BREAKING ALL FETTERS WITH THE SWORD OF EDUCATION: INTERPRETING BAMA'S *KARUKKU* AS A LIGHTHOUSE FOR DALIT FEMINISM

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Karukku is a poignant text that brings to light the shameful and ugly secrets of our mainstream Indian society, which has thrived on flawed, unjust doctrines of subjugating its most diligent and hard-working section in the name of a caste-based hierarchy. But the book does not limit itself to being merely a treatise on casteist atrocities and a woman's solidarity with the other members of her marginalized community, it goes on to become a manifesto of self-emancipation for the victimized Dalits across India. Through this book, Bama calls forth her fellow folks - the Dalits , and particularly the Dalit women - to re-discover, ,re-define, re-affirm and re-establish their identities as well as their rightful place in the Indian social order through educational and entrepreneurial initiatives, thereby resisting their victimization at the hands of hegemonic powers. My article not only delineates these multiple dimensions of this masterpiece of Dalit-feminist literature, but also argues that this book must be read as a thought-provoking piece of 'resistance literature'. Further, this article will also make an attempt to trace the intersecting trajectories between 'Dalit feminism' and 'postcolonialism' that can be identified in an insightful, close reading of Bama's *Karukku*.

Keywords: Dalit Literature, Marginalization, Discrimination, Dehumanizing Caste System, Resistance, Postcolonialism, Black Feminism, Education, Empowerment.

Introduction

Karukku, originally written in Tamil by a Dalit Christian writer named Bama Faustina Soosairaj, was first published in 1992, but it gained a substantial reputation in literary circles after Lakshmi Holmstrom translated it into English and the translated version was published around the dawn of the new millennium in the year 2000. The translated version of *Karukku* won the Crossword Prize for Literature, and this further enhanced the recognition of

Bama Faustina Soosairaj as an exponent of Indian Dalit-feminism. Defying any specific genre classification, this book is too unconventional to be called either an autobiography or a fiction, although it seems to be both. Finding realistic documentation to be a viable mode of protest against an unjust, exploitative and conventional social order, Bama not only records her individual frustration and predicament as a Dalit Christian woman who was bound to suffer humiliation and rejection at every step of her life, but she also authentically testifies to the collective experiences of an entire subaltern community of India − the Dalits. With the aid of a series of anecdotes, Bama tries to capture in words the milieu of her village, in all its beautiful and ugly shades. Bama was born as a Tamil Dalit Christian in Puthupatti village situated in the Virudhunagar district of Southern Tamil Nadu in the year 1958; nearly a decade after India gained sovereignty as a nation and liberated itself from the servitude of a foreign yoke. But like numerous other villages across the length and breadth of India, this village too was plagued with the social evil of casteism, a discriminatory system in which the Dalits had no experiential idea of words like 'freedom' and 'human-dignity'.

The term '*Dalit*' is commonly used across India to denote those sections of Hindu society which have been repressed, depressed and oppressed socially, culturally and politically as well as economically for the past several centuries, by the hegemony of elite sections of society. The Indian-Hindu society has been conventionally divided into four major classes called *Varnas – Brahmins* (the clergymen), *Kshatriyas* (the warriors), *Vaishyas* (the traders) and *Shudras* (the servants and labourers). The classification of specific roles associated with each of these four *Varnas* was consolidated and systematized on the basis of theological or religious scriptures such as *Manusmriti*, or rather their interpretations by the influential elites. The *Shudras* have remained disenfranchised from most privileges, excluded from participation in any mainstream acts or discourses, deprived of basic rights to own land and property, educate themselves or opt for a vocation of their choice and have been compelled to do all sorts of menial jobs including manual scavenging, in the service of upper-caste sections of society (particularly in the rural areas of India). On top of that, the *Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas* have looked down upon the *Shudras* as a degenerated echelon of Indian society, thereby subjecting them to the most severe forms of discriminations, to the extent of treating them as untouchable 'polluted beings'. These '*Shudras'* were denominated '*Dalits*' by the twentieth century social reformer Jyotirao Phule as well as by the renowned political revolutionary Bhimrao Ambedkar; and gradually the term gained currency in common usage. Dalit women bore the brunt of exclusion and inferiority even more intensely than their male counterparts and were doubly marginalized due to their inferior caste identity

compounded with their inferior gender, thus being pushed further to the peripheries of the Indian social structure.

Unlike most autobiographical texts which are limited to registering subjectivity alone, *Karukku* gives the impression of rather being a *testimonio,* in which the boundaries between individuality and universality become altogether blurred and the narrative simultaneously gives voice to personal as well as shared collective concerns. Pramod K. Nayar in his essay entitled '*Bama's Karukku: Dalit Autobiography as Testimonio'* defines Testimonio as "the voice of one who witnesses for the sake of an 'other', who remains voiceless".[1] In this process of penning her memoir, Bama identifies herself with the Dalit community, which almost becomes an extension of her own self. In a way, through *Karukku*, the collective-consciousness of an entire community finds expression. Bama herself acknowledges in the book that "I am like a mongrel wandering about without a permanent job, nor a regular means to find clothes, food and a safe place to live. I share the same difficulties and struggles that all Dalit poor experience. I share to some extent the poverty of the Dalits who toil far more painfully through fierce heat and beating rain".[2] It would therefore be appropriate to read *Karukku* not just as Bama's autobiography but rather as a collective biography of Indian Dalits in general and Dalit-women in particular, because any Dalit woman would have had similar experiences.

Bama deliberately resorts to a specific narrative technique for adding this unique flavour to her discourse. At the outset of this book, its Preface is in first person; but by the second and third paragraph the narrator's tone shifts from an individual perspective to a collective shared perspective, confirmed through an authorial assertion that it's an articulation on behalf of an entire community. Unlike normal autobiographies, Bama's narrative is neither linear nor chronological, rather in a jig-saw puzzle style, the focus of the narrative keeps on shuttling between the past and the present life of Bama Faustina, thereby revealing bit by bit, the numerous glimpses of manifold incidents, which have taken place during the different phases of her life. She helplessly recounts a bitter childhood experience when her schoolteacher falsely accused her of stealing a coconut and publicly humiliated her, even though she had not committed any theft; the only reason behind the teacher's suspicion being that she belonged to the so called lower 'pariyah' caste. Bama candidly records her juvenile angst at being victimized by caste prejudices at school and the sting of shame she felt due to this incident: "When I entered the classroom, the entire class turned round to look at me, and I wanted to shrink into myself as I went

[1] NAYAR, P. K. Bama's Karukku: Dalit Autobiography as *Testimonio*. In *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Sage Journals, June 2006, Vol. 41, No. 2, p. 84.
[2] SOOSAIRAJ, B. F. *Karukku*, pp. 67–68.

and sat on my bench, still weeping."[3] She also gives a threadbare account of the all-pervasive casteist abhorrence that deeply hurt her sensitive young heart during her college days: "I had thought that at such a big college, at such a distance away, among so many different students, nobody would bother about such things as caste. But even there, they did certainly consider caste differences… It struck me that I would not get rid of this caste business easily, whatever I studied, wherever I went."[4] Even while commuting on public transport, Bama was anguished to notice that most upper-caste ladies avoid sharing seats with Dalit women. Questioning the ethical legitimacy of such actions rooted in the concept of class-based "varna" superiority versus inferiority, Bama writes: "How is it that people consider us too gross even to sit next to when traveling? They look at us with the same look they would cast on someone suffering from a repulsive disease. Where ever we go we suffer blows and pain".[5] In a stream of consciousness narrative mode, the book also functions as a repository of Bama's reflections on her grandmother's servitude as someone who used to work as a servant for the upper-caste Naicker families in her ancestral village, where even the Naicker children would address her elderly grandmother by her personal name, and command her like young Masters, while in a customary fashion, Bama's grandmother used to respectfully address the upper-caste little boys as Ayya, which means 'master'. Whenever these labour class Pariya ie. Dalit women asked for drinking water, the upper-caste Naicker women would pour out water from a height of four feet, to avoid getting defiled by their touch. Even while offering food to the lower caste women, the Naicker lady "came out with her leftovers, leaned out from some distance and tipped them into Paati's vessel, and went away".[6] All through the course of her life, Bama had been a witness to innumerable such incidents of discrimination and atrocities. She vehemently strikes at the core of such mainstream prejudiced perceptions by hurling upon readers a series of unanswered questions: "Are Dalits not human beings? Do they not have common sense? Do they not have such attributes as a sense of honour and self-respect? Are they without wisdom, beauty, dignity? What do we lack? They treat us in whatever way they choose, as if we are slaves who don't even possess human dignity."[7] These pertinent questions, interrogating the legitimacy of caste-based stratification, remind us of a similar set of questions raised by Frantz Fanon's seminal book *Black Skin, White Masks*, in the context of

[3] SOOSAIRAJ, B. F. Karukku, p. 17.
[4] Ibid., p. 19.
[5] Ibid., p. 24.
[6] Ibid., p. 16.
[7] Ibid., p. 25.

discriminations validated by notions of racial superiority: "What a disgrace it is to be black in this world! Are black men not men? Does that endow them with a baser soul, a duller, and an uglier one? And for that they have earned scornful names."[8]

But Bama's *Karukku* does not limit itself to being merely a treatise on casteist atrocities and a woman's solidarity with the other members of her marginalized community, it strides ahead to become a manifesto of protest as well as self-emancipation for the victimized Dalits across India; thereby seeking to establish itself at the forefront of 'resistance literature' written in India during the post-independence era. She aims at the liberation of Dalits through her writing. Interpellating the 'dignity of labour' done by the Dalits and their role in an Indian society that has never even acknowledged their contributions in nation-building, Bama's book is a gem in post-independence 'resistance literature'. The word 'resistance' is derived from the Latin root-word "resistere" meaning to take a stand against. Conceptually, the idea of 'resistance' becomes an effective weapon for the subaltern or marginalized sections of any particular society to react against hegemonic power structures and subversive norms. Resistance literature has ample potential to awaken the dormant psyche of suppressed classes and become a viable instrument at the hands of the subaltern to subvert the hegemony.

"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."[9] These words of advice from her elder brother flashed upon the disillusioned spirits of Bama as a beacon light of hope. Quite early in life, Bama had realized that intellectual advancement is the key to elevating oneself on the socio-economic ladder; hence she herself made her academic excellence the tool and weapon with which she incessantly fought against all odds, and ultimately succeeded in being able to throw off the yoke of subjugation and the shame of inferiority. Bama calls on her fellow folk − the Dalits, and particularly the Dalit women, to trust their inner strength which has become stronger through prolonged subversion and take the first step to re-discover, re-define, re-affirm and re-establish their identities as well as their rightful place in the Indian social order through educational and entrepreneurial initiatives, thereby resisting their victimization at the hands of hegemonic powers. To oppose exploitative power structures or to question the validity of a dominant tradition at the linguistic level is the ultimate end which 'resistance literature' aspires to achieve, and *Karukku* is no exception in this regard. Hence this book needs to be analyzed and interpreted as a titular metaphor for Dalit empowerment. *Karukku* means

[8] FANON, F. *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 166.
[9] SOOSAIRAJ, B. F. *Karukku*, p. 15.

palmyra leaves, which have sharp edges on both sides, like double-edged swords. The image of 'Karukku' as the title of this book, is indicative of the wounds inflicted through humiliating caste discrimination upon the conscience of Bama, as well as several million Dalits like her. But the seared edges of 'Karruku' also become the symbol of a sharp-edged weapon to cut through the dominant system. Though many other writers have voiced Dalits' sufferings in their literary works, Bama's *Karukku* opens up new possibilities to resist hegemonic power structures through self-elevation and self-emancipation.

Postcolonial writings are substantially analogous to the genre of resistance literature, in which *Karukku* deserves to be rightly placed. In his book entitled *Beginning Postcolonialism*, John McLeod argues that "the internalization of colonial sets of values was, to a degree, an effective way of disempowering people; it was also the source of trauma for colonized people who were taught to look negatively upon their own people, their culture and themselves".[10] Perpetuation of the ideology of colonialism justified the subservience of colonized people to the assumed superior class or race and persuaded the colonized victims to internalize and accept their lower rank by succumbing to a particular imposed perception. In the case of Indian Dalits, the mechanism of subjugation has worked at the physical, financial and psychological levels alike. Enslaving the psyche of these marginalized sections, the hegemonic powers perpetuated doctrinal dictums which conditioned these subalterns to think of themselves as lower creatures. The mainstream Indian society that had functioned on the doctrines of "*Varna- Vyavastha*" (i.e. caste system), identified its proletariat labour class as defiled "*shudras*" and the concept of purity-pollution validated exclusion and exploitation. Underscoring this conspiracy of subjugation at the psychological level, Bama writes in her book *Karukku*: "Because Dalits have been enslaved for generation upon generation, and been told again and again of their degradation, they have come to believe that they are degraded, lacking honour and self-worth, untouchable ..."[11] It acutely perturbed her conscience to witness how easily the people of her community have resigned themselves to their subaltern status. Nostalgically, Bama delineates her own grandmother's servile attitude devoid of any self-esteem, towards the same upper-caste people who treated her in derogatory manner: "These people are the Maharajas who feed us our rice… without them, how will we survive? Haven't they been upper caste from generation to generation, and haven't we been lower caste? Can we change this?"[12] Such passages from *Karukku* can be better analyzed in the light of Frantz Fanon's psychological

[10] MCLEOD, J. *Beginning Postcolonialism*, p. 19.
[11] SOOSAIRAJ, B. F. *Karukku*, p. 28.
[12] Ibid., p. 14.

approach delineated in *Black Skin, White Masks*. As John McLeod referentially states: "*Black Skin, White Masks* explains the consequences of identity formation for the colonized subject who is forced into the internalization of the self as the 'other'…. The colonizers are civilized, rational, intelligent; the Negro remains the other to all these qualities against which colonizing people derive their sense of superiority and normality. *Black Skin, White Masks* depicts those colonized by French imperialism doomed to hold a traumatic belief of their own inferiority."[13] What the colonizers did to make the colonized multitudes subservient, was to systematically enslave them mentally by instilling into them a sense of inferiority and acceptance of their own location at the lower rungs of the social order. Once their self-confidence was drained, their willpower to resist exploitation naturally waned and they became vulnerable prey for the dominant sections of society. This very same conspiracy of mental subjugation was instrumental in pushing the Dalits to the fringes of mainstream society, where they lay dormant for centuries, without even challenging the discrimination that eventually dehumanized them and these marginalized subaltern groups internalized their own identity as lesser beings or creatures who could not claim to be counted as 'human' beings.

As an anti-oppressive text, *Karukku* tries to foreground the inferior position unjustly assigned to Dalits and create a platform to fight this dehumanizing exclusion. Similarly, the psychologist Frantz Fanon too holds the opinion that "the end of colonialism meant not just political and economic change, but psychological change too". Adding deeper connotations to postcolonialism, Meenakshi Mukherjee asserts that "postcolonialism is not merely a chronological label referring to the period after the demise of empires. It is ideologically an emancipatory concept, particularly for people outside the western world".[14] Hence, Bama's strong plea to the people of her own community to realize, assert and claim their rightful place in the Indian social order seems to be conceptually in accord with the quintessence of postcolonial discourses: "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 fate, as if we have no 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."[15] A close reading of *Karukku*, contextualizing it in

[13] MCLEOD, J. *Beginning Postcolonialism*, pp. 20–21.
[14] MUKHERJEE, M. *Interrogating Post-Colonialism: Theory, Text and Contex*, p. 3.
[15] SOOSAIRAJ, B. F. *Karukku*, p. 40.

a broader ideological conjuncture, reveals several intersecting trajectories between the ethos of postcolonialism and Dalit feminism. In harmony with the broader conceptual ethos of postcolonialism and its essence of being synonymous with the empowerment of the subaltern, Dalit literature appears to be functioning as a catalyst in bringing forth the marginalized Dalits from their peripheral location to the centre of the mainstream social order.

Bama tries to make an assertion of hitherto neglected voices and experiences of the Dalits, just like the efforts of postcolonial writers to write back to the centre. Dennis Walder's observation that "at the centre of that rewriting from the postcolonial perspective, is the reclamation of the voices and the experiences of the 'other'…"[16] seems applicable in the case of Dalit literature too. The spark of resistance against dominant ideologies and the determination to overturn hegemonic social perceptions runs as an undercurrent throughout this text, and this feature of *Karukku* makes it thematically analogous to the tenets of postcolonialism. Jasbir Jain opines that in the broader spectrum, postcoloniality is "an attitude of mind, a state of positioning within power relationships and a process of rehabilitation of restoration of identity and moving from simple protest and resistance, goes on to provide an alterity".[17]

With the objective of re-structuring and re-conceptualizing 'Dalit woman's Image' at variance with conventionally dominant perceptions, Bama's *Karukku* also functions as a treatise celebrating 'Dalit identity', placing in high esteem the resilience, grit and spiritual strength of Dalit women by faithfully documenting an ordinary village girl's extraordinary struggle to re-construct herself and thus this book becomes an inspirational feminist text for all those women across the world, who bear the brunt of discrimination rooted in a prejudiced, narrow-minded world-view. It clearly sends a message that education and self-reliance are vital to uplift social status and achieve empowerment. The life struggle of Bama testifies to the assumption that education plays the role of a catalyst in women's development by enabling women to transform themselves into free thinkers and, enlightened through the medium of intellectual advancement, they become bold enough to stride ahead for liberating and uplifting themselves. Education opens up new vistas for self-discovery, free-thinking and builds up the confidence in an individual to assert one's right to living with dignity. Bama's own life exemplifies this social phenomenon. Bama believes that if the latent spirit of Dalits like her is kindled through transformative education, they will collectively be successful in breaking their shackles, which they have ignorantly internalized for generations as their unalterable destiny. Towards the latter part of her book, Bama expresses

[16] WALDER, D. *Post-Colonial Literatures in English: History, Language*, p. 32.
[17] JAIN, J. *Contesting Postcolonialisms*, p. 25.

her conviction that with gradually-growing awareness through transformative education, these subservient multitudes of India will dare to rise against oppression and make sincere efforts for self-emancipation. Her optimism rings aloud in these lines: "Dalits have begun to realize the truth … They have become aware that they too were created in the likeness of God. There is a new strength within them, urging them to reclaim that likeness which has been so far repressed, ruined, obliterated; and to begin to live again with honour, self-respect and with a love towards all humankind. To my mind, this alone is true devotion".[18]

In its multi-dimensional spectrum, *Karukku* can indeed be considered to be a semi-fictional, semi-autobiographical, semi-testimonio and semi-inspirational text, that deserves to be recognized as a seminal book in the canon of Dalit literature; but in addition to all this, it also seems fit to be considered on a par with the literary masterpieces of Black feminism. In terms of its theoretical concept, counter-hegemonic resistance is the common ideological axis on which both Dalit feminism and Black feminism turn alike, in spite of having evolved in altogether different geographical as well as historical contexts. Dalit feminism and Black feminism both evolved out of the ramifications of exclusion from the mainstream and are intrinsically analogous in aiming at re-structuring, re-formulating, re-conceptualizing and re-framing the existing stereotypical social hierarchy. Taking into consideration, the role played by autobiographical discourse in charting new self-definitions to counter pre-defined notions of inferior identity, *Karukku* by Bama Faustina performs more or less the same function as was played by the autobiographies written by Black women. As Elleke Boehmer points out in his book *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, "during the years when government repression was at its height, autobiographies by Black women first began to appear in South Africa… the autobiography allowed them to give shape to an identity grounded in these diverse experiences of endurance and overcoming. The life-story was also seen as a way of forging political solidarity, reaching out to Black women caught in similar situations".[19]

The distinguished Black feminist writer Patricia Hill Collins makes the point that in the process of writing her book entitled *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, she was making an attempt to regain her voice and seeking self-definition to replace the external definitions imposed by dominant groups. Her contention is that "Black women's self-definitions enabled them to refashion African-influenced conceptions of self and community. These self-definitions of Black womanhood

[18] OOSAIRAJ, B. F. *Karukku*, pp. 93–94.
[19] BOEHMER, E. *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, p. 225.

were designed to resist the negative controlling images of Black womanhood advanced by Whites as well as the discriminatory social practices that these controlling images supported. In all, Black women's participation in crafting a constantly changing African-American culture fostered distinctively Black and women-centered world-views".[20] In the preface to the second edition of her book which helped in the formulation of Black feminist theories, she explicates the objective that motivated her to write: "I initially wrote *Black Feminist Thought* in order to help empower African-American women. I knew that when an individual Black woman's consciousness concerning how she understands her everyday life undergoes change, she can become empowered. Such consciousness may stimulate her to embark on a path of personal freedom, even if it exists initially primarily in her own mind. If she is lucky enough to meet others who are undergoing similar journeys, she and they can change the world around them. If ideas, knowledge, and consciousness can have such an impact on individual Black women, what effect might they have on Black women as a group?"[21] Bama too attributes the genesis of *Karukku* to her larger vision of emancipating the Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular. The need to formulate a unique epistemological standpoint for Black as well as Dalit women, on the basis of their shared experiences of dehumanizing discriminations, is equally felt by Bama Faustina and Patricia Hill Collins. Furthermore, Bama's inferences regarding the relevance of education as a viable ladder for Dalit women to achieve self-emancipation and eventually elevate herself to a respectable position in society, find congruent resemblance in the notions of one of the earliest proponents of the concept of Black feminism, Anna J. Cooper, who underscores the relevance of transformative education for empowering Black women in her book *A Voice From the South*: " Now I claim that it is the prevalence of Higher Education among women, the making it a common everyday affair for women to reason and think and express their thought, the training and stimulus which enable and encourage women to administer to the world the bread it needs as well as the sugar it cries for; in short it is the transmitting of the potential forces of her soul into dynamic factors that has given symmetry and completeness to the world's agencies".[22] Such ideological affinity between *Karukku* and Black feminist literature give the readers an insight to interpret Bama's narrative not just in the limited context of the Dalit perspective, but in the universal context of women's empowerment.

[20] COLLINS, P. H. *Black Feminist Thought*, pp. 13–14.
[21] Ibid., p. 9.
[22] COOPER, A. J. *A Voice From the South*, p. 57.

Conclusion

Written in an hour of despair as a catharsis for personal turbulence by Bama Faustina Soosairaj at a stage of her life when all seemed bleak, *Karukku* has turned out to bring salvation not only for its own author, but has gained over the years the status of a scripture for Indian Dalit women in particular, and all victims of hegemonic oppression in general. What makes this groundbreaking, radical literary text all the more special, is the fact that it not only raises pertinent questions and underscores concerns pertaining to the victimization of womenfolk on the basis of gender, caste or class, but also hints at viable solutions to confront and overcome those problems. Most emphatically, it underlines the relevance of 'education' as a vital tool for women to achieve empowerment, liberty and the right to live with human dignity.

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