The Factual and the Fictional

The opening pages of *Karukku* present to the reader the scenic beauty around Bama’s village. Mountains “range right round the village” (Bama 1).

At dawn and at dusk, the eastern and western skies are splendid to see ... (In) the early morning a bright red sun, huge and red, would wake up in the east and climb in to the sky. It would make its way, peering between the trees, glowing, its light spilling and sparkling ... (At) evening time, when it went and dropped through the mountains, all the fields roundabout would blow through the fields. The crops glowing, swaying in the breeze filled the heart with the delight. To look at the light in the western sky was like looking upon a revelation of God. (Bama 3-4)

It is divine light glowing over the village. But Bama’s description goes on to impress on us a familiar world through relating Nature (hills and lakes) to human life and activities. *Marakka Puuchi malai* is so called because it resembles a heap of paddy; *Perumaara mountain* has on it a Perumaal Sami temple; *Vannpaara* so derives its name because Vannaam boys washed clothes in the tank up a hill which is appropriately named *Vattal Vittham Paara*; crops were vulnerable to the foxes that lived in
the woods up a particular hill what is understandably called Nari Paara.

Lakes and ponds in and around the village derive their identity from the activities of the village. Poder kulam is for Podgars’ use; Baathrang kulam gets that name after the priest who bathes in it; the lotus pond is fittingly called Periya kulam and the lake of life, Jeeveneri kulam. The pond nearest to Bama’s street Anupaang kulam and its opposite shore gets its name Vaathra kulam from the neighbouring village Vaathra.

The spots are as familiar to the villagers as the space divisions within home. But this beauty and familiarity of Nature becomes a subtle precondition to the poverty and exile-within-home predicament is tellingly conveyed in the way food becomes available to them in a season of plenty. During the rainy season, water from the lakes would overflow when people “would catch any amount of fish by placing earthen pots just where the water flowed through. The streets overflowed with fish during season”. (Italics added, Bama 2)

A vast variety of fish is made available by Nature: “People used all sorts of fish like silebi kendai, paaruku kendai, keluti, ayirai koravi viral” (Bama 2). But the lower-castes in the village can afford to buy only the cheapest—‘silebi kendai’ and ‘pambu kendai’.
That “...was the cheapest we could get” (Bama 2). All other varieties go to the prosperous upper-castes.

On the one hand Nature would be bounteous, but its bounty cannot reach a section of society because of human intervention. The unnatural, unreasonable practice of caste is introduced in this manner. There is excessive food right before the poor. It is as though theft becomes understandable in that predicament. It is even perhaps inevitable, spontaneous and joyous activity, considering the approach of the poor, despite risks to the pond brimming with fish.

As soon as the man who held the fishing rights for the pond went off for his meal ... everyone big and small would whip out their rods ... . You could catch fish easily. People would light small fires of straw right there on shore and roast the newly caught fish. It used to taste delicious. But if ever the care taker caught sight of us, then that was it. He’d confiscate all the fish and smash up the rod as well. (Bama 3)

One cannot but be impressed by the glee with which Bama narrates the activity of stealing. She asserts: “... there is special taste to food snatched by stealth” (Bama 3).
Such a bold assertion can come only from marginality. The marginal points in the novel exist conspicuously and naturally. The small bus-stand in village is the ‘terminus’ in both literal and symbolic senses: “The bus will take you no further. It is as if our entire world ended there” (Bama 6). There is a stream beyond the terminus which runs with water when it rains. At other times, it is a “stinking shit-field” (Bama 6). The low-castes dwell literally in marginal spots; but the lowest the Parayas, have their settlement “just next” to the cemetery (Bama 6). The picture of marginality is made complete when Bama says: “The post-office, the Panchayat board, the milk depot, the big shops, the church, the school—all these stood” (Bama 6) in the streets of the upper castes. All physical and spiritual needs are denied to lower castes that mostly dwell in “cottages with Palmyra-thatched roofs” (Bama 6).

And so survival would mean stealing, to say the least. The first ‘individual’ Paraya in the village to be described is Bondan, known for his skill in burglary. “Bondan mama” (Uncle Bondan), he is for Paraya children. He has the audacity to burgle the money offering and the temple-bell of the Muniyandi Sami temple. “His chief means of livelihood was stealing limes, coconuts and
mangoes from the landowning families’ gardens and groves and then selling them” (Bama 4).

Bama’s narrative makes Bondan’s feats admirable and heroic. One midnight he climbs a coconut tree when a strange form “slides from above. He realizes it is a pey (ghost) tormenting him and he dashes off” (Bama 4), not for his home, but in to “another garden”! (Bama 5) There is a time at night when after plundering mangoes from a grove he jumps into a well to escape from the caretaker. A long time does he stay there keeping a deadly cobra from striking him dead. Yet on another occasion, setting out on a raid Bondan is actually bitten by on the toe by a king cobra. Swiftly burning his toe and cutting it off with his sickle, returns home after “finishing his raid”. “Such a sharp fellow he was” (Bama 5).

Surviving the attack of king cobra is a nearly supernatural feat. In fact Bondan is shown encountering the supernatural in almost every episode. When village people pressurize him to return the temple offering and the temple-bell he had stole, in order to prevent Muniandan’s wrath from descending on the village (the terrible Munianda, torch in hand, stalks at night the “rubbish tip” of the Paraya street). Bondan, armed with but a Cross, deposits the temple money at night. “After that the terrible Devil never came down our street again”
Bondan’s oddities and strangeness are those that characterise people relegated to the edges of society and he only marks the start of the procession of marginal characters with their own eccentricities and peculiarities (Marginalized characters are always looked down at as odd). Kaaman for example is a crazy fellow who unpredictably alternates between extreme idleness and excessive industry. He is said to be an excellent cook, but when cooks rice, he eats it all by himself and washes the pots specklessly clean. He can “polish off a half-measure of rice all by himself” (Bama 9). His real name is Maria-Lourdes, but he is actually recognized by the name, ‘Kaaman’ which means, ‘Jack of all trades.’ A notable feature of Bama’s narrative is that it introduces the Parayas/Dalits as deriving their identities from their eccentric traits, and hence the currency given to nicknames. ‘Bondan’ actually means ‘snatcher’. The woman Kazhinja (‘Leaky’) is so named because she leaks all over legs when she relieves herself. ‘Midday-Masala’ is another woman’s nick name. She grinded masala to cook curry at day time when the invariable practice is to cook
curry only in the evening. ‘Kaaka’ is the name that has struck to a woman who used to, as a child, chase crows. Someone who used to say ‘Endrayya’ for ‘Engayya’ becomes ‘Endrayya’ all his life. Another child is nick named Munkovan, ‘Short-temper’. An excessively plump child gets the name, ‘Murugan Spring Pig’. And there are many, many others: Konnavachi (‘Starer’), Dumbo (‘Deaf One’), Ulzamukhi (‘running nose’), Nadodi (‘Wanderer’), Vidvi (‘Idiot’), Nezucchaan (‘Staggerer’), Mannachchi (‘Flat-nose’), ‘Needle-bum’, ‘Green-nose’ and so on. The mention of all these eccentric people in the narrative follows the account of Bondan—‘Bondan’ meaning ‘Snatcher’.

The very process of Bama’s growth, to a certain degree, appears to lie in her recognition of the oddities of the poor people. It is a ten-minute walk to her school when she is in the third class; but she takes half-an-hour to cover the distance, for on the way, along with the performing monkey and the snake-charmer, there are many oddities that gain her attention:

... the cyclist who had not got off his bike for three days ... the rupee notes that is pinned to his shirt to spur him on ... the dried fish stall by the statue of Gandhi; the street light always demonstrating how it could change from blue to
violet; the narikkuruvan hunter-gypsy with his wild lemur in cages, selling needles, clay beads ...

... there were the coffee-clubs ... the way each waiter cooled coffee a tumbler held in his other hand ... (Bama 11-12).

Bama’s growth to maturity involves, not in noting just the eccentricities of the Parayas, in understanding the social aberrations that manifest themselves in the upper-caste people. The oddities of the Parayas pale into insignificance before the social aberrations displayed in the upper caste-people.

She first becomes aware of caste-discrimination on a particular day when she is returning from school. A Paraya-elder (big man he is) is seen carrying a small packet, a vadai, and he is holding the packet by a string, avoiding the touch of the packet. When he submits it to a Naicker assumes a humble posture. The big man’s manner of carrying the small packet is an oddity and Bama is all laughter at the funny sight. Her laughter gives way to disgust and indignation when her brother explains that the upper-caste Naicker would avoid physical contact with a Paraya, and hence the peculiar mode of carrying the vadai packet. The reader is compelled to compare the eccentricities in Paraya behaviour that evoke laughter with the aberrations of the upper-castes that
shock us. Social imbalance is to an extent worked out in terms of eccentricities and aberrations. One of Bama’s grandmothers who work in Naicker fields addresses the little Naicker boy respectfully as ‘ayya’ whereas the little one calls her by her name. Her other grandmother who every morning cleans up the cowshed of the Naickers comes home with left-over waste food from their house. “She would behave as if she had been handed the nectar of the gods” (Bama 14).

Central to Bama’s growth is her awakening to her Paraya status, and with the faith that education can bestow on one respectful status. Her brother who instils in her such a faith had done his M A and had consequently been treated with respect at the library.

Along with the hope in education, Bama’s process of growth in fact lies in a steadily increasing awareness of her degraded status of a Paraya in the village. Her experience both as a student and teacher stresses this fact throughout.

In the narrative, it is in terms of the animal images that subhuman status of the lower castes is often stressed, as the following passages indicate:

(a) Children “played in the water like little tadpoles ... . Next to them buffaloes bathed pleasurably” (Italics added, Bama 23).
(b) Regarding the attitude of Christian nuns who run schools, Bama says: “They think we have no moral discipline nor cleanliness nor culture. ... To aid us is like aiding cobras” (Italics added, Bama 23).

(c) “They seem to conspire to keep us in our place: to think that we who have worked throughout history like beasts should live and die like that” (Italics added, Bama 24).

(d) When there is a conflict between two different low-caste groups, an incited group runs with staves and knives. The terrified women and children follow them. “And the street dogs ran too, barking as they went” (Italics added, Bama 25).

There is indeed in Karukku, an abundance of animal images. According to a grandmother, when the police catch the Paraya men, “they’ll whip them like animals” (Bama 31). When the police arrive, the men flee “like a flock of crows” (Bama 40). The Paraya children are “crab-like” (Bama 48), like “little mice” (Bama 51).

Very early in the narration of her growth the references to fields, lakes, mountains and open spaces disappear, and Bama is increasingly becoming aware of biases of the society against her as dalit.
One of the effects of animal imagery appears to be substitution of humour by grimness. Humour certainly is conspicuous in the section where Bama is still rendering from her childhood memory, before she learnt of caste-distinctions. Later, it is only certain anger, pain and a deep sense of hurt. She compares herself to a “mongrel-dog wandering about without a permanent job nor a regular means to find clothes, food and a safe place to live” (Bama 68). Her streets are full of children without even a scrap of clothing, rolling about and playing in the mud and mire, indistinguishable from “puppies and piglets” (italics added, Bama 68). The narration closes with the animal image that stresses the closed-in space (in contrast to the open space in the beginning) and a depressing prospect:

I am like a bird whose wings are broken. After its wings have broken, it is protected only if it stays within its cage. But if comes out, it can only flap its wings uselessly, unable to fly.

I don’t know when my wings will heal and gain strength ... . Just as people throw sticks and stones to wound a wingless bird, many people wounded me with their words and deeds. (Bama 104)
It is to a great extent the animal imagery in the narrative that lends poignancy to Bama’s questions:

Are Dalits not human beings? Do they not have such attributes as a sense of humour and self respect? Are they without any wisdom, beauty dignity? (Bama 24)

Bama’s narrative is that of a ‘lonely’ person. Her sense of isolation comes from her acute consciousness of her own human dignity in the midst of a world that would deny it. The desire to get recognition for her own identity—not a subhuman dalit identity—but her identity of an individual—prompts her to (a) get educated (b) become a teacher (c) become a nun.

Prompted by the faith in education, Bama’s life is shown as a course of disillusionment. As a student she experiences a series of humiliations. In school she is once playing with other children at touching a coconut fruit hanging low from the tree. Due to repeated impact the coconut drops down. Everyone in the school including the headmaster, the teacher and the priest hold her responsible for the “theft”. The judgement swiftly follows the social conviction that it is in the true nature of a Paraya to steal. She is nearly thrown out of the school. The Parayas in the school are deliberately made to stand apart from the other students by the PT
teacher or the class teacher. The warden sister’s regular habit is to scold the low-caste children for no reason.

The story is no different when Bama becomes a teacher, and later, a nun. When she joins as a teacher, the first question by the nun at the place of work is whether Bama was a Nadar by caste. Bama’s reply that she was a Paraya brings an expression of shock on the nun’s face. Because she saw the upper-caste were especially cared for, and the poor low-caste ones were neglected by teachers in Christian schools, Bama joins a religious order to serve the dalits better. But even here, she experiences greater humiliations for being a Paraya, and a Tamil Paraya at that.

Bama finds herself in a social system that is like a huge machine. Interestingly, the people in the system are only recognized by Bama by their roles within the system, and not by personal identities. Bama refers to the “the head master”, the “PT teacher”, the “priest”, the “policeman”, “the nun”—and so on, by their depersonalised identities. The people of her own community who were rendered so humorously through nicknames, now start getting referred to by their real names, as the humour is suspended and the narrative turns grim. When the conflict between Chaliars and the Parayas erupts (in Chapter 3), we hear Bama mentioning names: “Izhava’s husband”
(Bama 26) who is stabbed by Chaliyars, “Mama Paralokam” (Bama 27), “Verghese”, Chinnappa Machaan” (Bama 28) “Mariappa’s son” (Bama 32), Ondiviran from the Palla street” (Bama 39), Thavasi-Pethiya” (Bama 39), “Pavulu”, “Susai” (Bama 39), “Monangi’s son” (Bama 40) and so on. A sensitive reader will notice that the appearance of regular names of the low-caste people and the role-names of the upper-caste ones, in combination with references to animals draws up a powerful picture of the beastialization of both the oppressors and oppressed. In an insightful reading of Karukku, in “Beyond the Margin: Dalit Women’s Autobiographies” Rajkumar draws our attention to Bama’s narrative strategies and remarks: “It is perhaps deliberate that Bama leaves out the names of people, places, and institutions in her narration ... the names of her parents, brothers and sisters or the upper caste people ...” (Kumar 232). That the narrative strategies of Bama are subtler is seen from the name scheme in the work.

M.S.S. Pandian has also noted this feature of Karukku:

To name is to exercise power. But a deliberate refusal to name can enable a politics of collectivity. In this case, the shroud of anonymity frees events, persons and institutions from the
possibility of individuation and renders them as general. Anonymity thus becomes a mode of invoking larger solidarities. In contrast those who get named in Karukku are the ones who are so ordinary that they would be part of the dalit community anywhere else. (Pandian 132)

Bama’s story of her life renders a factual picture of the low-caste with all the force of a fictional work, because of the art of narration. Bama’s self-account necessarily includes almost all sections of her life in society: family, street, school, church, convent and so on. In all sections of society it is with pain that Bama records the inhuman discrimination that is in practice.

A very important area of Bama’s narration has to do with children and childhood. References to babes and children dominate the autobiographical account. On the one hand injustices rendered to the weak and helpless in society are shown in all their shocking intensity, from children’s perspective. Secondly, we are also made aware of a crucial denial to the low-caste: the denial of a childhood. We may consider the games that low-caste children play.

The very first games that Bama and others play in their early childhood only mirror-directly-social hierarchy:
Two or three boys would play at being Naicker. The rest of us would call them, ‘Ayya Ayya’ and pretend to be their pannaiyaal (slaves). These boys would act as if they had a lot of power over us. They’d call us names, humiliate us, and make us do a lot of work. We’d pretend to work in the fields all day, and then collect our wages and go home. (Bama 48)

Another game runs like this:

We also played at keeping shop. The boys managed the shop pretending to be Nadar Mudaali. We’d go there, hand over our tile-money and buy all sorts of groceries to take home. (Bama 48)

And then this one:

Then we played at being married and setting off on a bus journey; the husband comes home drunk and hitting his wife; the police arriving and beating him up. (Bama 49)

Note that they do not play some genuine games like kabaddi and dice games. They do: but the significant fact is that the very first games they play in childhood show an erasure of the line dividing play from actual life. It is as if the very first thing children become conscious of, the very waking to life is with the consciousness of
the inequities and oppressions in society. Before the childhood is over, they would go to work:

... there was no more play, we went to work during the day, came home and saw to the household chores; that was it. (Bama 50)

We’d go at day break to the Naicker’s house to shell the groundnuts ... . We’d sit in the cattle shed, take up the groundnuts in both hands—alternately, and break the shells by smashing them against the floor. If we were in a great hurry, we’d use both hands as well as our teeth to shell the groundnuts ... . We had to work as hard as we could to shell all the nuts. (Bama 43-44)

If none of this work was available I’d go off to collect stray onions in the field or thorny twigs. Some days I’d go with other children to collect firewood from the mountain jungle. On such days I’d wake up early in the morning, pour some kuzu in the carrier, and collect four annas from my mother to give to the ‘Guarder’ or forester. (Bama 44)

The non-availability of a true childhood is a crucial aspect of Bama’s Karukku.

Through all these depressive pictures, there is one picture that commands the admiration and respect of the
readers, and it has to do with the picture of the low-caste women. Even at distress, their presence of mind and spirit of life constitutes the strength of the community. Especially during the fight between Parayas and Chaliars Bama’s narrative reflects the strength of character and organising ability as well of Paraya women.

Raj Kumar cites S.J. Mark’s Preface to the Tamil version of Karukku. From one angle, Karukku reads like a novel; from another, a village history; yet from another an autobiography. Raj Kumar’s own comment is: Bama ‘wilfully’ ‘violates’ the ‘boundaries of genre’ and recreates ‘a new form’. He adds:

Bama also refuses to accept the fact that her account is all about the narration of her autobiographical ‘I’. Instead of her individual self coming to occupy the center stage, she evokes the collective self of the entire Dalit community suggesting that the autobiographical ‘I’ does not have an autonomous life outside the collective ‘we’.

(Kumar 232)

It is true, as Raj Kumar observes that “almost all the Dalit autobiographies adopt this strategy” (Kumar 232). In Bama this strategy can convey, not just their oppressed state, but also their resourcefulness. The best example is when the old women in the village, dressing up
a victimized man—in woman’s clothes, dupe the police and bring him to his dead son’s funeral. It is an impressive example of the collective ‘we’ which erases even gender-divisions.
Works Cited


Sunity Devi (1864-1932)

Sunity Devi, Maharani of Cooch Behar was the daughter of Keshub Chandra Sen. Being the daughter of one of the leading lights of a westernising and rationalising movement in India, she stands among the first generation of Indian women to receive modern education. When Sunity Devi was thirteen, her marriage to the young Maharaja of Cooch Behar had only gone ahead when the reforming Hindus of her father’s organisation were assured that the wedding ceremony would be expunged of its idolatrous portions. Like many Indian royals, the Cooch Behar royal couple were frequent visitors to England, with their four sons at school at Eaton. Nevertheless it was ground-breaking at the time for an Indian lady of high rank to wear structured European clothing. During her stay in England Mahathma Gandhiji is said to have visited her.

All her life, Sunity Devi remained an enthusiastic follower of religion of New Dispensation founded by her father. Influenced by the value system that prevailed at her father’s joint family, she finds fulfillment in her role as wife and mother than as a queen. In India she is first the woman to write her autobiography in English (1921). The Maharani outlived her husband by over twenty years and lived to see her first son reign for only two years before he died in 1913. She wrote fictional works, both in English and in Bengali.