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**THE TRIPLE MARGINALIZATION OF DALIT WOMEN WITH
REFERENCE TO BAMA’S KARUKKU**

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ABSTRACT

“To awaken the people; it is the women who must be awakened, once she is on the move, the family moves, the village moves, the nation moves.”

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru.

India, an example of ‘Unity in Diversity’, is famous for its cultural variedness where people of different languages, cultures, religions and castes live together in ‘so-called’ harmony but also has been a quiet observer to the violence of women irrespective of their social status. Women in India are regarded as an incarnation of ‘Shakti’ ever since times immemorial. They are adored as Goddesses, revered as epitome of strength. But in actuality, they are measured as the weaker part of the society. If this is the situation of women in general, what would be the condition of dalit women who are the oppressed among the ‘oppressed’. Dalit community is that part of society in which the people are considered as untouchables and are marginalized by the upper castes people. All the time, dalits are on the downgraded ‘other’ side of the Indian culture. So when they started articulation after centuries of silence, about themselves, there comes a literature depicting affirmation of human rights, self-pride, revolution against social discrimination, chronicles of individual and collective anguish, and hopes and desires for a new society free from discrimination. Female writers also have come up into the open enunciating their experiences, miseries, humiliations and manipulation in all walks of their lives after taking insight from the male writers in expressing the life of the subjugated and the incredible reaction they received from the thinkers for their upraised voices. Bama is one amongst them. This paper focuses on Bama’s novel, Karukku, in which she discusses the triple marginalization of women in the Paraiyar community, the lowest of the lowest section in the society, at the hands of caste, religion and gender. She wants dalit women to awake and rise for their rights.

KEYWORDS: *Marginalization, Dalit, Women, Bama, oppressed.*

INTRODUCTION

The word 'marginalization' applies literally to anyone or any groups who are excluded from engaging in power and decision-making. Marginalization often implies physical, emotional, political, economic, religious, social, and educational power inequality and dominance over certain groups. People were oppressed and treated as 'untouchables' based on their status. They have been oppressed by higher castes. The Dalit people, particularly in our society, have been oppressed, and dominated for several years. They began to lift their voice for their rights after tolerating all these sufferings. From the desire for equality, Dalit literature is expressed, its character is collective rather than personal.(Kamila,2018). Dalit literature is henceforth a manifestation of dalits, written by dalits and for the awakening of dalits. (Rawat, 2005)

Dalit literature falls under the category of 'Marginalized literature' or 'Subaltern literature'. A new identity of modern Indian literature is gaining significance. It is not the pain of single person, but it is collective agony, endured over thousands of years. Experiences in Dalit literature constitute a dedication to self-search in order to attain self-respect; the denunciation of traditions and religion that are divergent to such self-respect. They express the suffering of people who are not regarded as human beings. Dalit writers were motivated to write by this experience which is actually the product of pain and revolt (Selvi,2016). While Dalit literature is written in different languages, there are different geographical contexts, but a common denominator exists: origin, sensitivity, common deprivation, bigotry, exploitation and injustice. Therefore, among all Dalit authors, there is solidarity. They transcend the narrow barriers of language, religion, colour and gender. They use literature as a tool to fight against the norms, practices and rituals of the existing social order. Their writing is not propaganda, it is characterized by the feeling of resistance against the development of negativism. (Rawat, 2005)

Marginalisation of women means keeping women isolated from social, cultural, economic and political participation. This social disharmony has been generated by stereotypical patriarchal thought. The primary cause of the imbalance of power between men and women is inequality in education. As a result of their illiteracy and indifference of their parents, women frequently suffer physical and psychological atrocities such as eve-teasing, sexual abuse, female infanticide, dowry, injustice, domestic violence, poverty, insecurity, etc. The talents of women are used inadequately; thus, they do not successfully foster their self-esteem and self-confidence.(Anowar, 2018)This poses a plethora of concerns about society's approach to them. Discrimination and injustice begins from the moment of the girl's birth, considering her to be a burden on the parents and not getting the male child proper care. They are seen as a weaker gender and compelled to play a secondary role in society and are frequently ignored, discriminated , marginalized, and reduced to the status of 'nobody,' the 'other' uncivilized. If this is the status of women in general, what will be the trauma of Dalit women who are the oppressed among the 'oppressed'? There is a world of contrast between theory and reality in their lives.(Deivasahayam, 2018)

Dalits are a segregated and marginalised group in India. The Dalit women's status is so grim that under the patriarchal rule of the Dalits, they are once again Dalits among the Dalits. Dalit women faced physical, sexual and verbal harassment. Dalit women are subjugated and exploited both inside and outside their homes. Hindu women from Savarna are dominated only by the male; on the contrary, Dalit women are subjugated by double social monsters, the first by Dalit patriarchy and the second by caste hegemony. (Anowar, 2018) They are easy prey in society for evil-minded vultures. As they face the harsh realities of suppression, fight for survival, and torture at the hands of not only the men of the upper castes, but also the men of their own class, in the lowest of the lowest strata of life. (Deivasahayam, 2018) Dalit

women do the backbreaking work in the field for their survival, carry wood-fire, rear the children, do household work and satisfy the lust of their drunken husbands at night. In workplaces, the discriminatory treatment provided to Dalit females is very popular. They get minimum and unfair pay for the job they are engaged in along with their male counterparts. They do not have an identity of their own. Wives, daughters, sisters, and mothers are known by their male members. Mainstream feminists are fighting for economic and social equality, but they are hardly paying attention to the multiple inequalities of Dalit women. Only Dalit feminists, like Bama, raise their voices against the triple marginalization of Dalit women at the hands of caste, religion and gender.

Bama erupted with indignation after being marginalized by the upper caste and broke her silence, raising her voice in her novel *Karukku*(1992). She bravely lashes out the upper caste ill-treatment against castes. Bama recounted her lamentable experiences in the village, culture, school, college, and as a nun in the church in *Karukku*. Bama is the pen name of a Tamil Dalit feminist who as Bama Mary Fatima Rani born in 1958, into a Roman Catholic family in the village of Pathupatti in Tamil Nadu. To escape the clutch of the Hindu caste system, her grandfather converted into Christianity. The family's status did not change much by this conversion and they still remained landless workers, working for landlords of the upper caste. *Karukku* is considered the first autobiography written in Tamil. It was first published in Tamil and later was translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom, edited by Mini Krishnan and published in 2000. Only after the translation of Lakshmi Holmstrom into English, *Karukku* increase its worldwide reorganization. In 2001, it won the crossword book award. This was the time when she and her autobiography came into the attention of national and international readers as well as writers. In Tamil, *Karukku* is the first autobiography of its kind to explore the lives of Dalit individuals. (Selvi, 2016) It copes with the brutal repression unleashed on Dalits. In this novel, she also mentions how the caste system can play a significant role in human existence. The pain and suffering of the Dalit people are mentioned in this childhood memoirs.

Bama's *skarukku* is the path-breaking life story of her oppressed position, accentuated by her gender, class and religious position. Bama is caught up in three identities in this novel, as a Dalit, as a woman and eventually, as a Christian. The key motive for *Karukku*'s writing is to expose her inner wound. Bama's voice is the voice of all of her community as a whole as she herself says, "I am part of a collective awareness." She seeks to crack the silence of her community's subjugation arising out of their inferior status. Bama calls for women's rights, justice and social equality in her novel. She also lifts her voice against women's exploitation, discrimination, casteism, ignorance and of their inferior status. *Karukku* describes the persecution of upper-class people, administrative control, teachers, students, and the church against the Dalits.

Bama has countless stories right from her childhood that speaks of caste prejudice and humiliation. In the life of Bama, caste, gender and religion bring about numerous sufferings. She felt really ashamed in many places because of her birth in the Parayar community. She is infuriated with the upper castes bad treatment of the lower caste people. She continues to work hard to uplift herself and her society from this evil after facing many challenges in her life. Right from her childhood, she realized the domination. In the meantime, her elder brother inspires her and tells her about the potential of education that could alter life's tremendous changes, and that she could also gain equal rights for herself and to her society. Her brother also says that education could offer her integrity as well. She felt a lot of support and trust after her conversation with her brother. She decides to work hard and has very seriously oriented her studies and stood first in class. Many people became her friends after her success in studies, even though she was from the downtrodden community. Bama's methods of self-improvement are also framed in corporeal terms.

In the novel *Karukku*, Bama focuses on three essential aspects namely: caste, religion and gender that causes great pain in life of dalit women. Bama experienced the marginalization and untouchability of the society in which she lived. She articulated the way how she was marginalized and discriminated to the core because of her caste. Bama demonstrates how biases and caste traditions are so deeply embedded in the society that lower caste children are marginalized against almost unconsciously, even in institutions such as schools and churches. According to Bama, Harijan children were despised and exploited as cheap labour. She tells us about how she was wrongfully branded a thief because a coconut fell down when they were playing. One day, Bama and her friends were playing the game of running up the coconut palm and touching its tip in the school in the evening. Unfortunately, a green coconut fell down when Bama climbed up and reached the tip. The children left it there out of fear and ran away. At the morning assembly the next morning, the head master of the Chaaliyar caste called out the name of Bama and scolded her. Actually, Bama was not guilty, but she was handled badly by the headmaster. In the name of caste, he rebuked her: "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". (Bama,19) Since the Chaaliyars and the Parayars (Bama's community) were fighting over a cemetery at the time, the headmaster's caste as a Chaaliyar becomes important. In front of all the students, she was humiliated and insulted. She got suspended from school after that. When she was weeping, she was told by a teacher to visit the church priest for an apology. When she headed to the priest to get a letter from him to be accepted to the class, the priest's initial reaction was, "After all you are from the Cheri. You might have done it. You must have done it"(Bama, 19). Even the priest to whom she goes for justice informs her that since she is a Paray, she must be a cheat. With the advice of the priest, when she entered the school, the whole class looked at her in a strange way. The injustice of the caste system is inscribed in terms of Bama's "shamed" body when she is harassed by the priest in front of her class: "When I entered the classroom, the entire class turned round to look at me and I wanted to shrink into myself as I went and sat on my bench, still weeping" (Bama, 19). Even in public places, such as bus stands, she experiences marginalization and untouchability. By refusing to sit with girls from Cheri, Naicker women demonstrate their disgust and casteism. They'd even choose to stand all the way than to sit with girls from Cheri as Bama says: "They'd prefer then to get up and stand all the way rather than sit next to me or to any other women from Cheri. They'd be polluted." (Bama, 20) By this incident Bama felt humiliation of caste-based discrimination on the part of society which are hard to bear and try to exposes in the novel the true essence of the society in which she lived and the way she was humiliated and discriminated by upper castes .

A harder and more unequal repression of Dalit women is illustrated in Bama's *Karukku* by the association of patriarchy with caste hegemony. Dalit women are seen as hard-working, brave women who work tirelessly at home and outside and handle the household individually when their male-folk are rounded up by the police over trumped-up charges, specifically the men of a particular family. Dalit women are forced to deal with tremendous abuse at male hands, amid the dual stresses of work at home and in the fields or workplace. The men of the Dalits harass their women no less than the men of the upper caste. In India, patriarchy plays an important role in literature, and Dalit patriarchy is also an important topic of concern in Tamil Dalit literature.(Wankhede, 2017)Bama realized this patriarchy domination right from her childhood. She recalls events of her childhood, such as playing with her friends both boys and girls where boys are going to behave as Naickers, and the girls as Paraiyars. Boys are going to hold supermarkets, and girls are going to buy groceries. Boys are like priests, and girls are like sisters. The boys are going to work and the girls are getting used to cooking. After remembering all these events, she claims that the subordinate role was also granted to Dalit girls even in games. They portray the girls as passive and helpless.

The Dalit women go up the hills to collect firewood, weave mats and other related works to be able to reach both ends. Dalit women are barred from pursuing education after they have reached about their puberty. When Bama asks her father to join college, her father replies, “there was no need for me to go to college or to study any further...In any case, there was no money. Then they said it would be difficult for me to find a husband in my community if I went in for further education.”(Bama, 74) Dalit women work not only at home, but in the fields as well. In the hands of their men, they also become the victim of violence. To clarify the labour disparity between men and women, Bama says, “I used to think, that at the rate they worked, men and women...but of course, they never received a payment that was appropriate to their labour...even they did the same work, men received one wage, women another.”(Bama, 54) By the order of the upper caste Naickers, Bama and her family members work like slaves. Dalit patriarchy allows for the subjugation of Dalit women and perpetuates authoritarian relationships within the Dalit community, resulting in a triple marginalisation based on caste, class, and gender.

Bama harshly criticised her Paatti, grandmother, for her extreme subjugation towards the Naicker household where she served. She shares the agony of how unfairly her grandmother is handled only because she is a Dalit. . “Even tiny children, born the other day, would call her by her name and order her about, just because they belong to Naicker caste.” (Bama, 16). Throughout the novel, Bama's Patti is insulted and oppressed by the Naicker community. Both her grandmothers served for higher castes. Only leftover food from the previous evening is offered to them. “Naicker lady came out with her leftovers, leaned out from some distance and tipped them into Patti's vessel, and went away.”(Bama, 16) Bama Sarcastically explains that her paatti considers the leftover food from Naicker's as “nectar of the gods” she has seen how Naickers consider Parayar like dogs that eat scraps and waste (Chellam, 2018) Naicker women do not give them the opportunity to enter their homes and from a suitable distance they throw away food and water to the Parayars to save themselves from getting polluted. “The Naicker women would pour out the water from a height of four feet, while Paatti (grandmother) and the others received and drank it with cupped hands held to their mouths. I always felt terrible when I watched this.”(Bama, 14) Patti is so conditioned that she is not affected at all by the Bama's scolding. The taboo and social barriers are thus imposed by bodily prohibitions. The Dalit's body is engraved with caste by its rejection: the body, and how it is received and handled, becomes a marker of caste. Her grandmother tells her, “Without them how will we survive? Can we change this?” The mother of Bama also expressed the mentality of not coming out in open opposition against injustice. But this cowardice was never endorsed by Bama. To her, caste was her identity. First, she is a Dalit and then a Christian. It troubled her heart to see how quickly people surrendered themselves to their subaltern status in her community. *Karukku* seeks to illustrate the inferior status of the Dalits women and to build a voice for the battle against all kinds of discrimination. Bama tries to crack the silence of subjugation despite all the suffering. (Winny, 2014)

Bama takes up Christianity and becomes a nun, hoping that, at least now, she will be free of caste, class and gender inequality dominance. Yet she is disillusioned with the manner in which she was treated at the convent. She noticed that even in convent where nuns are meant to look after the downtrodden, casteism plays a major role. Dalit Christians are looked down by the Christians of the Upper Caste. Bama offers vivid information here of how Dalit Christians are not permitted to sing in the choir of the church and how they are not allowed to bury their dead in the cemetery behind the church in the village, but are forced to use a separate graveyard beyond the outskirts. In order to escape casteist oppression at the hands of the Orthodox Hindus, the Paraiyars who converted to Christianity are seen to be greatly troubled by this as they are unable to escape another form of oppression within the Church fold. Bama enters convent in order to work for poor and oppressed Dalit children but she has been turned into a "wingless bird" bound by three vows. (Winny, 2014) She tells, “the convent

I entered did not even care to glance at the poor children.”(Bama,66) Much earlier in her life, she had realized, “if you are born into a low caste, every moment of your life is moment of struggle” (Bama, 27). This has been clearly confirmed during her training phase. A sister told everyone even in the last phase of the preparation to become nuns that, “in certain orders they would not accept Harijan women as prospective nuns and that there was even a separate order for them somewhere.”(Bama, 25). As a teacher, she teaches wealthy students in the convent where she notes that the Dalits “were looking after all the jobs like sweeping the premises, swabbing and washing the classroom and cleaning out lavatories.”(Bama, 25). The spark of rebellion in her was fanned by seeing that menial jobs are performed by Dalits and are viewed in a derogatory way. In every act of enduring exploitation, self-respect and pride have been lost. She worked for seven years at the convent. Bama is disappointed by Dalit's pathetic state of the workers who are expected to embrace the upper-class nuns' slang words. With the impression that the missionaries have no true sympathy for the downtrodden, she leaves the church in deep disappointment.

The order she entered was founded by a woman who loved the poor and the downtrodden, trained their children, and assisted them in their everyday lives. The convent, on the other hand, operated on a very different set of principles. Bama's primary identity is as a dalit and a woman from rural India, as she says in first sentence of 8th chapter, "I was born in a small village as a dalit girl." From this vantage point, she finds the convent wanting and insensitive. Instead of the poverty that the church speaks of and the poverty that she has encountered throughout her life, she notices a luxurious lifestyle. She speaks of the strange, wealthy, and lavish meals as well as the size of the buildings. The church seemed to be a long way from the material realities of her community's existence, which made up the majority of the laity. She felt as out of place as she would in an upper-caste home there.

Furthermore, the convent was highly hierarchical—almost mirroring the outside world. Apart from the intrigue and politics that pervaded the region, Bama recalls that before she took her vows she “ had to run about a young child, dance to everyone's tune, take upon yourself every menial task they pushed at you with their feet”. She found that the nuns' thoughts were the furthest from serving the country and the needy. Wealth and power among the upper castes were respected by the church. According to Bama, even the convent's school was not much better. They took four or five poor children as a token, and they were a poor, wretched bunch, totally cut off from the rich brats.

Most notably, Bama criticises how nuns' vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience isolated them from “ the reality of ordinary lives” and “put them at a great remove, as if they belonged to a different world”(Bama, 97). The convent was cut off from the rest of society and had no empathy or compassion for the poor.

The nuns were “within.... luxurious cages, trapped in comfort”(Bama, 97), according to Bama. The vow of ‘obedience’ irritates Bama because it is used to hold nuns in check, to keep them submissive even in the face of oppression or insensitivity, as well as their own obligations. Since she was told to learn loyalty and faith, Bama was compelled to serve the wealthy rather than the poor, as she wanted.

In the church, Bama discovered a disconnect between what was preached and what was practised. According to her, the nuns' teaching had little to do with the lives they would have to endure later. The church, according to Bama, had no relation to the lived reality in India, and the authorities had been ‘indoctrinated during their studies in Europe and America’ (Bama, 99). Not only did the convent have no knowledge of Dalits, but they also disparaged them. Even so, if they "had to speak about something unpleasant or ugly, they tended to identify it as Harijan." Bama was transferred five times in one month after three years of service in one school. Bama then left the convent for the world of social injustice and

suffering that she had hoped the church would seek to eradicate after another five months in a wealthy children's school.

Bama's departure from the nunnery after seven years of service is the key topic of voicing against human rights. She considered church authorities' treatment of Dalit-Christians to be unfair, unchristian, and discriminatory. It was misinterpreting Christ's true picture and teachings. *Karukku* is a novel that celebrates Dalit women's lives, their wit, humour, resilience, and creativity. Their fight for humanity is symbolised by the word 'Dalit'. Bama's narrative is a reflection of her community's suffering, not just her own. This autobiography is about an inner journey of self-discovery and the courage she takes to step away from the life of a nun and into "the life of a Dalit woman", fighting for Dalit women's and her community's human rights. Her writing is primarily focused on the emancipation of Dalits so that they can enjoy equality and human rights.

Bama is now wondering what her next step is and where to find her identity. She honestly and correctly finds her 'self' in sharing her thoughts, raising her voice, challenging society in the name of caste, religion and gender for their discrimination. As a strong tool of resistance, she has taken up writing and serves as a spokeswoman for the people of her own culture. She protests against the age old oppression, makes Dalits aware of the issue of the caste and questions about how long they can lead this ignorant life. Is there going to be no redemption for them? Is there no one to lift their voice and challenge the dominance of the Hindu caste and the people of the upper strata of life? (Deivasahayam, 2018)

Bama, however, has an answer to all these questions. She succeeded in finding her vocation, her identity, gave her group a name, gave the hitherto voiceless a voice. This is not merely the narration of the tale of Bama. It is the narrative of the upper classes' subversion of authority. Through her writings, in an open and courageous debate, Bama was able to articulate the voices of the Paraiyar community, giving a sense of integrity and honour to her caste. She explores prevailing literary traditions and expresses the perspective of the oppressed in the language of the oppressed, making it crystal clear that the writing that began at the margin has reached the center and produced new sociocultural identities and ideological foundations for autonomous reflection and self-action. As a Dalit feminist, Bama advises to "study well. If you are good at studies, everyone would befriend you. So work hard." (Bama, 14)

Writing propagates the tactics of Dalit women to emerge from their disadvantaged status. Bama demands the notion of human rights and human dignity. The Savarna feminists barely paid attention to the degraded condition of Dalit women. Instead of being battered and blunted more and more, they unite, think about their rights and fight for them. (Anowar, 2018) Bama not only questioned the system, but also proposed a solution: by treating boys and girls fairly and educating both providing the girl child with adequate freedom will eradicate the evils of inequality, abuse and injustice (Parmar, 2019) Despite triple marginalization, Bama urged all women in her culture to keep their heads high to obtain respect as human beings that they deserve.

CONCLUSION

Women's empowerment is desperately required in our male-dominated country to make them equal to men. Women are known as the pillars of a family that can solve problems of any kind. Women's empowerment would automatically help to inspire the family, society, country and, eventually, the world. Bama has shown considerable enthusiasm for the empowerment of Dalits and Dalit women in *Karukku*. Bama continues Ambedkar's approach of 'educating, uniting and organizing' to increase the prestige of Dalit women. By participating at the social, cultural, educational, political and economic levels, Bama inspires

the Dalit women to mould themselves properly. The goal of Bama is to transform the society that is casteless, classless and productive for both men and women.

Bama emerges victoriously in this novel, cracking domestic, social, religious, political and sexual shackles that have so long been like a landmark weighing on them. Her narrative has turned women into self-confident, assertive modern women from passive, battered, voiceless situations that compete in all spheres with men. Her narratives have shifted from marginalization to assertion and from becoming victims to victors, and this triumph is Dalit Feminism's ultimate target. The theory behind this strong narrative is that for decades oppression has not succeeded in removing the vitality and inner strength of the Dalits completely. In particular, the Dalit women have tremendous power and vigour to bounce back from all odds. Bama articulates the challenges she faced as a minority. To break out their agonies, she uses art as a medium. She sees how Dalits are treated unfairly by the dominating class. The Dalit women are possibly the victims of a number of atrocities. Their experience of patriarchal dominance is more extreme and qualitative. There are very few possibilities and outlets open to them to voice their complaints and agonies. Yet in their inner minds, the charismatic Dalit women have commotion and it takes them toward radiance. Their revolution is not an individual-centered one, but a society-centered. The bravery of Dalit women was to crack the shackles of power, to catapult themselves upward, to shout their defiance, to change their difficult lives full of problems and to quickly stall their tears .

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