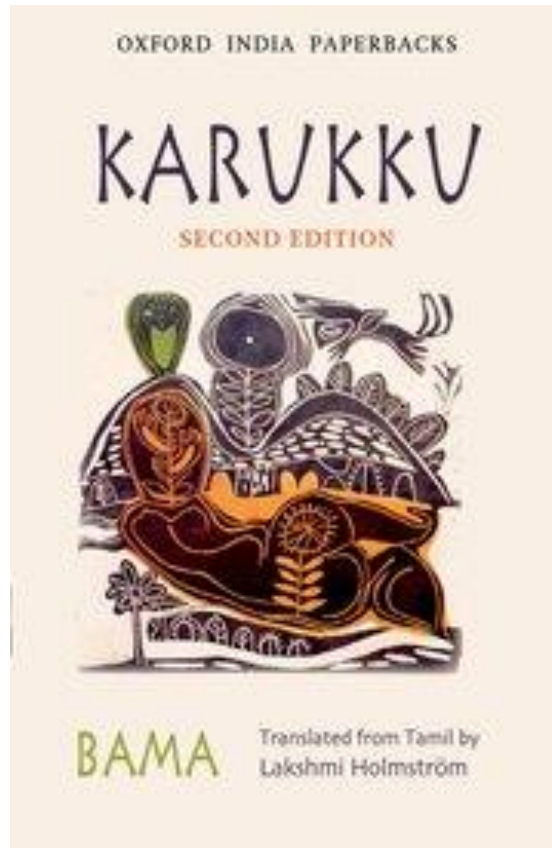


Bama's *Karukku*: Distress of Dalits

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Courtesy: <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/karukku-9780199450411?lang=en&cc=dk>

Introduction

Karukku is a *testimonio* which is written with a purpose to bring justice to Dalits. Testimonio is a genre commonly associated with Latin American atrocity narratives. John Beverly in his *The Margin at the Center: On Testimonio* defines it as: “A novel or novella – length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist and whose unit of narration is usually a “life” or significant life experience”. The purpose of Bama is to bring out the darkness in the life of Dalits to light and make them shine and also to upright their status among all others in society. Dalits are also human beings who possess everything as all others. Caste discrimination is the main factor that makes people suffer. The writer writes her own experience in life starting from her childhood till her age to earn and withstand on her own legs. Everywhere the discrimination

prevails. Common people and the entire Indian society reject Dalits in every entry and prohibit them in all cases.

Innumerable Sufferings of the Dalit

It is really tough to pin point the sufferings of Dalits because it is innumerable. Their life is full of pain, spread with thorns, struggles and sufferings. It clearly shows that their life is not remarkable for others in Indian society. No optimistic offering throughout their life. Indian customs and system take no notice of Dalits and their life. Bama's *Karukku* brings with it the force to attain the first level of success for Dalits by projecting them to others and showcasing their lifestyle in society.

In the introduction part of *Vanmam*, another novel by Bama, she writes:

“In the academic sphere, while the European and American Universities accommodate Dalit Studies as part of the expansion of Cultural Studies, Indian Universities have included it as part of University Grant Commission's demand to accommodate Human Rights in the curriculum. Dalit Studies, however, remains a marginal study as it remains outside the mainstream curriculum, and is offered only as an elective or optional course... it remains merely as a component and does not affect the dominant (Hindu) perspective on literature and culture”(xix)

Sufferings Due to Caste

Karukku which means the sharp double edged sword of Palmyra leaves, discusses the life of Dalits especially Dalit Catholic women. Caste discrimination is the most predominant factor that always makes Dalits suffer. It prevails throughout the country. Their living area also has to be far from upper caste area but the people of upper caste need Dalits to come and work in their fields for daily wages. Caste discrimination injures the heart of the writer. Dalits are treated very low. Everybody in the village state that Naickers and Udayars are upper caste people and so should not be touched by a Dalit, because they are untouchables. If a Dalit touches the upper caste people then they would be polluted. Dalits should be only their servants to work out of their home and in fields. When the writer is at her age going to school, the incident happens. She is walking home back from school. She writes:

“Just then, an elder of our street came along from the direction of the bazaar..... He came along, holding out the packet by its string, without touching it. The elder went straight up to the Naicker, bowed low and extended the packet towards him, cupping the hand that held the string with his other hand. Naicker opened the parcel and began to eat the vadais” (15)

Facing Insult Everyday

The behavior of the upper caste shows that even the touch of Dalits would pollute their belongings. This prevails not only in home, but in fields, public places and everywhere. In bus people would not sit with Dalits in same seat. In schools, Dalit children should sit either in

ground or separately. In hostel, students would not stay with Dalits in same room. They think their touch would pollute them, but the truth is that pollution is not with Dalits but in the minds of others. As this separation continues, it deeply registers in the minds of children even from their childhood days. Also they see their parents' and grandparents' behavior with their masters in village. Bama shares all her agony and feelings with her brother always. He used to advise her to study well, because education alone can help Dalits come up in life and attain a suitable place and also get status for them in society. She feels pity for such a pathetic situation of her people.

Another incident that always pricks her heart is the insult that she faces during her schooling in front of all for no wrong in her side. She is in seventh class, all children used to play after school in their village. One day, the game is to run up to the coconut palm and touching its tip. With an excitement, the author runs fast and touches the tree. When she touches, a coconut falls down with a louder noise. All frighten and run away faster. The other children with her say that she only plucks it. The next morning she is called by the headmaster in assembly. In front of all he says:

“You have shown us your true nature as a paraya, you climbed the coconut tree yesterday after everybody else had gone home, and you stole a coconut. We cannot allow you inside this school. Stand outside”(19)

Children Also Suffer

The writer is fed up and is unable to put off her tears. All have gone to the class. She stands out alone with tears. One of her teachers advises her to meet the priest, explain everything and get a letter from him. As per the words she meets the priest and tells everything even missing a single word. The priest's first response is to say: “After all you are from the Cheri. You might have done it. You must have done it”. (19) Bama burst out crying. She is true in her words and is not of that sort of girl telling lie. She is from Dalit community and so no one is ready to believe her. At that time no one helps her to prove her. Everyone believes that Dalits always behave meanly. The small girl does not have any eyewitness for her to prove, if so she would have proved herself. Thus she is unable to sustain her respect. This is how Dalit children are treated in schools. They suffer for no reason. Parayars are always dishonored irrespective of their age. She reminds her brother and his optimistic words, so consoles her. Not only this, she has to face more than this in future throughout her life. She concentrates more and more on her studies just to promote her and get status.

The writer always thinks off her people and their worst situation. They work hard from dawn to dusk but earns only a few that is not even enough to satisfy their hunger. Many of the days they need to starve for food. Poverty is another unavoidable factor that accompanies their life. Their daily wages is not at all enough to satisfy their basic needs. Just to sort out the problem of hunger, even small children from the street need to go for work. Many of them go to matchbox factory. Poverty restricts them from going to school and get education.

Burst of Agony

Early generation Dalits' way of living is so painful. They don't even speak a word against their masters. They are caught hold in the hands of upper caste. In those days they are like slaves.

Bama reminds her grandmother drinking water. The Naicker woman pours water from a height of four feet which her grandmother drinks with cupped hands holding close to her mouth. Dalits are supposed not to touch even the vessels of upper caste. All these thinking set off her mind always. Each and every struggle of the community insists her to do well in her studies and win in life. She would get the power to ask against the injustice happens, when she gets educated. Bama asks a sequence of questions that are the outburst of the agony in Bama's mind.

“How did the upper caste become so elevated? How is it that we have been designated? How is it that people consider us too gross even to sit next to when travelling? Are Dalits not human beings? Do they not have common sense? Do they not have such attributes as a sense of honor and self-respect? Are they without any wisdom, beauty, dignity? What do we lack?” (27)

Agony Caused by Daily Suffering and Ill Treatment

Dalits are also human beings like others and they are in no way degraded from others. They have their own lifestyle, culture, food, tradition, language and everything. But they are not treated equal in society. All together, Bama strongly believes that education alone can make Dalits win in life and get empowerment. That alone would bring respect, dignity and everything that is missing so far. Common people must be given awareness that Dalits are also human beings like others. Once the realization comes in mind then there is no need of any more struggles. Government plans a lot but it should reach the deaf ears, only then Dalits can live peacefully with respect.

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