

## The Sufferings of Dalit Women: A Subaltern Study of Bama's *Karukku*

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### Abstract:

The plight of Dalit women in the Indian society as depicted in *karukku* is sad and labeled with considerable gloom. They are oppressed on the basis of caste, gender as well as class. *Karukku* very significantly raises questions on caste and religious issues that damage our society. Bama's fictional writings delineate several issues of violence on Dalit women, wife-beating, sexual harassment, loneliness, women abandoned by their husbands, ignorance, etc at their own homes within the community. In a larger outlook, her literary works portray the marginalisation and exploitation of Dalit women as well as the whole community at the hands of upper class society. They are socially and economically exploited by the upper castes people. Through this autobiographical novel, Bama attempts to reflect, especially her own sufferings both within and outside her community, the sufferings of Dalit women and the everyday social reality of her community. She tries to project the social reality of Dalit women who struggle every day for their survival. The present paper is on the basis of patriarchal rules in which women have to go through the rules made by the male members of a family or society. In that case, women are compelled to go through the tough roads made for them, they are segregated, separated and become as 'other'. Because of the strict customs prevailing, they cannot speak of their own and finally become subalterns. This study reflects on the issues of women portrayed in the select text. It is highlighted in terms of class, caste and religion with proper lens of subaltern context.

**Keywords:** Women, Caste, Dalit, Subaltern, Marginality, Patriarchy, Exploitation.

*Karukku* is a significant novel which reflects the sufferings of Dalit women in a patriarchal and caste-based society. At every moment the protagonist undergoes some sort of patriarchal or traditional sufferings. This sort of sufferings recurrently pushes women into the class of subalterns. Wherever Dalit women go, they are encircled by many circumstances evolved out of traditional caste backdrops. On the other side, at home, they are bound with patriarchal norms. They are trapped with many societal and patriarchal rules. It eventually drags them into the class of 'other'. Bama portrays the sad reality of Dalit women in the select text. She explores her own story of suffering which is about patriarchy and culture set in Dalit background. Bama writes in the novel,

"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.....If you are born into a low caste, every moment of your life is a moment of struggle" (Holmstrom, 26, 27).

Traditionally, the structure of society is divided into such an entity that does not allow the lower castes to become independent. In this system, the lower castes are always treated as the worst human beings. They are not given that required opportunity to march forward. The so-

called caste and community in Indian society divide people into segments. In the text the protagonist belongs to the Paraya caste, a lower caste group generally found in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. They are surrounded by many higher caste groups like Nadar, Naicker, Chettiyaar, Aasaari, Thevar, etc. Bama narrates the traditional and cultural harassment done to them by the higher caste groups. The Paraya caste women are always bound to display their regard and servitude towards upper caste people and also at their own homes. Dalit women suffer in two ways. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her essay, *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*, describes the double colonisation of third world women. At first, they suffer from western colonisation, secondly, they suffer from existing patriarchy and tradition at their own homes. In a society where caste elements are so rigidly maintained, it left no place free for women. The line which has been drawn in between Dalit women and higher caste is not just a line. It is but the line which divides whole humanity into certain segments. This line is like an electric shock produced out of a thunderstorm that destroys anything that comes before it. Bama refers to her childhood experience in the novel,

"The elder went straight up to the Naicker, bowed low and extended the packet towards him, cupping the hand that held the string with his other hand.....He said everybody believed that Naickers were upper caste, and therefore must not touch Parayas" (Holmstrom, 15).

For the first time, Bama saw this Paraya elder bowing down before a Naicker. This scene entirely changed the thought of the author. At her very young age when she did not even know about the caste system and untouchability, she had seen it, experienced it and been humiliated. The cruelty and domination of the upper caste people have always been disastrous to the lower castes. They have been dominating the Dalits in every possible way. Dalit women have to face every kind of exploitation. They are bound to follow the caste rules strictly. Social discrimination is a serious issue in Dalit society. On the other hand, untouchability is frequently observed in the text which further fuels the discrimination. In the text *Sangati*, when Bama questions her grandmother about their exploitation, she answers that they are bound to follow because of their caste and money power which the Dalits do not have. They can't fight back with them because sooner or later they will have to go for wage work at their homes.

Generally, upper-caste people are directly harsh to Dalit women. But, many a time atrocities on Dalit men further affects the lives of Dalit women more severely. Bama reflects a similar incident from her childhood past. It was such a horrible incident where all the men in her village had to hide in the jungle for many days.

"All of a sudden a huge gang of policemen came out of the Chaaliyar settlement, batons in hand, drove our men back ruthlessly, mercilessly beating up those they caught, before arresting them....Outside, we heard the thud-thud of police boots stamping up and down, the sharp sounds of blows as our men were struck repeatedly, and the yells, 'Ayyo Amma', of unendurable pain" (Holmstrom, 34, 35).

Caste differences are so dominant that it totally attacked the whole elder males of the village. The upper caste groups are very aggressive towards the Dalits. It was for a small piece of cemetery land, they attempted to kill the Dalits. These upper-caste groups have huge areas of land but they too attempted to grab a small cemetery ground from the poor Dalits. Societal rules have positioned the Dalits in a subordinate place. The governments and organisations also have a distasteful focus on lower castes groups. In the text, the policemen who are called

the preserver of laws blindly follow and side with the higher castes. The whole police team is being feasted to arrest the Dalit men. In such a desolate situation what could these women do, where shall they go for help when everything has turned against them? They become silent before the situations only hoping for a good turn every other day.

The text *Karukku* portrays the sufferings of women in the Dalit community in multiple ways right from a young girl to an old woman. This text questions several patriarchal rules existing in our society that oppress women. Through this text, Bama explores the hardships and everyday reality of Dalit women. She projects herself questioning various post-colonial and traditional institutions that oppress the Dalits. Women as depicted in the text are wage workers at the same time they play a crucial role in supporting the family through their everyday income. But they have been not given a proper status and recognition in the family. In the workplace, women are not paid a genuine price for their work whereas men are paid much more compared to them. Furthermore, the money which is earned by women is responsibly utilized and spent on household affairs to run the family. But men can spend their money according to their wishes without any proper interest of the family. Such limitations bound women to hold the responsibilities of a family where men stay irresponsible in family matters. Sexual harassment is another significant issue projected in the texts. Women are considered no more than a sexual object. Bama expresses the sexual exploitation of Dalit women at the workplace as well as at their homes. At the workplace, they face sexual harassment at the hands of upper-caste men. In her seminal text *Sangati*, Mariamma is misbehaved by Kumarasami Ayya near the pump set, but when he realizes his fault, he quickly informs the village headman and manipulates everyone for his reputation. "By this time, Kumarasami Ayya, afraid that his reputation might be in ruins, hurried to the village, and went and complained to the headman of the paraiyya community, the naattaamai" (Holmstrom, 20). In the meeting, everyone tried to blame her for the misbehavior. On the other hand, women are sexually harassed by their own husbands at home. In the evening, when they return from the workplace with full tiredness, soon after finishing all the household works they have to surrender their tired bodies to their husbands.

Poverty and hunger are the two worst evils of every society. These have always been issues for the Dalits from ages. It is poverty that compels Dalits to stoop before the upper caste people. Furthermore, it is the hunger that turns Dalits to do the filthiest works at the homes of the upper castes. Namdeo Dhasal, in his poem *Hunger*, explains the sufferings of Dalits due to hunger. It also reflects the urging angry and resistance of Dalits from hunger. The question of survival becomes more important than anything. Either it may be through accepting physical torture of the upper caste or by cleaning wastages at their homes. In the text *Karukku*, Bama has portrayed a series of incidents that reflect Dalit poverty and hunger.

"Most of the land belonged to the Naicker community. Each Naicker's fields were spread over many miles. The fields were spread over many miles....Our people knew all the fields by their names and turned up exactly where they were required to work" (Holmstrom, 6).

The above lines clearly reflect that the Dalits are deprived of land and properties. They are not given lands by upper castes to cultivate their own crops. Moreover, the Dalits have to stay in particular streets provided to them. The upper castes masters know well that providing land and properties to Dalits would be a blunder. If they would offer them the wealth they would no longer serve them. Wealth could empower them which would be unworthy to the upper castes. The Dalits are neither given enough foods nor properties. Only a minimal amount of sources are being offered to simply survive so they can serve them. As mentioned in the text,

their villages are thickly populated in small rows (Holmstrom,7). Therefore, they have no other way except working in the fields of upper castes. Webster mentions in his well-known text *The Dalit Christians*, "The Pariyar and other dalits, however had no such rights to the land, but did the actual cultivation work for the mirasdars" (Holmstrom, 32). This kind of dependency on the upper castes pushes them to become 'other' in the eyes of society. If they do not obey as instructed by the upper castes, the Dalits would remain jobless and unwaged. It is usual that no one would like to react to the cost of survival. Hence, the Dalits have to go according to the commands of the upper castes. The question of living becomes more significant than suffering. Any kind of oppression on them becomes acceptable if there is an answer to survival. In such a flow, from generation to generation, Dalits have been suffering from upper castes oppressions. Bama mentions the hardships and sufferings of women in the text,

"Both my grandmothers worked as servants for Naicker families.....My other Paatti was the same. As soon as dawn broke, she would go to the Naicker houses, sweep out the cowshed, collect up the dung and dirt, and bring home the left-over rice and curry from the previous evening. And for some reason, she would behave as if she had been handed the nectar of the gods"(Holmstrom,16).

Whatever the upper caste gives in exchange for service provided, the Dalits have to accept that with satisfaction. The phrase in the quoted line above 'And for some reason' reflects everything which is the only answer to the question of hunger. The acceptance of the tasted food would eventually evoke a question of their identity. But these foods would curb their hunger which works as nectars in those empty stomachs. These old women are compelled to go to work so early in the morning. If for some reason, they would reach in late at their masters' houses, even the left-over food would not be served. These poor women have no other ways than breaking their bones, days and nights. After working hard for the whole day in the crop fields they reach back home late at night and continue to do the same on the other day.

In summing up, it can be said that women in Dalit societies suffer from various issues. At every step of their lives, they have to face some kind of atrocities in society. While facing atrocities in various ways, resistance is regularly seen in the texts. Subaltern women try to resist oppression in different modes like anger, rebuking, shouting, actions, etc. Today, though many democratic and constitutional rules have been initiated for their rights, it has been observed that such rules are not effective to a sufficient level. The exploitation of Dalit women is still prevalent in our society. They are regularly pushed to the subaltern positions through various traditional and colonial forces.

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