

## CASTE & GENDER DISCRIMINATION PORTRAYED IN BAMA'S KARUKKU & SANGATI

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### **Abstract:**

Caste system and gender inequality are the major reasons behind societal conflicts in Indian democracy. Social activists and research scholars are on their toes to sort out such issues. Literary scholars and authors also play their roles through their writings. There are many feminist activists and writers like Neera Desai, Iravati Karve, Susie Tharu, Kamla Das, etc. in Indian English literature. But most of them were influenced by Simon de Beauvoir and her highly celebrated work 'The Second Sex', which is considered as a Bible of feminist theories. But the problem and issues of Indian women, that too, Dalit Indian women are more complex and clumsier than the ones reflected through 'The Second Sex'. It can be said that, this gap was pointed out by Faustina Mary Fathima Rani, who pen named herself as 'Bama'. She not only pointed out the gap, but also tried to fill that gap through her autobiographical novels, namely Karukku and Sangati. Bama highlighted the problems of Dalit Indian women who were abused and exploited both at home and at their work place. The dark aspects of caste and gender both are dealt by Bama in her novels. All these aspects are studied in the present research work.

### **Keywords:**

caste, religion, gender, oppression, discrimination, biases.

### **Introduction:**

Bama was born as Faustina Mary Fathima Rani in 1958, in Tamil Nadu. She is from the Paraiyar community, and is a Christian Dalit activist. She herself gave her the pen name 'Bama'. Her ancestors were Dalit and they were converted to Christianity long before Bama's birth. Her parents were agricultural labourers, and thus she spent her school life in village. After completing the education, Bama worked as a teacher in a school. But, later she joined the convent to become a nun. After some time, she came to know that in Church too, there was a separate treatment given to Dalit Catholics. After seven years, she gave up convent life because of caste discrimination. Not only this, but in childhood too, Bama had gone through a lot of misbehaviors because of her caste. She had to face insults and abuses in her school. All these real life experiences made her write her autobiographical novel, Karukku and Sangati. Both the novels were originally written in Tamil and were translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstorm. Both her novels were translated in English, German, French, Telugu, and Malayalam. Karukku was written in 1992, while Sangati was written in 1994. Both her novels got famous worldwide. Apart from this, Bama has also written a collection of short stories titled Kisumbuukaran in 1996. Bama portrayed the lifestyle, travails and sufferings of dalits in a simple and lucid language, through her novels. She is one of the famous Dalit activists. Besides writing, Bama teaches at a school in the village of Uthirameroor near Kancheepuram.

### **Material & Methodology:**

The present research work deals with two novels, namely, Karukku and Sangati written by Bama, as the primary sources. Apart from the primary sources, different works related to these novels are studied. Some of the research articles by different scholars are analyzed as below:

K. Latha, in the research article titled 'Double Oppression in Bama's Karukku and Sangati' discuss about both the autobiographical novels of Bama. She discusses about the cast conflicts, religious conflicts and gender oppression portrayed by Bama in her novels. According to K. Latha, Bama's novels show the sufferings of Dalit community. They also portray the oppression of lower castes by

the upper castes. Bama's portrayal of physical abuse of Dalit women by their husbands and other upper caste men is also discussed in K. Latha's research article.

The article 'Understanding Dalit Feminist Perspective through Bama's Karukku', authored by F. Usmani, deals with the novel 'Karukku'. This research article deals with Bama's revolt against all forms of oppressing forces worldwide. F. Usmani says that, the socio-political conditions of dalit Christians, who embraced Christianity just to come out of their subaltern position within the Hindu religion, form the backdrop of Bama's literary ventures. After their religious conversion, Dalit Christians lost the privileges that they were entitled to as Hindu Dalits. Kumar Shiv, too, explores the dalit feminism and other feminist aspects of Bama's autobiographical novel through his research article titled 'Becoming Dalit Women's Voice: Engaging with Self-reflective Narrative in Bama's Karukku'. J. J. Latha, in her research article 'Socio-Economic Status of Dalits in Bama's Karukku' says that, Karukku is an autobiographical account of the reflection of author and her community's life. J. J. Latha discuss about the travail, sufferings, and lifestyle portrayed by Bama in her novel. According to j. J. Latha, Bama's novel identify that the poor socio-economic conditions is the main barrier for the upliftment of the dalits.

M. S. Wankhede's 'A Study of Bama's Karukku in the Light of Subalternity' deals with the issues of lower caste women portrayed by Bama in her autobiographical novel. According to M. S. Wankhede, the collusion of patriarchy with the caste hegemony, and the oppression of Dalit women is shown in Bama's Karukku.

In the present research work, analytical, descriptive and interpretative research methods are used by taking into consideration, the literary and thematic nature of the subject.

### **Study Area:**

Caste system and gender are given much importance in Indian democracy. But there are much biases and inequalities that come along with these two aspects. Many sensitive and humane writers had tried to highlight and overcome the caste- gender inequalities through their literary works. Bama is no exception to that. She was a Dalit activist as well as a feminist. She pointed out the complex problems of Indian woman, especially, Dalit women and tried to give solution to their problems through her works. She was empathetic towards those women as she herself had gone through many Indian societal complexities. She tried to fill the gaps through her autobiographical novels 'Karukku' and 'Sangati' that 'The Second Sex' could not. Thus, the present research work tries to study and analyze caste-gender inequalities from Bama's point of view.

### **Result & Discussion:**

Bama's Karukku is an unusual autobiographical novel. The novel depicts Bama's life both as a Christian woman and as a Dalit woman. As mentioned earlier, Bama faced many caste conflicts from her childhood. Untouchability, insults, abuses came into Bama's life from her schooling. She mentions that, when she was in third standard, she didn't even know the meaning of the word untouchability, but had sensed and felt it at that age itself. It was extremely difficult for her to digest the travails she came across because of her caste. Her ancestors were Hindu Dalits who converted themselves into Christianity. Her parents were Catholic. So the privileges given to Hindu Dalits were already taken away from her. And because she wasn't a Christian by birth, no privileges were offered to her that were offered to the people who were Christian by birth. Apart from this, when she left her job to become nun, she had to face discrimination in Church, too, which was very inhuman and devastating for her. She had no idea about her next step. All these incidences gave birth to her driving quest for humanity and integrity as a Dalit and Christian. Her novel Karukku is specifically concerned with the issue of caste oppression within the Catholic Church, the educational institutes and the society. Her experiences and writings led her to the self-realization and self-discovery.

Karukku reflects the conflicts between the self and the community. Bama left one community in order to join another one. She left the community of 'religious women' in order to join another one as 'a

Dalit Woman'. The novel *Karukku* has an autobiographical, as well as confessional touch. And thus, it depicts how Dalit Christians were not allowed to sing in the church choir, were forced to sit separately, away from the upper caste Christians, were not allowed to bury their dead in the cemetery within the village, behind the church, but are made to use a different graveyard beyond the outskirts. So, the Dalit Hindus, who embraced Christianity to escape from Hindu orthodox community, got stuck into the caste related conflicts and oppressions within the church. All these aspects are boldly portrayed by Bama in *Karukku*.

Further Bama has also portrayed the caste-based structure of their village in her *Karukku*. The upper caste people like Brahmins, Naicker, Chettiyaar, Aasaari, Thevar, Nadar and Udaiyaar lived in the main area of the village and never went to the parts where the lower caste people like Koravar, Chakkiliyar, Pallar and Parayar lived. The Panchayat Board, the Post Office, the milk-depot, the schools, the big shops and the church were situated in the main area of the village, that is, in the streets of upper caste people. Lower castes were not allowed to go to the places which were situated in the streets of higher-class people. The communities were divided geographically, physically and emotionally. Finally, Bama had to stop running away from the situation and accept it. All these events, deeply rooted in Bama's mind and heart are reflected in *Karukku*. In this entire journey, Bama was highly influenced by her brother who helped her get proper education.

Bama's another autobiographical novel, *Sangati*, was published in Tamil in 1994. This novel deals specifically with the journey of Dalit women. This novel reveals how the women belonging to Bama's community were doubly oppressed. Those women were physically abused not only by their husbands, but also by the upper caste men. According to Bama, rape, sexual atrocities, molestation, harassment, etc. are the different forms of oppression of the Dalit women. The novel 'Sangati' also deals with the history of the Dalit women. Bama's maternal grandmother was a writer and a Dalit activist. Thus, this novel is an account of the experiences of Bama's maternal grandmother and her contemporaries. This novel also deals with the plight of Dalit worker women. Those women worked hard to handle their families. The tired women often denied their husbands for the physical relationship and thus were beaten up by their husbands. Sexual violence at home and sexual exploitation at work place are the major subjects of concern in *Sangati*. As portrayed by Bama, Dalit women were not allowed to go to schools and colleges after reaching puberty. They were not permitted to take education from the universities. Bama challenges the patriarchal tendency that set up to dominate women in all phases of their lives. Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati* show various aspects of caste discrimination and gender discrimination. Both her novels reflected the sufferings of the Dalits, specially the Dalit women by the upper castes.

### **Conclusion:**

The Indian English literature, if broadly divided into two phases, namely, pre-independence and post-independence, reflect various Indian societal issues through its themes and stories. Freedom struggle, unemployment, gender discriminations, caste conflicts, religious conflicts, child and women exploitation, etc. were discussed by Indian authors. Bama is no exception to that. She too, like other Dalit writers highlighted the issues to lower caste people through her autobiographical novels mentioned in the present research paper. She specifically pointed out the problems of lower caste women who were abused not only by their husbands, but also by the upper caste men. Bama has also given some examples from her childhood to portray the caste discrimination in her village. To be concluded, Bama has not only highlighted the issues of lower caste, but has also come up with a solution. Bama, through *Karukku* and *Sangati* has identified that, poor socio-economic condition is the major barrier in the way of progress of Dalits and education is the only means to change the situation.

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