

Position of Religion in Dalit Literature: A Case Study of Bama's *Karukku*

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Interpretation and Discussion

Karukku is an autobiographical work written by a Roman Catholic woman from Tamil Nadu. She writes her works under the pen name Bama. This is an autobiography which raised from a personal crisis in the authors life because of the oppression she underwent due to her religion and caste. This book gets its shape and polemic from the authors drive to gain integrity as a Dalit and Christian. This autobiography isn't a conventional one, it is not simple or in chronological order but had different perspectives, different themes and reflection of different life events. This book provides us the details of how the Church influenced her and the lives of other Dalit Catholics. Other than the religious life which she discovers, she also finds out through the process of self-education the meaning of untouchability. Her re-reading of the Christian scriptures enables her to spread hope to the other Dalits. She emphasises on the revolutionary aspects of Christianity, the values of equality, social justice and love for all. Her life experiences drive her to actively engage in the upliftment of the oppressed. After she becomes a nun she has a little hope that she will be able to put these ambitions into effect. Through this journey she discovers how her perspective differs from that of the convent and the Church. This conflict makes the core theme of the book Karukku.

Karukku mainly focuses on a single issue which is caste oppression in Catholic Church and the journey of her lonely self-discovery. The other conflict Bama faces is between herself and the community, she leaves one community (religious woman) to join another (Dalit woman). Bama's parents were converted Christians, who converted way back in the 18th century. The main essential aspects of this story are caste and religion that caused pain in the authors life. Christianity was considered a way of liberty to her, it is freedom which is specifically concentrated to the Dalit. When she was young her life was filled with festivities and rituals of her family and community, but when she started going to the outside world, first school and then the convent, is when she understood the rudimentary life.

“Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creations”. In the authors life this pain is doubled due to her religion as well. In Tamil Nadu, Dalits are influenced by the church and its activities irrespective of the fact that they are Christians or not. She describes the caste prejudice in the society which was worse from before. She feels betrayed by the freedom and dignity which is supposed to be offered to every Indian regardless of their caste, religion, race or creed. She is also disgusted by the betrayal by the convent and the church. She tells us about her journey of her spiritual growth as a Catholic child to the realisation of herself as a Dalit.

“What did it mean when they called us ‘Paraiya’? had the name become that obscene? But we too are human beings. Our people should never run these petty errands for these fellows. We should work in their fields, take home our wages, and leave it at that”. Since the incident of her finding out the situation of the community which she lives in, which regarded them as untouchables, she started finding means for the upliftment of her kind. Her elder brothers words inspired her to study hard and prove herself to the society. She would constantly be reminded of her caste wherever she studied. After completing her B.Ed. she joins as a teacher in a convent and finds out that the nuns working there constantly oppress the Dalit children. This incident reminds Bama of an occurrence in her own life. When she was in eight grade studying in a convent she would often hear the nuns commenting on the Dalit children. She would often scold these children for no reason and those who were a little more on the plump side they would get even more. She would often say that those children would not get anything to eat at home and fill their stomachs here, when they return from their houses they are just skin and bone but in the hostel they are like potatoes.

Bama enjoyed teaching in the convent as most of the children were Dalit. After looking at the oppression of Dalit children and teachers by the nuns, Bama decides to become a nun herself and sacrifice her life to help those children. The nuns could not stand poor or low caste people. Bama then works in a Christian religious congregation in which Tamil nuns are treated inferior, especially the Dalit Tamil nuns, they were considered to be the lowest of the lowest. Bama started noticing the casteism in the convent. She could deal with this discrimination in the society but not in the convent. The Dalit nuns were not given any higher positions in the Church. She had to pretend there to survive. They did not consider Dalit Christians as human beings. Even though the circumstances of the convent was like that she continued working there for the betterment of the poor and Dalit children. The other nuns taking training under Bama were also curious about her caste and she would tell them without any fear and hesitation. Even the religious congregation had a separate reservation for Harijan women. The sisters would often say that there will be a different religious order for the Harijan women somewhere.

Despite all she faces, Bama decides to become a nun and serve the poor and lower caste children. She soon replaces the fear of God with the love for him. “The fear (bhayam), that I felt towards God gradually left me, and love (paasam), grew. I tried to the best of my ability to pray at all times; to go to Jesus, look at him, and talk to him frequently; not to behave in a way that would cause him pain; not to commit sinful deeds; to be good...when I finished my exams after the tenth class, I told one of the sisters about my wish. But she told me that I should only be considered after I had finished my college education.” Despite all the hardships she has faced in school and college and the insults she gets on a daily basis, she has faith in the Christian religion and God. She wants to spread love and brotherhood. But her experience in the convent shatter her belief about the religion she believed in. The nuns themselves were not treated equally. They were treated on the basis of caste, language and economic status. She doesn’t lose faith in God but loses faith in the religious practices. She believed that God showed greatest compassion toward the oppressed and he associates himself with the poor. The Jesus in the bible is different and the Jesus who is known

in the daily prayer is different. She then could not continue pretending in the religious order and resigns. She realises that there is no connection between the “convent God” and the poor.

Conclusion

Religion has a great impact on Bama’s work “Karukku”. Christianity was a way of freedom for the Dalit people but in the convents and churches the situation was completely different. The Dalit nuns were never given equal importance in the church and were always given menial jobs unlike the upper caste nuns. Christianity stands for love, support and service for others. Convents are usually service oriented but this service changes according to the social status of the people. The convent Bama worked in could not admit Dalit students in their school as their standards will fall. They marginalised the lower caste as poor quality. The nuns even spoke about the Dalits in a very scornful manner and didn’t even consider them as humans. Religion in this work has a great position as it shouldn’t discriminate people on the basis of their caste or social status. God is equal to all is what the preaching of most religions are but what is followed is completely different.

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