

Bama: "karukku"



Foundation Course

LLC 1 (M.I.L)

Lesson: Bama: "karukku"

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"...there are traces of the agony and ecstasy of the dalits, the direct and emotional outbursts, the collective identity, the mockery and caricature of the immediate oppressors, the supernatural powers of oracle and the mythical heroism: these are the several elements for the reconstruction of a conscious Dalit literature (Indu B.C 2).

Dalit narratives have long been a part of Indian history, but the politics of Indian hegemony always sabotaged its growth. Sharankumar Limbale writes "Indian literary history and theory, as well as the teaching of Indian literatures, are silent about Dalit literature." (Limbale 1) The years after 1960 saw a rise in dalit narratives in Marathi and then in Hindi, Kannada, Telugu and Tamil languages.

Looking back at the first steps of Dalit writing in Maharashtra one cannot forget the two leaders of the state, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and B.R Ambedkar. Mahatma Jyotiba Phule from the year 1828-90 was a reformist, critic of the Hindu caste system and a staunch supporter of individual rights of men and women.



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Young_Ambedkar.gif

Dalit literature consisted of poems, autobiographies, short stories and novels, encounters of the untouchables with the hegemonic forces of the society. The need for creating an identity for themselves and also the emergence of Dalits as a political entity led to the growth of Dalit literature.

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Dalit literature began to appear in the literary Indian mainstream with the appearance of the English translations of Marathi Dalit writing. In 1992, Mulk Raj Anand and Eleanor Zelliot's edited text "An Anthology of Dalit Literature" and "Poisoned Bread: Translations from Marathi Dalit literature" collected in a single volume later on by Arjun Dangle popularised the genre throughout the country. Some great figures like Sree Narayan Guru, Jyotirao Phule, B.R Ambedkar and others in their works have been able to inspire the Dalits to assert their identity through political activism, literary and critical writings. They articulated the sources and modes of caste oppression and therefore could establish modern Dalit writing as a distinct genre in Indian literary scene. Among the women writers, Bama, Hira Bansode, Kusum Pawde, Urmilla Pawar, Aruna Lokhande and many others took Dalit literature to new heights. Women writers show the repressed desires of Dalit women and also show the double burden faced by them in a patriarchal and a 'caste-structured' society.

Bama Faustina Mary was born at Puthupatty near Madurai in 1958. Her family was converted to Christianity in the 18th century. Bama was popularly known through her autobiographical novel Karukku in Tamil in the year 1992. In her writings Bama shows the precarious condition of Dalits along with their struggles to attain freedom from the beliefs of Brahmanical Hinduism. The central theme of her autobiographical novel "Karukku" shows her life as a Christian and also as a Dalit woman. The extracts from "karukku" reflect and narrate the childhood experiences of the author and her realization about the condition of the untouchables. The first time she came to know about untouchability was when she saw an elder from her community bringing a package of vadas held by a string to give it to a Naicker, who was from an upper caste. She was really surprised to see that the elder had tied the package with a string and holding the string without touching the package gave it to the Naicker. As a child she could not understand why the package had to be offered that way, but it was her brother who had cleared the idea of untouchability to her. It is therefore her reminiscences of the past which help her to realize her present and create a niche for herself and her community.

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Bama's "Karukku" is a microcosm which shows the experiences of all the Dalits and their struggles. For Bama, only education and pride in their identity can lift the Dalits from the suppressed state.



<http://www.hindu.com/thehindu/mp/2003/03/06/stories/2003030600570300.htm>

Therefore, in Dalit literature one could see the despised, downtrodden and tortured object becoming the speaking subject. Many critics felt that the literature written by the erstwhile writers usually the non-Dalit writers were biased and not at all conducive for the status of the Dalits. Hence, the Dalits started representing themselves in their own writings and with the rise in translations of Dalit writings, it reached its popularity. But it does not mean that only Dalit writers contributed to Dalit literature, but there were also some non-Dalit writers who were committed to the Dalit cause and hence, were appreciated. Some of the non-Dalit writers are Narayan Surve, Keshavsut and Sharatchandra Muktibodh. Therefore, the central concern of Dalit literature was to represent the life of the Dalits in an authentic manner. In 1968, when Gangadhar Pantawane began publishing Asmitadarsh, the primary journal of Dalit writing, both Dalits and the neo-converts were encouraged to write and publish.

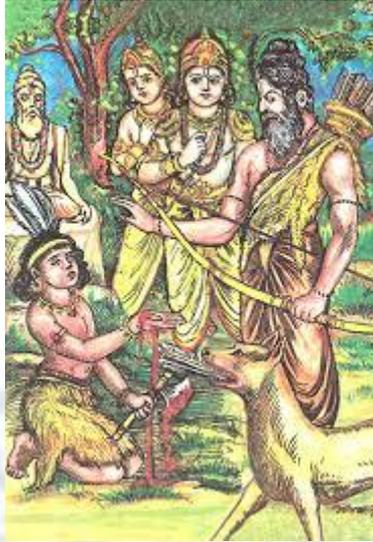
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<http://yellowpress.com/2014/01/11/untold-dalitsindia/-in->

Since, Dalit literature portrays the anguish and irritation of the Dalits, it is also charged for being biased and too sarcastic on Hindu religion. It is also criticized for being monotonous but the Dalit writers say that all the Dalits throughout the country experienced similar cases, so much of what is written in Dalit writings is similar. Dalit writers have challenged orthodox religious theories and questioned upper caste ideologies. They rejected the Hindu view that their low status was a consequence of their own sins in the previous life. In an attempt to subvert the stereotypical ideas, they have started looking out for the new symbols to express themselves. They are well aware of the discrepancies shown by Hindu religion so they have stopped using the religious symbols. They are being instructed to construct new myths and identities out of the existing Hindu texts. Therefore, Dalits instead of looking up to Rama, they respect Shambuka, Eklavya instead of Arjuna and Bhagavad Gita and Mahabharata are deconstructed every time to give a new perspective to their history. The low caste saint poets of the Bhakti movement and tenets of Buddhism are rediscovered by them. Therefore, it is mostly in the contemporary Dalit narratives, we see continuous references to subaltern mythologies, an attempt to resist the Classical myths of Hindu religion on the part of the Dalits.

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http://www.4to40.com/katha/index.asp?p=Gurubhakt_Balak_Eklavya

Dalit Tamil literature came on the scene much later around the 1990's. During this period there were many who wrote some exceptional books in Tamil like Daniel's "Panchamar", P.Sivakami's "Pazhaiyana Kazhithalam" and Bama's autobiography "Karukku". The mentioned works although were not a "protest literature" like most of the other works of Dalit literature but were proto-Dalit in some respect. Tamil Dalit literature was seen as soft and complaining which the critics thought was not enough to awaken the people to see their sufferings. Critics had often criticised Tamil Dalit Literature for being a literature of lament and suffering but nevertheless , Tamil Dalit writers have shattered all conventions with their narration of stark reality.

"Karukku" is more about pain and suffering than of aggression. On the one hand it challenges the hegemonic society and on the other it is a wake-up call for justice and equality. Bama's "Karukku" attempts to implement change by educating the dalits and by maintaining peace among themselves. The Tamil word Karukku means an embryo or a seed full of freshness, Bama in the preface of the novel shares her views on how she wrote this particular novel. She writes:

"The driving forces that shaped this book are many: events that occurred during many stages of my life, cutting me like *Karukku* and making me bleed; unjust social structures that plunged me into ignorance and left me trapped and suffocating; my own desperate

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urge to break, throw away and destroy these bonds; and when the chains were shattered into fragments, the blood that was spilt then; all these, taken together."

(Bama xiii)

Dalit literature is an outcome of changing social consciousness and is also a symbol of revolt against the hierarchical regime which suppresses the rights and freedom of the Dalits. Dalits were not treated as human beings, were called untouchables and were always the victims of social, economic and cultural injustice. In the nineteenth century, the Dalits who were illiterate started educating themselves through the colonial patrons. But the opening of colleges like Siddhartha College in Mumbai, in 1946, and Milind College in Aurangabad, in 1947, by Babasaheb Ambedkar helped educating and bringing change among the Dalit youth.



http://i583.photobucket.com/albums/ss271/siddheart/Babasaheb%20Ambedkar%20Life/DrAmbedkar_SiddharthaC26.jpg

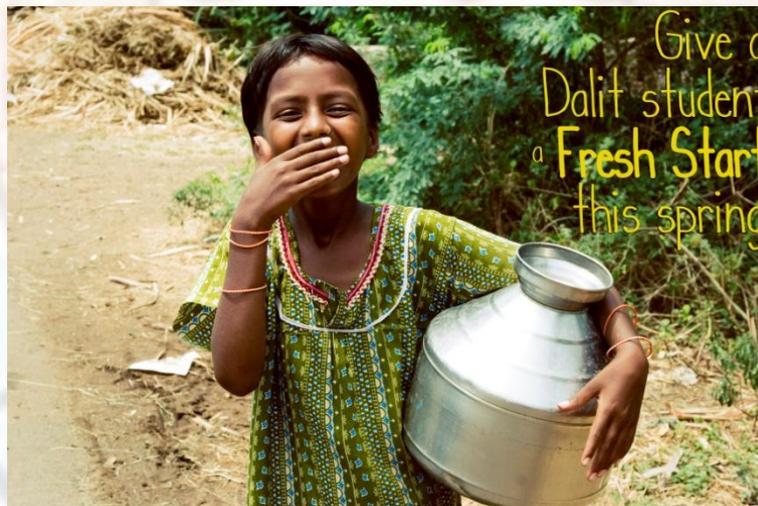
Gradually, in the post independent period Dalits hoped for their freedom along with the country's freedom. They sought to bring about reforms in the hierarchical society and it was through education that they fought for their emancipation. In the "Karukku" too we can see how Bama's brother had emphasized the role of education for uplifting the status of Dalits. He said, "Because we are born into the Paraya jati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect...But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities." (Bama 15)

"Karukku" is an experience of a Dalit woman, a long ordeal, through which she could identify herself. Bama did not only create a space for her caste but also for women who

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were the victims of two-fold hierarchy. Dalit women were victims not only of caste but also of patriarchy. In the novel she has shown the plight of a Dalit women, their sufferings and discrimination at the hands of their patriarch, but through her own story she has evolved herself as a role model for the rest of Dalit women. Although she was born in a Pariah community, it was through her hard work and zealous interest that she could establish a place for herself in her community. In a society where women were paid lesser wages than men for the same amount of work, had to do the household chores, were beaten up by their husbands and not allowed to go to school, Bama was able to fight the odds. She carried on with her higher education, and also at times thought about the ways in which the Dalit children could be educated and treated better.

"In the face of such poverty, the girl children cannot see the sense in schooling, and stay at home, collecting firewood, looking after the house, caring for the babies, and doing household chores." (Bama 68)



http://www.dalitnetwork.org/eeimages/uploads/Fresh_Start_Homepage_.jpg

There were many Dalit communities in India which converted to Christianity due to the humanitarian efforts of the missionaries. Many thought that conversion into Christianity would bring about liberation from the clutches of the caste system. The Gospel was also preached and promised to dissolve inequality and oppression in the society. And for the first time, by converting to Christianity they could acquire a holy book and read it,

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because so far, the Muslims had the Koran, the Hindus had the Bhagavad Gita, and the Sikhs had the Guru Granth Sahib but the Dalits had none. Baburao Bagul a noted Dalit writer felt that unlike the Bible, holy book of the Christians, the holy book of the Hindus could not accept the Dalits. He writes:

"In spite of the division between the rich and the poor, between the haves and the have-nots, there is a place for the most unfortunate and the most miserable sections of the masses in Christianity and its literature. As against this, the Shudras and the Athishudras — the lowest of the castes and those who were kept totally outside the caste framework — failed to find place in the religious and secular literature of the Hindus." (Christopher 9)

In the extract, one can see the life of the Dalits and their expectations from the newly acquired religion. On Christmas Eve, all the Dalit Christians used to rejoice, cook good food, eat beef; they spent on the extravagances for one day. One reason why the Dalits were categorised as untouchables was because they used to eat meat, especially beef. P.N Chopra writes about the Mahars one of the low-castes and also about the cause for their degradation. The Mahars had consumed beef during the Mahadurga famine and for this reason they were degraded and treated as a low caste (Chopra 145). Bama has also written about a similar incident when the Dalits were called low-castes because of their meat eating habits. A character called Michael-amma complains "So many people buy and eat beef on the quiet these days, it's getting more and more difficult for us to get any meat. All of them eat their fill, but see, it's only we people who are called low-caste." (Bama 55)

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<http://www.voiceoftheoppressed.in/wp>

Although the "Untouchability Offences Act" was passed in the year 1955 yet, caste discrimination never stopped. Converting oneself too did not bring respect for the Dalits, they were still discriminated and dehumanised. The church people also mistreated the newly converted Dalits and treated them as the upper caste Hindus did. Bama's "Karukku" also shows us the disillusionment of the Dalit Christians. Throughout the novel, one can see instances of Dalit Christians complaining against the church and its authorities. On joining the convent Bama also realises that the nuns and the priests were biased and only treated those children who were from the upper castes. On one occasion, when people in the locality goes to Reverend Mother to ask for pictures she chases them away saying " Have you given me some money in order to buy you holy pictures? Very well, now, you may all go home quickly without leaning on the walls or touching anything." (Bama 58) So, we can see the untouchables were disregarded not only by the Hindus but also by those people who converted them on the promise of a casteless system. Their touch which was looked upon as defiling by the upper caste Hindus was also avoided by the Church authorities.

The Dalit Christians in the extract are shown as ignorant people. They were either disillusioned or were suffering while converting themselves. The writer shows how the Dalit Christians had no idea about Christmas or New Year. The stories which prevail regarding conversion tell us that the Dalits converted themselves because of the humiliation they received in their former religion, and also they were poor, and the

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missionaries who converted them promised a good life, and also financial stability. Therefore, in the extract we can see how the Dalit Christians celebrated Christmas, for them it was not the day that they remembered as Christ's birthday but as "a day of liberation". For them, Bama writes, "At Christmas, Easter, and New Year's day, people hang up posters of Rajnikant and Kamalhasan here and there. Nobody seems to know what the festival is really about, or what it is celebrating." (Bama 60)

Bama writes about her own father visiting home with lots of gifts and eatables, but it was only during this time, she could enjoy good food. On other days she had to eat simple food and face the hardships of life. She writes about the custom when they had to buy gifts and fruits for the priest and Mother Superior on New Year. The Dalit Christians "went through every effort to buy the fruit for the church elders; they made their offering, knelt before them in all humility and received the sign of the cross on their foreheads." (Bama 56) In the whole novel, Bama writes about her transformation, how she came to know about the caste bound society and what she did to change the social malaise to some extent. Bama became a nun to help or guide her own people when she saw how they were being mistreated by the church people. Although, later on, Bama leaves the convent and comes back home to the same drudgery after experiencing injustice there as well, but at least, she could understand the mechanism of the world.

The Dalits also maintained a hierarchy among themselves, which Bama thought was taken as an advantage by the higher castes. (Bama 41) There were many castes which were called untouchables but even among the untouchables they practised untouchability. Among the untouchables too, they maintained a caste hierarchy, which further helped the upper castes to divide them. There were instances where the untouchables of different castes fought and avoided each other. The lower caste girls were allowed to marry the higher castes but not vice-versa. In the essay "The 'Dalit' Category and its Differentiation" AM Shah writes how the Dalits divide the parganas according to their castes. In Gujarat the higher castes among the untouchables like the weavers have taken thirty-three parganas, and chamars and bhangis have taken

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thirteen parganas each. (Shah 1317) So we can see that the untouchables themselves were not united, hence, it was difficult for them to fight the upper castes.

With the formation of DCLM (Dalit Christian Liberation Movement) in Tamil Nadu the Dalit Christians' fight for equality and justice could be seen as a reality. Some of the points submitted in the manifesto of DCLM in the Tamil Nadu **Bishop's Conference** are:

Untouchability should not be practised in the church

Authority structure should be de-centralised for the inclusion of Dalits as clergies and nuns

Social justice in the form of equal sharing of power

Dalit Christians who work for the cause of the Dalits should not be penalised. When Bama walked out of the convent disillusioned, she met Father Mark, a member of DCLM and was encouraged to write down her experiences. "Karukku" was the outcome; it was also the first autobiography by a Dalit woman where one can see the various predicaments of Dalit Christians. It was written as a recollection by a Dalit Christian woman of the social and institutional betrayal. When asked about the inclusion of Dalit Christians in the list of reservation for the Scheduled Castes, Bama says that she is against it. She feels that reservation further dehumanizes improving the social position of Dalit Christians. She feels that the term scheduled caste is more derogatory and prefers being called a Dalit than the former.

Bama's novel like M.B Manoj's poem "Children of the Woods Conversing with Christ" asserts that conversion was not an escape from reality. The reality could be changed only with the change in the mentality of the people. The Dalit Christians were regarded as Dalits even after adopting the new religion. The Dalits too converted themselves to find solace and equal treatment from Christianity but they had hardly learnt to embrace the tenets of Christianity. However, the motivation behind the conversion of Dalits is questionable but the Dalits themselves desired for better social status, respect and freedom from the religious hierarchy.

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Summing up Bama, Indu B.C. writes, "Bama has an ambivalent attitude towards Christianity. Bama insists that she doesn't wish to imprison Christ in religion." (B.C 3) Although, she went out of the convent, she never left Christ but left the institution and the people who were corrupting the words of Christ. Bama like rest of the Dalit writers shows her rejection of the traditional casteist beliefs and aspires for social change in the Indian society.

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