


**CHAPTER IV**

**THE VOICE OF THE VOICELESS IN BAMA**

Like the women writers of the First Nations in Canada writing on racial issues, Indian women writers took up the issue of caste discrimination in India in the 1980s. The caste system is a social construct among the South Asians and has no genetic basis. Though the caste system has been formally abolished under the Indian constitution, there is still discrimination and prejudice against the Dalits. Since Indian
Independence, significant steps have been taken to provide opportunities in job and education. Many social organizations have introduced proactive provisions to better the conditions of the Dalits in education, health and employment.

The word ‘Dalit’ comes from the Sanskrit language which means “ground”, “suppressed”, “crushed” or “broken to pieces”. It was first used by Jyotirao Phule in the nineteenth century, in the context of the oppression faced by the erstwhile untouchable castes of the Hindus. Gandhi coined of the word ‘Harijan’, translated roughly as ‘children of God’ to identify the former untouchables. The terms, ‘Scheduled Castes’ and ‘Scheduled Tribes’ (SC/ST) are the official terms used in Indian government documents to identify the untouchables and the tribes. However in 2008, the National Commission for scheduled castes, noticing that the word “Dalit” was used interchangeably with the official term “Scheduled Castes”, called the term “unconstitutional” and asked state governments to end its use. After the order, the Chattisgarh government ended the official use of the word ‘Dalit’. ‘Adi Dravida’, ‘Adi Karnataka’ and ‘Adi Andra’ are words used in the states of Tamilnadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, respectively, to identify people of “untouchable” castes in official documents. These words, particularly the prefix “Adi”, denotes the aboriginal inhabitants of the land.

“Dalit” (oppressed or broken) is not a new word. Apparently, it was used in the 1930s as a Hindi and Marathi translation of ‘depressed
classes’, a term the British used for what are now called the scheduled castes. In 1970s, the ‘Dalit Panthers’ revived the term and expanded its reference to include scheduled tribes, poor peasants, women and all those exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion. So Dalit is not a caste. It is a symbol of change and revolution.

Dalits’ struggle against casteist tradition has a long history. In the context of traditional Hindu society, Dalits’ status has often been historically associated with occupations regarded as ritually impure, such as any work involving butchering, removal of rubbish, removal of waste and leather work. Dalits work as manual labourers, cleaning latrines and sewers and cleaning away rubbish. Engaging oneself in these activities was considered to be polluting to the individual and this pollution was considered contagious. As a result, the Dalits were commonly segregated and banned from full participation in Hindu social life. For example, they could not enter a temple or a school and were required to stay outside the village. Elaborate precautions were sometimes observed to prevent incidental contact between Dalits and other Castes. Discrimination against Dalits exists in rural areas in private spheres, in everyday matters such eating places, schools, temples, water sources, etc.

The caste system in India was originally devised, based on one’s profession and not by birth. Later, it got associated with people of that profession and became exploitative. An exploiting system always
adheres to a set of values which is more favourable to it. The other systems of values are either distorted or corrupted for the convenience of upper caste. Social inequality and untouchability were convenient and were necessary to keep up the politics for the early rulers and were hence retained. With all these socio-cultural predicaments in the arduous past, the Dalits in India live a life full of poverty, starvation, ignorance, insults, injustice and atrocities, practiced against humanity.

In Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and a few other states, the Dalits have come under the influence of the neo-Buddhist movement initiated by Ambedkar. Some of them have come under the influence of Neo-Buddhists and Christian Missionaries and have converted themselves from Hinduism into religions such as Christianity and Buddhism in an attempt to escape the prejudices they face.

The Prevention of Atrocities Act (POA) is a tacit acknowledgement, by the Indian government of caste relations defined by violence, both incidental and systemic. In 1989, the Government of India passed the Prevention of Atrocities Act which clarified specific crimes against SC and ST (The Dalits) as atrocities and created strategies and punishments to counter these acts. The purpose behind the Act is to curb violence against Dalits.

Firstly, the Act clarified what the atrocities were: both particular incidents of harm and humiliation, such as the forced consumption of noxious substances, and systemic violence still faced by many Dalits,
especially in rural areas. Such systemic violence included forced labour, denial of access to water and other public amenities, and sexual abuse of Dalit women. Secondly, the Act created special courts to try cases registered under the Prevention of Atrocities Act. Thirdly, the Act called on States with high levels of caste violence (said to be “atrocity – prone”) to appoint qualified officers to monitor and maintain law and order.

The Prevention of Atrocities Act gave legal redress to Dalits. In practice, the Act has suffered from a near – complete failure in implementation (except in two states). Policemen have displayed a consistent unwillingness to register offences under the Act. This reluctance stems partially from ignorance and also from peer protection. According to a 1999 study, nearly a quarter of those government officials charged with enforcing the Act are unaware of its existence.

While the Indian Constitution has duly made special provisions for the social and economic uplift of the Dalits, comprising the so – called Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes to enable them to achieve upward social mobility, these concessions are limited to only those Dalits who remain Hindus. There is a demand among Dalits who have converted themselves to other religions that the statutory benefits should be extended to them as well, to overcome historical injustices. This has a striking parallel in the Métis’ demand when they were not recognized by law for welfare measures granted to Indians or even whites. The affirmative–action measures taken by the government towards the
upliftment of Dalit through quotas in government jobs and university admissions as sought by Dalit activists like B.R. Ambedkar ensured that the Dalits would find a proportionate political voice.

Dr. Ambedkar, the apostle of the Dalits is the first to break the Sanatan Hindu traditions of ban on learning for the untouchables. His own achievements in the field of learning are the source of pride, prestige and inspiration to the Dalits. The rise and success of Dr. Ambedkar is the foundation period for the all-round rise and growth of the Dalits in India. All that he wanted to achieve through his social and literary activities was to make the Dalits assert their position as human beings. In his speech at the Mahad Satyagraha, he says “we are not going to Charadar Lake merely to drink its water. We are going to the lake to assert that we too are human-beings, like others” (5). His role as the Chief Architect of the constitution is unique and most revered. He asks the Dalit writers to rise above all others in intellectual pursuits and literature. His writings and speeches published by the government of Maharashtra in seventeen volumes began a new epoch in the cosmopolitan living and writings of Independent India.

Ambedkar’s footsteps were followed by Jalasakar, K.K. Salri, Valangkar, Bhimrao Kardak, C.B. Khaimode, L.G. Salve – Vahurkar. In the first phase, such writers expressed their humble gratitude to Ambekar. But in the second phase, the number of Dalit writers have
increased and their writings are towards community-ideology. In general, all the writings have five categories of themes:

1. social disabilities forced upon Dalits
2. Hindu caste system and inhuman treatment to Dalits
3. Dr. Ambedkar’s demand for social equality
4. Dr. Ambedkar’s insistence on social justice and
5. Buddhism and social and economic democracy

The themes chosen by the Dalit writers are the natural outcomes of their expressions. In the short stories, poems, ballads, novels, biographies, autobiographies, dramas, historical writings and all their forms of literature, they have created their own sphere of operation. Educationally, the qualifications of all such writers vary from formal education of IV standard to Ph.D., degrees. Their standing in society also vary from ordinary farm labourers, textile mill-workers, teachers, professors to University Vice – Chancellors, advocates and I.A.S., officers. This scenario certainly has created a new world of experience in the Indian literature with MAN as its centre.

Some of the important Dalit writers are Mahasweta Devi, Namdeo Dhasal, Daya Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Sachi Rautray, Rabi Singh, Basudev Sunai, Bama, Abhimani, Poomani, Imayam, Marku, Mangal Rathod, Neerave Patel, Perumal Murugan, Palamalai, Sudhakar, D. Gopi, Sivakami and others.
Dalit Literature questioned the mainstream literary theories and upper–caste ideologies and explored the neglected aspects of life. Dalit Literature is experience–based. This Anubhava (experience) takes precedence over “Anumana” (speculation); that is why authenticity and liveliness have become hallmarks of Dalit Literature. These writers make use of the language of the out–castes and the under–privileged in the Indian society. Shame, anger, sorrow and indomitable hope are the motifs in of Dalit Literature.

What has come to be labelled as Dalit Literature can be best defined borrowing a paragraph from Dr. Sharan Kumar Limbale’s essay on the Dalit Literary Movement in Maharashtra:

Dalit Literature is a form of agitation. It centers around common man who has been oppressed for thousands of years. The Hindu caste system has divided Indian Society into castes. There are not only divisions of castes, but also the watertight compartments of Indian people and culture. One who takes birth in one caste should live in one’s caste, drink and eat in his caste, marry within his caste and die within his caste. This is the age of tyranny. Dalit Literature wants to destroy this inhuman caste system, which enslaved not only Dalits but also our democratic country. Our nation is politically free but socially it is still in slavery. Dalit struggles for total revolution, and it is a declaration of human rights (Limbale 40).
The liberation of the Dalits is the only sure way for the liberation of the Indian people.

The primary objective of Dalit Literature is the liberation of Dalits in particular and the liberation of the oppressed in general. It is fundamentally a cultural activity coming under the broad movement of Dalit Political liberation. It is cultural politics that takes the form of protest. This Dalit literature closely associated with the hopes for freedom of a group of people is relevant to all regional Dalit Literatures in India and of course to Dalit Literature in Tamil. Dalit voice in the literature could not find its distinct place in literary domain until late 1980s or early 1990s.

Dalit Literature managed to carve its own space in the Tamil literary space when the Dalits took to recording their experiential reality in autobiographical or fictional mode. The romanticized, sentimentalized Dalits, Poomani and Daniel find an authentic voice and affirmative presence in the writings of Sivakami, Bama, Edayavendan, Unjai Rajan Abimani, Anbadavan, Gunasekaran, Imaiyam and others.

Dalit literature in Tamil has many firsts to its credit. The Indian Dalit novel in Tamil written by the woman Dalit writer Sivakami was published in 1989. Pazhaiyana Kazhithalum (1989) advocates the need for an organized educated Dalit youth that stands united by ideological commitment and sincerity of action towards empowerment of the Dalits. Karukku, the Indian Dalit autobiography in Tamil written by a Dalit woman, published in 1992, discusses the oppression and discrimination
meted out to Dalit and by the society, especially through institutions like schools, colleges and the church. The works of both Bama and Sivagami have been translated into English. While Sivagami translates after nine years and also reviews her work by way of Author Notes, Bama writes an afterword to her work translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom, after a period of seven years.

While Sivagami’s novel Palaiyana Kazhithalum (The Grip of Change) discusses Dalit leadership and its corrupt and manipulative politics as well as the violent treatment of Dalit women at home by Dalit men, Bama’s Karukku presents various forms of social ostracism practised by upper castes over the Dalits, the violence unleashed on them and the discrimination in church in direct contravention of Biblical tenets. While Christianity does not recognize caste divisions, Church in India is casteist. They are kept at margins not only in life but even after death; they are not allowed to use the cemetery within the village.

The social discrimination against Dalits, the humiliation they feel when named as “Parayas from Cheri”, their anger and urge to assert themselves as human beings with dignity and self-respect and their conflicts get resolved in a positive note at the time of their review after seven to nine years or nearly a decade. If it is racism in the writings of first Nation’s women writers in Canada, it is casteism in Indian Dalit writings.
Like Beatrice Culleton’s *In Search of April Rain Tree* Bama wrote a book *To Heal Herself*. Both have questions, both pursue their questions and raise their voice against discrimination, unjust practices and segregation of the Dalit by two major institutions of society: the educational institution and church. It is ironical that the academic institutions that should illuminate the mind darken it by alienating the individual from his / her roots. The Church that must illuminate the soul should deprive an individual of his / her zest for life or rather a desire to live.

*Karukku*, the first unusual Dalit autobiography by Bama to appear in Tamil eschews a confessional mode leaving out many personal details. The protagonist is never named. The events of Bama’s life are not arranged on a simple, linear or chronological order, as with most autobiographies, but rather reflected upon in different ways, repeated from different perspectives, grouped under different themes; for example, work (Games and recreation) pastimes, education, belief, etc. It grows out of a particular moment: a personal crisis and watershed in the author’s life which drives her to make sense of her life as a woman, Christian and Dalit. The convention of writing under a pseudonym adds to the work’s strange paradox of reticence and familiarity. Her driving quest for integrity as a Dalit and Christian shapes the book and gives it its polemic.
Bama is the pen-name of a Tamil Dalit Woman, from a Roman Catholic family. Her major works are the autobiography *Karukku* (1992), a novel, *Sangati* (1994), a collection of Short Stories, *Kisumbukkaaran* (1996) and *Oru Thathavum Erumaiyum*. Bama Faustina Mary was born at Puthupatti (near Madurai), Tamil Nadu in 1958. Her family was converted to Christianity way back in the 18th century. Her father, Susairaj was employed in the Indian army and spent all his money for the education of his children. Her mother was Sebesthiamma. After completing her education at St. Mary's college, Tuthukkudy she did her B.Ed., degree. She worked as a teacher in a school for years. Later, she joined the convent to become a nun. After seven years of convent life, she came out as she found the Dalits discriminated against even in convents which waxes eloquence over the equality of all human beings before God.

According to Bama herself, *Karukku* was not originally intended for publication. It was a very personal endeavour that helped her resolve certain tensions in her life. When she left the convent, she found herself helpless, without a job or any kind of support, still unable to escape the training of the convent. She wrote it to rediscover herself. Her story is linked with the life of her community – the Dalits. Society always marginalizes the Dalits. The more they try, the more they are pushed to the margins. According to her, society has the moral responsibility to support the Dalits who have been otherwise oppressed and deprived of
equal opportunities over centuries. Writing for the Dalits is an effort to assert their identity in such a society.

**Karukku** discusses the violent oppression unleashed on Dalits especially on the paraiyar caste by the state police, the panchayat, the upper castes and by the church. The Paraiyars who converted themselves to Christianity to escape casteist oppression at the hands of orthodox Hinduism get disillusioned by the oppression within the church fold. Further, reservation benefits are not granted to Dalit Christians, as theoretically Christianity does not recognize caste. The government’s reservation policy fails to take into account the gap between belief and practice and the Dalit Christians face the brunt of it. When exposed to unjust, unchristian, discriminatory conduct of church authorities towards Dalit Christians, Bama gives vent to her personal dissatisfaction with the church and walks out of the nunnery after seven years of conscientious struggle.

Bama’s work points out that the church distorts the real image and teachings of Christ and preaches docility, meekness and subservience to the faithful, while suppressing the radical, liberative teachings of Jesus. She urges the Dalits to educate themselves, read the Bible and find in Jesus a defender of the oppressed. It is also a powerful critique of Indian civil society, the educational system, the church and bureaucracy, where the author highlights the complicity between class and caste in post-Independence India. Bama uses the genre of autobiography, a powerful
tool of resistance, in which the “silenced” voices of the Dalits can be heard, breaking through the myriad forms of atrocities that ruled every moment of their existence. Bama’s is a political autobiography in which the individual ‘I’ is never alienated from the communal ‘We’. As Lakshmi Holmstrom, the translator of Karukku into English remarks, “There is, in this writing, a very powerful sense of the self, as the community, as Dalit” (160). Lakshmi Holmstrom has adopted the three methods of transliteration, translation and transcreation to retain the original pungency of Bama’s work and it won the Crossword Translation Award in 2000.

In the opening chapter, Bama adapts a narrative strategy in which the sense of communal life and the intimate relationship with the land are evoked throughout the individual’s story. In the very first chapter, even before we get to know the narrator’s life we are told the story of Bondan Maama (Karukku 4-5). The legend of the Bondan Maama, like Bama’s listing of nicknames for Boys and girls (7-8), the story of Kaaman (8-9), or that of Nallathangal (9-11), focuses our attention on the community rather than on the narrator. In fact, we get almost no personal detail of the narrator in the opening chapter. In order to focus on the community, Bama refers to the toils of the Dalits in the fields, the spatial organization of the village and the community’s rituals and superstitions. Bama’s recourse to the collective myths and beliefs draws our attention to an entire community similar to Maria Campbell’s account of her past, her
ancestors and the myths, beliefs related to the Métis who preferred to live in the wild, one with nature.

Bama spends considerable narrative space describing the topography of the village, the landmarks of the season (1-4). Four complete pages are devoted to the setting and descriptions of people. Later, she describes the hard work of the Dalits devoted to agricultural activities of her village (41-48 and 66). She foregrounds land and the community because, historically, land distribution, the ownership and caste hierarchies have been closely related, as it is in the Métis claim to their settlements.

It is significant that the reader is not given the name of the narrator anywhere in Karukku. “Bama” is itself a pen name and the use of a pseudonym is common to atrocity narratives. Bama’s translator Lakshmi Holmstrom states: “It (Karukku) grows out of a particular moment: a personal crisis and watershed in the author’s life which drives her to make sense of her life as a woman (Introduction vii). Bama herself 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 …” (Introduction xiii).

Karukku is less an autobiography than a collective biography where the narrator is a common (wo)man who metonymically stands for the community. There is no problematic hero as in a novel, but there is
a problematic collective situation. The collective situation being caste, Bama makes her readers witness the sufferings and trauma of the Dalits / Parayas. Mini Krishnan declares: “no one can ignore her experience”. “Her expose’ of certain aspects of our society is shocking” (*Karukku* v).

Bama opens her preface with the personal “I”. “There are many congruities between the saw-edged palmyra Karukku and my own life” (*Introduction* xiii). She describes the unjust social structures that plunged her into ‘ignorance’ in the second paragraph. The narrative changes in the third paragraph, “There are other Dalits like mine”. She declares that she speaks for an entire community: “they, who have been the oppressed, are now themselves like the double-edged karukku” (*Introduction* xiii).

It is significant that the first noun in Bama’s narrative is not “I” but a collective “Our” in the opening line: “Our village is very beautiful (1); when she describes her community, unlike Maria, she uses “my people”. She writes, “Most of our people are agricultural labourers” (1), indicating that it is not a personal voice but a collective archive of suffering. Bama’s narrative voice testifies to the sufferings and atrocities of two communities: Dalit and Christian. She opens chapter two with “When I was studying in third class” (11), and moves from the ‘I’ to ‘we’ (individual to collective), concluding thus:
We who are asleep must open out eyes and look about us. we must not accept the injustice of our enslavement by telling ourselves it is our fate, as if we have not true feelings: we must dare to stand up for change…..(25)

The movement is repeated in chapter nine which also begins with ‘I’ and then shifts to the communal.

The movement from individual to communal is a retrieval of trauma, but one that is shared with other Dalits: what holds the community together is the trauma. Bama writes:

Today I am like a mongrel dog, 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 Dalits’ poor experience. I share to some extent the poverty of the Dalits who toil far more painfully through fierce heat and beating rain. (67 – 68)

It seems that our society is divided into those who toil, and those who sit down and feast… they marginalize them, make them work like machines, abuse them unjustly, never allowing them to make any progress. (168)

In righteous anger, she bursts out asking if the one who exploits will ever change. She concludes, even in church only the upper caste
Christians enjoy the benefits and comforts: “we find there is no place for us there (69).

One of her chapters is devoted to recreation of the pastimes – the games the Dalit children play on their streets. Even in games, the children do role play Naicker- and- Pannaiyaal game where Pannaiyars are humiliated, called names by boys playing the role of Naicker. The children mimic the elders undergoing exploitation and swindling by the Nadars who run shops, and also play at being nuns and priests who give them blows instead of love. If they play at being married, the couple set off on a bus journey, husband gets drunk, beats wife, police arrive and beat him up. Children act as a witness and are an innocent reflection of the society around them. As for entertainments like cinema, children from other communities go dressed up to the cinema. But none of the women from Dalits go to the cinema for fear of being pulled by boys of all other communities, a parallel to Métis women abused by the Whites in public places.

The children play other traditional games too. The boys play catching games, stick games, spinning tops and marbles while girls play dice, hop and catch, pebbles, ‘pallanguzhi’ and ‘thattangal’. They have bull – chasing in Pongal season and Christmas. Easter and Feast day celebrations are lively and entertaining for the Dalit children. The cultural practices of Dalit women are brought about in their songs for different occasions such as (i) planting paddy seedlings (ii) weeding the fields (iii)
harvesting the grain (iv) singing for babies while rocking them to sleep in their cradles (v) songs to young girls coming of age (attaining puberty) and (vi) the dirges for the dead. They would sing religious songs and dance a ‘kummi’ clapping hands on feast days.

In the chapter about her convent education, Bama reveals how the Dalits face a sense of shame and humiliation, discrimination on account of their poverty and that of their caste. However, education gives her a sense of self-esteem, and Bama brushes aside her poverty of dresses which are poor, compared to those of her classmates. She goes for higher education against all odds. Even at that stage she feels, people who have cash to spend can afford to live in comfort. But our people however hard they try, never seem to have that cash. They live on gruel, wear nothing but rags – own nothings. But how are they to educate themselves while they struggle to fill their bellies?”(66).

She highlights the importance of education and necessity for the Dalits’ economic empowerment.

Bama describes her mind disturbed and conscience battered by the differences in the preachings and practices of the convent. “The nuns take a vow to live in poverty but they do not know the meaning of the word because they live in comfort zones with all varieties of food, fruits, vegetables etc” (67). Disillusioned, she prefers to quit the comfort and convenience of the convent to find a meaning for life. As a person with self–respect, she decides not to dance to someone else’s tune, as Maria
decides not to dance for a place in society in *Halfbreed*. When she leaves the convent like a bird with a broken wing, the uncertainties of life make her wonder when such atrocities would end and if the system would ever change – a doubt that gets resolved after seven years when she writes the Afterword for Lakshmi Holmstrom’s English translation of her work *Karukku*.

Bama centres on the religious side of her life – her spiritual development both through the nurturing of her belief as a catholic and through her gradual realization of herself as Dalit. The readers are given a very full picture of the way in which the church ordered and influenced the lives of the Dalit catholics. Every aspect of the child’s life is imbued with the Christian religion. The year is punctuated by religious processions and festivals which become part of the natural yearly cycle of crops and seasons. But parallel to this religious life is a socio–political self–education that takes off from the revelatory moment when she first understands what untouchability means. It is this double perspective that enables her to understand the deep rift between Christian beliefs and practice. “I had to search hard to find God”! (92) in church where the poor are turned to slaves in the name of God while the church authorities (priests and nuns) themselves lived in comfort and bent religion to their benefit in order to maintain their own falsehood.

Bama’s re–reading and interpretation of the Christian scriptures as an adult enables her to carve out both a social vision and a message of
hope for Dalits by emphasizing the revolutionary aspects of Christianity, the values of equality, social justice and love towards all. Her desire to do her utmost to live her life meaningfully could not be fulfilled in a well-endowed Church with materialistic ambitions. Even the ideas indoctrinated during the training were influenced by their studies in Europe and America – alien lands which only helped to alienate her from her people. The sense of disorientation from her roots literally destroys, devastates Bama’s morale.

In the concluding chapter the author talks of the life after she dared to leave the convent. She finds herself in a world without connections. “We hope so much. We study so many things. But in real life everything turns out differently. “We are compelled to wander about stricken and unprotected”, bemoans Bama (102).

The strategies of the convent and training have transformed Bama from an oak, strong in mind and body, to a feeble drumstick tree that breaks in the wind. Ultimately, she comes to her senses. It may be hard to make a living but she is happy to live with a whole and honest mind. With all the pain, she experiences “a certain happiness in the depths of her mind because she has courage, a certain pride, a belief that she can live and a desire to live – to live a meaningful life that is useful to few others. It is better to lead a life weeping real tears than live a life with a fraudulent smile” (104), concludes the courageous Bama.
For Bama the writing of *Karukku* becomes an act of resistance and assertion because in narrating the story of her own personal ordeals and in documenting the oppressive conditions of the fellow Dalits, she has a political agenda of providing a voice for the voiceless. In exposing the oppressive conditions in which the Paraya lives and the repressive tactics of the state and the upper caste communities in the village, she is not only chronicling the misfortunes of the Dalits, but also skillfully manipulating her autobiography as a form of political intervention to reach out to as broad a readership as possible in order to lay bare the caste and class-based discrimination in the society and the hypocrisy that lurks within the four walls of institutionalized religion. Further, Dalit women embody a dual outsider status in society and the narration offers an opportunity to examine Dalit woman’s resistance to caste, class and gender oppression.

Bama underscores the corporeal aspect of social oppression early in her narrative:

> When I was studying in the third class, I hadn’t yet heard people speak openly of untouchability. But I had already seen, felt, experienced and been humiliated by what it is. (11)

Bama’s sustained description of caste-related humiliation also takes recourse to corporeal imagery. She gives a description of the communal fights between the Chaaliyar community and the Dalit
Christians staking a claim to the cemetery. The Chaaliyar community was set against the entire Paraya community and many Parayas were arrested by the police. The Chaaliyar community invites the police, “feasts them and then unleashes them onto the Parayas” (30-39). Grandmother asks: “here we are, struggling just for this watery gruel. So how will the police or the Government be on our side?” (31). The law discriminates between communities and favours the wealthier Chaaliyars. All important offices, the school, the church, the convent and the parish house are situated in the area where the upper caste community lives. The high caste people never come to the area where Bama lives. She experienced the humiliation of being an untouchable even as a child.

Through a series of sometimes poignant, sometimes funny reflections on her childhood in a caste-divided village in Tamil Nadu, Bama recreates for the reader her experiences as a Dalit child. There is not a single false note or shrillness in the narrative. The innocence of the child Bama who “hadn’t yet heard people speak openly of untouchability” (13) is gradually shattered. When an elder from her community (the Parayas) brings a Naicker some ‘vadas’, he holds the parcel by its string - not touching it directly. Bama says,

I wanted to shriek with laughter at the sight of such a big man carrying a small pocket in that fashion. (13)
But Bama’s elder brother is not amused and explains to her that the big man has not touched the pocket directly because everybody believes that Naickers are upper caste and therefore must not touch the Parayas. They will be polluted if they do so. Bama writes,

When I heard this, I didn’t want to laugh any more, and I felt terribly sad. How could they believe that it was disgusting if a Paraya held that package in his hands… I felt so provoked and angry that I wanted to go and touch those wretched Vadais myself. Why should we have to fetch and carry for these people, I wondered. (13)

Bama then sees some Naicker women giving water and waste food to her grandmother:

The Naicker women would pour out the water from a height of four feet, while Paatti and others received and drank it with cupped hands held to their mouth. It was a long time before I realized that Paatti was bringing home the unwanted food that the Naicker were ready to throw away. After she had finished all her filthy chores, Paatti placed the vessel that she had brought with her, by the side of the drain. Her vessel, (Naicker woman’s) it seemed, must not touch
Paatti’s; it would be polluted. I always felt terrible when I watched this. (14)

Bama’s account of her experience with upper caste landlords and their children stand testimony to this kind of discrimination. She writes:

My grandmother worked as servant for Naicker families. When she was working in the fields, even tiny children, born the other days, would call her by her name and order her about, just because they belonged to Naicker caste. And this grandmother, like all the other labourers, would call the little boy Ayya, Master, and run about to do his bidding. (14)

Bama also describes the condition of the poverty stricken Dalits who work on the farms of the higher caste Naickers and how they are swindled by the upper caste traders. They work from dawn to dusk and get wages just enough to fill their stomach. Dalit women who work along with their men folk receive lower wages because of gender discrimination and are economically exploited. Bama further says that however hard they may work, they always get low wages. People from her community are made to do all the menial work by the people of the high castes. The Dalit children are exploited when forced to do all sorts of menial jobs for the higher caste people. They have to carry water to the houses of their teachers and water their gardens. They have to work in the match factories also.
Later, to underline the abhorrence with which Dalits are held by the so-called upper castes, Bama writes,

How is it that people consider us too gross even to sit next to when travelling? They look at us with the same look they would cast on someone suffering from a repulsive disease. Wherever we go, we suffer blows. And pain. (24)

Here caste is inscribed upon the Dalit’s body through its very rejection: the body and how it is treated has become a marker of caste. The trauma retrieved is, again, of a community’s body. Bama describes the trembling bodies of old, “abused” (23) Dalits and her racing heartbeats when she sees caste violence. She feels a “burning anger” when she sees the atrocities perpetrated. Dalit bodies are hurt and brutalized because social structure allows the brutalization. When there is a riot in Bama’s village, the police arrive. They then proceed to engage in acts of sheer physical violence upon the Dalits (34-6).

The taboo and social barriers are therefore enforced through prohibitions physically. When Bama is humiliated by the Head Master in the school assembly the oppression of the caste system is inscribed in terms of Bama’s “shamed” body:

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. (17)
On the humiliation suffered by Bama and her caste-students at the hands of the warden-sister, Bama writes:

The warden-sister of our hostel could not abide low-caste or poor children. She’d get hold of us and scold us for no rhyme or reason. If a girl tended to be on the plump side, she’d get it even more. These people get nothing to eat at home; they come here and they grow fat, she would say publicly. (17)

“It was really embarrassing, when they too had paid their fees like everyone else, for food, for this and that” (18), laments Bama.

Those who are lucky enough to get admission to educational institutions find themselves humiliated before the other children. Bama’s account of her experience in school is a testimony to this kind of discrimination. She states,

All the same, every now and then, our class teacher, or the PT teacher would ask all the Harijan children to stand up, either at assembly or during lessons. We’d stand. They’d write down our names, and then ask us to sit down again. We felt really sad then. We’d stand in front of nearly two thousand children, hanging our heads in shame, as if we had done something wrong. Yes, it was humilitating. (18)
The child Bama reacts sensitively to praise too. Praised as the Harijan child who has gained the best marks in the assembly, she wonders if it is impossible for a Harijan child to study or what? She feels proud and gets a desire to prove herself and progress.

The humiliation coupled with poverty most often leads to heavy dropout of Dalit students from educational institutions. At one point Bama seeks to go home for her First communion. The school denies her permission. Bama recalls,

I stand my ground… insisting that there cannot be different rules for different castes, only the same rules for everyone.

(19)

Later she asks:

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? (24)

She later debates the issue of justice, unequal wages for upper castes and Dalits. In each of these cases, Bama takes recourse to the discursive register of human laws and justice. Rhetorical listening involves paying attention to a discourse beyond the immediate referentiality of the text to those absentees whose trauma achieves a presence in Bama.
The experience she has had in the bus is not acceptable to Bama. Any pretension is unthinkable, for her Dalit-identity is crucial to her. Bama writes:

When I went home for holidays, if there was a Naicker woman sitting next to me in the bus, she’d immediately ask me which place I was going to, what street. As soon as I said, the cheri, she’d get up and move off to another seat.

(18)

Besides being a scathing critique of the hegemonic ways of the upper caste communities, Karukku also reflects the hypocrisy and inadequacy of institutionalized Christianity. A nagging perplexity which pervades the work is the unfathomable divide between truth and fiction in the institutionalized religion - the deep rift between belief and practice. Bama provides elaborate details of the ways in which the church ordered and influenced the lives of the Paraya Catholics. Bama exposes the irony of religious life and Christianity. Dalit Christians are marginalized by the other higher caste Christians. The problem of marginalization prevails not only among the common people in society but also within the church. Christian Dalits also suffer caste discrimination. When the Dalits become priests or nuns, they are ostracised and marginalized.

The words of Bama’s brother, that education is the only redeeming factor which will help them escape the indignities and humiliations that have been haunting their circumscribed lives, are the words of
encouragement to Bama. Her brother’s advice, “study with care”, “work hard and learn” become the guiding principle of her life. She had firm conviction in her belief and had a strong “desire to prove that she could study as well as others, and make progress” (9). Bama explains,

because I had the education, because I had the ability, I dared to speak up for myself; I didn’t care a toss about caste [……] because of my education alone I manage to survive among those who spoke the language of caste-difference and discrimination. (20)

Later, Bama finds a job as a teacher in a school run by nuns, because the desire of working for the Dalits is still alive in her heart. She has the courage to live and work for the liberation of her community. Her childhood experience, her traumatic agony due to humiliation in college, her vocation as a teacher and later as a nun become the motivating factors in her life to engage herself actively to alleviate the suffering of the oppressed.

Bama has written her autobiography to share her experiences as student and writer to encourage the Dalits to liberate themselves and build something anew. She envisions them gaining political, economic and cultural strength. Bama’s cry is the cry of every Dalit woman and yet her aspirations, her disappointment and her response are unique. There is less acrimony and more hope.
Seven years later, when the English translation of her work was published, Bama’s emotions rose up in great floods and she notes the many changes in her life through these seven years. Like Beatrice Culleton who was affected by the death of her siblings, Bama was disturbed by the violent death of her beloved sister in 1995. The very next year, both her parents died. As a Dalit woman living on her own she has to face many problems. Each day brings new wounds, but also new understanding, new lessons that bestow her with sufficient mental strength to rise up even from the edge of defeat. She acknowledges both the brutal, ugly face of society that enrages her, as well as the sweetness and simplicity of life that makes her dance with joy.

She has gathered several people who work with zeal for the single objective of Dalit liberation like Maria Campbell who gets involved with the Métis Associations. It has been a joy to her to see Dalits aiming to live with self-respect, joining ranks in order to gain political, economic and cultural strength, resisting the unjust inhuman ways. She identifies the Dalit’s fierce anger that wants to break the barriers to the creation of an equal and just society and she has an unshakable faith in her attempts.

Like Maria, Bama acknowledges that she has met many friends who have shared her sorrows, who inspired her to engage in her work and who gave her an awareness of her responsibilities and an understanding of the community’s needs. She has been consoled and restored by their love. She continues to live her life with fresh courage.
and resolution because of the support and advice received from her friends and well-wishers.

In her Preface, Bama says that the oppressed classes should be like the double–edged Karukku, challenging the oppressors. She refers to the New Testament where the word of God is described as a two–edged sword. Dalits must function as God’s word piercing to the very heart (xiii). Her anger peeps through the narrative.

We must dare to stand up for change

We must crush all those institutions that use caste to bully us into submission. (25)

The protagonist of Bama’s Karukku progresses from passive endurance to affirmative awareness towards life, through a series of events in which she was oppressed and exploited. Bama does not suggest any quick solutions. She simply lays bare her maimed and tormented self through all the pain. There is a redemptive quality about her hope that gives voice to the voiceless – an identity to the people whose existence the society has chosen to deny so far. She has given human face and voice to people who have been so far denied the normal privileges of humanity.
REFERENCES


Limbale.


CHAPTER V

THE CONTINUUAM OF DALIT DREAM IN SIVAKAMI

Dalit literature is primarily a literature of protest and a demand of the oppressed for social equality. Dalit literature established itself as a distinct movement as early as 1960s in Maharashtra and was far more...