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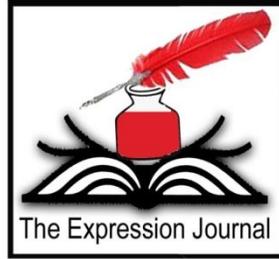
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RENEGOTIATING DALIT IDENTITY IN BAMA'S *KARUKKU*

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Abstract

Caste based discrimination has been the major part of Indian tradition where the dalits have been excluded from the main stream of society. In addition, their basic and fundamental rights are suppressed by the certain discourses of certain communities. Hence, the dalits had to live a life of humiliation and pain throughout the history of human civilization. Bama as a woman writer has experienced the harsh and painful realities of the contemporary system. Its basic roots can be seen as a part of traditional socio-cultural norms where the low caste people have been pushed back owing to the prevalent prejudices of the contemporary system. On the other hand, the dalits accept this hegemony without any doubt. Therefore, the large part of human civilization has been useless and lifeless. Bama as a creative writer has realized the potential with pain and tried to assert it through her autobiographical novel *Karukku* with new dimensions of dalit identity concerning a voice of resistance within it. Undoubtedly, the dalit writers are very conscious about four-five issues of their existential problems focusing on caste-discrimination. The novelist in her novel has more to assert through this autobiographical novel. She seems to be seen highlighting uncultivated area of dalit narrative. The researcher aims to explore the whole layers of this painful experience with reference to the novel *Karukku*.

Keywords

Discrimination, Identity, Politics, Dalit, Discourse, Hegemony.

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Assertion of identity is not a new theme in cultural studies because it has been discussed and elaborated a lot by scholars and thinkers from time to time. Various discourses are available on this topic which clearly depicts how identity is formed by the norms of socio-cultural politics which has been accepted without any doubt; but humanity demands an experiment with those norms which have pushed back the innocent thoughts of certain communities. The world can be finite with the practices of socio-cultural discourses but it is always infinite and alive under the false paradigms of society. Hence the meaning of *dalit* identity is not fully explored and discussed. The present paper throws light on certain hidden dimensions of *dalit* literature through Bama's autobiographical novel *Karukku* (1992) which critically reacts against the hegemonic structure of society where the *Varna* system forces the *dalits* at lowest level to serve other upper caste people. Hence, a voice of resistance can be a means to liberate the existence of the *dalits* who are discriminated and exploited on the basis of their castes. Basically, *dalit* is not a word which can only be associated with caste-based discrimination; every person, who is pushed back and exploited, comes into the range. Hence Bama's discourse can be seen as a part of it. Even the *dalit* movement in India tries to delimit the scope of this word by which *dalit* literature appears to have a propagandist politics of liberation and identity for the upliftment of certain communities only. Basically, it is not so because the enlarged scope of the term has been discussed by various scholars from time to time. Dr. Karan Singh and et al. clearly write in Preface to *Dalit Literature Challenges & Potentialities*:

It would be a mistaken belief to assume that Dalit literature is a literature of dalits, for dalits and by dalits. Dalit literature would lose its most important function if it

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limits itself exclusively to dalits and would face the danger of becoming limited and individualistic. Dalit literature is a dialogue with society which comprises of both the dalits and non Dalits. (12)

Actually, nothing is as bad in society as the utilization of communities' ideologies for selfish and political purposes, but Bama has much to share in this regard. Firstly, being a woman, she rejects the norms of patriarchal structure when she remains unmarried in the novel, yet her own self is stood for her community which is still struggling for basic needs as food, water and education. Her pain is transformed into a cry which becomes a means of resistance against untouchability. Much has been talked about the theory of resistance, but the voices of the *dalits* have been out of the major literary canon that writes back to the dominant system of certain communities. Now the *dalit* consciousness having the spirit of fourth world literature and globalization has enabled itself to share the experiences of exclusion, subjugation, oppression and dispossessions etc. *Dalit* communities justify their identity, space sharing the critical sense of the sentence: "One is not born *shudra* but becomes *Shudra*." Everybody, in other words, has to live in the world with constructed perspectives which show the sense of identity; but the world has been so much complex due to existed layers where every powerful voice tries to belittle the others consciously or unconsciously. That is why, one has to feel uprooted with the distorted sense of identity. This splitting spirit leads to so many things which remain fertile. Bama's autobiographical novel has that spirit which comes to that particular sense of living with its never-ending pain; but one must not think of those suppressed voices as useless or having no sense of identity. The system has been a matter of change and will have to change ever. Therefore, this dialectical sense of Bama's fiction shows the nature of social world in its real form. The resistance between the suppressed and the dominant has been going on everywhere including the hierarchies of the existed system. So, there is a need to explore those voices with respect to the mainstream of the world; but still all that can be seen struggling for their space in the society. The problem becomes more complex when it comes to the arena of identity. Searching for the sense of identity is also very crucial issue in the world of voices of resistance, the question: "where does the identity lie?" is usually faced by the people when they come forward to show themselves. So, the identity is self-made or socially constructed or something else, must be explored. Bama' fiction will be an appropriate arena to discuss the said issues

Bama's *Karukka* deals with the idea of exploitation and discrimination pertaining to the Dalit Community. Before Bama, such kinds of theme have been an integral part of Indo-English literature as well as of Indian literatures. The assertion of identity with respect to the oppressed and the downtrodden has been the major part of the writers like Munshi Premchand and Mulk Raj Anand. Bama has much sympathy and empathy for the upliftment of the *Dalits*; but her treatment

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of “Self” representing the traumatic experiences of the Dalits is so much real and emotional that the dominant castes have to be ashamed and humiliated studying the main substance of Bama’s autobiographical novel *Karukku* (1992). Here the pain, anxieties and assertion of identity with silenced resistance disrupting the roots of the very idea of constructed Indian civilization clearly mix-up with the *Dalit* consciousness in the literary canon which has ever been missed throughout the history of Indian sub-continent. Moreover, Bama revisits the whole discourses of subjugation and domination to show the predicament of her community concerning a lot of issues in confessional moods. In addition, she knows to be born in the lower caste is not her choice but to live with this stigma will definitely be her own weakness. Hence, she has much potential by which she can reverse the politics of the system, because the existed policies of living are not God-made but Man-made which must be revisited for the sake of humanity.

To think of Bama is to think of the downtrodden and the *Dalits* whose existence and identity have been conditioned and shaped by the hypocritical discourses of Indian social system under the name of *Dharma* and *Karma*. Therefore, the segregation of their lives under the domain of such discourses has been very much cruel, painful and inhuman. As Shashi Tharoor emphatically writes in his book *From Midnight to the Millennium and Beyond*:

Despite fifty years of freedom, well-trained and enlightened administrators and politically correct rhetoric at all levels, caste continues to enslave village society. Each week brings a new horror story into the national press. A Dalit woman is stripped and paraded naked through the street of her village because her son dared to steal from an upper caste Thakur; she is then forced to have sex with offending boy before a sneering audience of Thakurs. (106-7)

Much has been talked about equality, fraternity and liberty of the *dalits* and marginalized; but their voices of identity and survival have been unheard throughout the history of human civilization. Ekalvya, the important character of the *Mahabharata*, is the best example of the discussed suppression and exploitation because he, being a lower caste person, has not been given education by Daronacharya who has taught only for *Kaurvas* and *Pandvas*. Hence, the voice of resistance in dalit literature is not only for today’s discrimination but also for the re-cultivation of traditional historical paradigms of socio-cultural practices. R. Bhongle obviously writes in the essay “Dalit Literature and African-American Literature: A Comparative Study”:

Dalit literature not only subverts the old canon but also believes in creating new ones. It seeks to rejects those conventions and cultural norms which not only marginalized the dalit voice but also the voice of other oppressed communities including women. It attempts to create a new paradigm, a new set of values adding up to the contemporary cultural scenario. (32)

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Bama as a Tamil *Dalit* woman writer has experienced such harsh realities of Indian society where the marginalized existence has been an integral part of her consciousness. *Karukku* (1992), her famous autobiographical novel, explores the roots of subordination and the domination through the experiences of Indian society. Bama depicts how the society has been the part of hegemonic discourses where the *Dalits* have to be the objects. *Karukku* emphatically deals with the *Dalits'* exploitation, rape, violence, humiliation under the caste-ridden society. Therefore, the book is not a general story of the writer's life but a record of her humiliation and exploitation into the prevalent system. To be civilized means to belong to the upper castes utilizing the resources of education, water, food and religion etc. The irony of the society comes before when the *Dalit* are not the part of same resources concerning their human rights. Bama, for instance, shares her bitter and painful experiences at school where she has been blamed and abused for the theft of a coconut dropped from the tree by chance. She is insulted before her classmates by the headmaster. Note, for instance, the following:

The next morning at assembly, the headmaster called out my name. You have shown us your true nature as a Paraya,' he said. 'You climbed the coconut tree yesterday after everybody else had gone home, and you stole a coconut. We cannot allow you inside this school. Stand outside.' I was in agony because I had been shamed and insulted in front of all the children. (19)

Therefore, the *Dalits* have been apart from the human right of education. Education means assertion of identity and 'Self' but that has been disrupted throughout the socio-cultural history of Indian society where the politicized existence could be seen concerning its own justification while neglecting the voices of the *Dalit*. Hence, the gulfs have been conditioned in such a manner that they all have pushed the *Dalit* back over all the spheres of their human lives. Bama emphatically writes:

Most of our people are agricultural labourers. When there is no call for work in the fields, they go up to the woods on the mountains, and make a living by gathering firewood and selling it. People from the better-off castes never have such problems.... (2)

Moreover, Bama says that she herself has not received any honor or respect belonging to the *Paraya Jati* that means socially outcaste into the prevalent system. It, in other words, becomes very painful to live there where one is not free even to think of one's own terms. The *Dalits* have to live smiling with pain, working with shame, eating with humiliation. The people really face the problems of their "belongingness" where there is no one to whom they can express themselves. Their existence appears to have no identity into the contemporary Indian society where their lives

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and deaths are not free from the chains of the casteism. Bama's consciousness clearly reflects this view in the following lines:

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.... And this is why a wretched lifestyle is all that is left to us. (2)

Therefore, the discrimination, the marginalized existence and the exploitation have become an integral part of people's minds. The *Dalits* and the upper caste people have not been free from this impact of colonization; because suppressing others is considered to be the birth right of their cultural practices by the upper classes whereas the *dalit* think of their subjugation as a result of their past *karmas*. Bama's description of her own exploitation and discrimination appears to have a spirit of decolonization concerning the 'inferiority complex' of the *Dalits* and blindness of the upper classes in India. She also presents her critical views upon the issues of untouchability which has been a social and cultural practice in India and consists in suppressing the low-caste people. The untouchable people were not allowed to enter the temples and the houses of other people; and they had no opportunity to study. They were not able to go to city where no would care about their caste and community perhaps; but they were too poor to migrate to cities. They were called untouchables. There was no improvement in the condition of the poor and untouchables. Bama's *Karukku* by the reflection of enigmatic past, tries to decolonize the minds of the Indian peoples who have been busy in practicing it in their cultural discourses in different manner. She emphatically writes in the book about this. Note, for instance, the following:

Annan told me all these things. And he added, 'Because we are born into the Paraya jati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that. But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities. So study with care, learn all you can. If you are always ahead in your lessons, people will come to you of their own accord and attach themselves to you. (17-18)

Bama shows how education can be a means of awareness which has been disrupted by the hypocritical discourses. Further Bama also talks about the nature of Hindu religion where her community has been excluded owing to the low caste; but Bama's voices of resistance must not be associated with anti-religion. She tries to explore the cruel nature of certain communities which have used the religion into a different manner. For instance, Bama converts her religion living with the norms of Christianity where the people are just playing a fallacious role of humanity in the name of Jesus Christ, because the real humanity was missing there. Moreover, the Dalit communities have been a matter of segregation under the practices of that religion. Note for instance, the following:

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There was no love to be found in that convent, among these people who declared all the time that God is loving. There was no love for the poor and the humble. They claimed that God's love is limitless, subject to no conditions. (106)

Hence, religion-transformation is not a solution to the concerned problems of discrimination and exploitation. On the contrary, the religion itself is not anti-human, but it is Man who has used the norms of religion into a different context for this sake of certain temptations. The upper-caste communities have adopted these temptations as their birth rights to exploit the Dalits; and the Dalits have accepted the domination as the part of their lives without any doubt. So, the both sides have certain fixed cultural norms in their minds that have been criticized by the social reformers and creative writers time to time; yet they have been the "core" parts of Indian mentality. The colonization, in this context, is not cultural and external but internal and psychological. Ashis Nandy's essay "The Psychology of Colonialism" defines it clearly in the following words: "As a state of mind, colonialism is an indigenous process released by external forces. Its sources lie deep in the minds of the rulers and the ruled. Perhaps that which begins in the minds of men, must also end in the minds of men" (3).

Nandy's quote has been used into the context of colonial and postcolonial studies; yet the relevance of the concerned may be utilized in the canon of *Dalit* literature in order to destroy the traditional bondage of caste ridden society. Basically, religion itself is not anti-humanitarian as it has been depicted through the resistance of *Dalit'* identity in the present novel; but this resistance is only a means of coming out from the "Inferiority complex", ingrained in the *Dalit's* minds. So, Bama revolts against the hypocrisy that has been practiced in the name of *dharma*. This kind of *dharma* is no *dharma* at all, but only something similar to the imperial process and something which has deviated itself from its originality. Bama, as a novelist and as human being recognized her duty towards Man. She was a thoughtful person, who knew everything about humanity and the scenario that was around it. She knew the boundaries of Indian people and problems facing the *Dalits*. This impulse shows that Bama believed in the fact that man is capable of renovating himself. Although the personality of man is shaped by the social forces, there is always a possibility of change and transformation by self-will. That is why she decides to leave the adopted role of nun in Christianity. She goes to serve the *Dalit* into the world rather than playing that hypocrite role into the convent. She has been the follower of good ideas and ideals in her life without having any prejudice towards any particular religion and individual. On the contrary, she wants an internal transformation within the minds of the human-beings asserting the *Dalit's* identity through her autobiographical novel *Karukku* which has been an inspirational work in the canon of *Dalit* literature. As Sharankumar Limbale writes in his book *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*:

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In Dalit literature, writers are narrating their own experiences, they are writing about their own society. Whatever is in this literature, it is theirs, they cannot remain neutral. To be neutral can be very damaging to Dalit literature and the Dalit movement.... A Dalit writer must possess a particular consciousness. (158)

Hence, this particular consciousness has a special meaning in Bama's assertion of identity where she wants an internal transformation in human mind by which a healthy society can be established, but it will not be easy without a voice of resistance. Bama knows that external change is the result of self- transformation within the minds. It does not mean that one should be away from one's traditional values, but these must be practiced in humanist terms. She, in other words, has a desire for casteless society where the people can think of new ideas concerning the true development of the society.

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