



'Justice' in the margin: an evaluation of a Dalit testimony *Karukku*

There are a few 'firsts' attached with this novel *Karukku*; first autobiography by a Dalit woman writer, first work in colloquial Tamil language, first open challenge by a Dalit to the unjust religious practices. *Karukku* written by Bama Faustina translated into English in 2000 by Lakshmi Holmstrom, thus proves to be a testimony of the marginalized community of India. It is Bama's drive to make sense of her life as a woman, a Christian, and a Dalit. She speaks for her people, "people of my language" (Bama web) as she puts it, she demands "justice" out of all the injustices forced on them in the name of caste, class structure, race, law system, bureaucracy, education system, habits and appearances, etc. Bama describes *Karukku* as:

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. I just tried to freeze it forever in one book so that there will be something physical to remind people of the atrocities committed on a section of the society for ages. (Bama web)

As *karukku*, a palmyra leaf has a structure of two-edged sword; similarly this book deals with the double issues of caste and religion. Having built the background, there are two major points that I want to draw simultaneously in this paper.

- 1) Personification of 'Justice' and how it struggles to leap the margin line.
- 2) The 'injustice' as an affect which leads to the triumph of the true knowledge.

To start with the author herself, "Bama" is a pen-name given to the readers as pseudonymity is a characteristic of the subaltern- the marginals. The strong attempt has been made by the author to introduce herself as Bama-the Dalit representative, not the "real intimacy" for Bama as a person. The readers witness "justice" taking a leap to jump out of the margin when Bama uses her people's language, colloquial Tamil dialect to voice her trauma, not the mainstream Tamil. She does not apply the aesthetics of upper-caste Tamil but instead breaks the rules of written grammar and spelling and invites a different pattern of reading, to put

it in Gayatri Spivak's terms, a "surrender to the special call of the text" (Holmstrom xx) Furthermore, the book starts with "Our village is very beautiful" (Bama 1), again a very suggestive move by the author. The word "our" re-iterates the theme that it is a narration of her community's collective trauma and suffering; and the words "village" and "beautiful" show us that they are Dalits and marginals and they hold their head high- have high regards for their village.

The bodily experience of untouchability which is common to the Dalit community is seen and felt by them from their childhood days which is marked by various incidents in the book, a man holding a food packet with its string as it should reach to his master "untouched", an upper-caste woman pouring the water from four feet above which falls in the cupped hands of a Dalit servant to drink, and many more. These experiences bring the much darker reality in front of her as she puts it thus,

Dalits...have come to believe that they are degraded, lacking honour and self-worth, untouchable; they have reached a stage where they themselves, voluntarily, hold themselves apart. This is the worst injustice. (Bama 28)

Immediately true wisdom strikes the author in the next paragraph and she re-assures the leap of 'justice' when she quotes,

We must not accept the injustice of our enslavement...among human beings there are none who are high or low...we have place them (oppressors) where they belong and bring about a changed and just society where all are equal.(Bama 28)

The childhood plays and recreation games play a great role in shaping the personality of the child and these games also reflect the status of marginals. For instance, a game where some boys would play masters of upper-caste who made other slave boys do lot of work, other game where nuns and priests would come and gave sharp blows to the children playing, husband coming home drunk and beating up wife, etc.

This community, even if they desire to, they cannot easily take that leap as poverty is also to be fought with, "our mental firmness doesn't match the influence and authority that money-power wields" (Bama 80), they toil hard for their survival, to earn meagre wages, there also injustice rules in as for the same work dalit women are paid less than the dalit men.

A few chapters of this book are dedicated to Christianity, its daily rituals, the practices of church, and the convent and its practices. As Bama is deeply influenced by the rituals of her religion, she has a strong will to help the people of her community she embraces the Christian Order and becomes nun herself. She continues for five years only to leave the order and return to her life. She resigned her job and prepared to enter a religious order as she had a goal to liberate her own people, but later she realized that it was not a right decision; in her words, “today I realize what an extremely foolish thing I did” (Bama 105). When she enters the convent she finds that there was caste discrimination here also, dalit and poor nuns were oppressed, made to do menial works and pushed aside. She also witnessed the stark contrast between the three vows of “poverty, chastity and obedience” (Bama 129) were taken and the life that these nuns were leading. They got all the wealthy sponsors for their comforts, amenities, regular feasts and meals, there was no thought or discussion whatsoever of the poor and downtrodden. The Sisters and Mother Superior do not let her easily leave the order as she was a good teacher with 10 years of experience and of much use to them. These convents mostly run schools for teaching wealthy students, which again was contradictory to why Bama chose to join the order, which was to educate the poor. She thus puts her view:

All those people who had taught us, had taught us only that God is loving, kind, gentle, one who forgives sinners...Nobody ever insisted that God is just, righteous...and never countenances inequality..There is a great deal of difference between this Jesus and the Jesus who is made known through daily pieties. (Bama 104)

Nowadays, now that I have left the order, I am angry when I see priests and nuns . . . How long will they deceive us, as if we are innocent children. . . Dalits have begun to realize the truth . . . I comfort myself with the thought that rather than live with a fraudulent smile, it is better to lead a life weeping real tears. (Bama 122)

Bama leaves the religious order to find her true identity and to live a life where she can work towards benefitting her people.

In all these events, experiences, its effect on the author and the readers we find that ‘justice’, the want of acceptance, equality, brotherhood always shine through even in the darker ‘injustices’ that this community faces, as we have seen already. There has been a revelation in the Dalits that they too were created in the

likeness of God and have begun to live with honour, self-respect and with love towards all humankind, which is what Bama calls 'true devotion'.

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