a powerful portrayal of Dalit oppression. Though *Karukku* is an autobiography, the narrator brings out the inescapable condition of a community of people who have been othered and thus centralizes the othering of Dalits.

Bama calls upon the rationality of the readers. She drives the point home to the readers that the caste system is not all right. She portrays a world with a clear cut divide - the dichotomy between the upper castes and the lower castes and states that it is not a good sign of community living. She provokes her readers to think about the unjust practices of the caste system. She explicitly makes a clarion call to the people of her community in *Karukku* saying:

We who are asleep must open our eyes and look about us. We must not accept the injustice of our enslavement by telling ourselves it is our fate, as if we have not true feelings; we must dare to stand up for change. We must crush all these institutions that use caste to bully us into submission, and demonstrate that among human beings there are none who are high or low. Those who have found their happiness by exploiting us are not going to let us go easily. It is we who have to place them where they belong and bring about a changed and just society where all are equal. (25)

One finds in Bama’s novel cases of discrimination and social exclusion exhibited because of the social dynamics of the caste system. She brings in powerful invocations to do away with injustice and exhorts her people to realize and affirm their own cultural identity. The need is to define themselves and not to be defined by the upper castes or the church. Bama’s writings did offend the people of her own community –the parayas as all their practices were exposed to the outside world. Nevertheless, gradually her writings received recognition, because hers was the voice of the innumerable number of voiceless people, who have been oppressed and othered by the caste system. The caste system had deprived the Dalits of a voice and of living a life of equality. But Bama, makes it crystal clear through her book *Karukku* that the Dalits must live with self respect and dignity and thus move from the margin to the center.

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