

GOD, CHURCH AND CHRISTIANITY IN BAMA'S KARUKKU**Dr. S. JOHNY** (M.A., M.Phil, Ph.D, Pgdt)

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Email Id: johnys95@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

Dalit autobiography is a unique genre that opened new doors in subaltern studies. Among Dalit autobiographies, Bama's Karukku is a milestone while most of the Dalit autobiographies explored the phenomena of untouchability and casteism that were prevalent within Hinduism. Bama's Karukku exposed the same issues that were present in Christianity too. Bama is the penname of Faustina Mary Fathima Rani. Bama's presentation of casteism within Christianity in one of its kind because she lead a life as a nun for a few years. Hence she is able to present the readers with casteism among the lay people as well as clergy. Further she reflects on God, religion and the role of these two entities in caste based societies. This paper aims to explore the depiction of that trinity, God, Church and Christianity in Karukku.

INTRODUCTION:

Dalit autobiography is a unique genre that opened new doors in subaltern studies. Among Dalit autobiographies, Bama's Karukku is a milestone while most of the Dalit autobiographies explored the phenomena of untouchability and casteism that were prevalent within Hinduism. Bama's Karukku exposed the same issues that were present in Christianity too. Bama is the penname of Faustina Mary Fathima Rani. Bama's presentation of casteism within Christianity is one of its kind because she lead a life as a nun for a few years. Hence she is able to present the readers with casteism among the lay people as well as clergy. Further she reflects on God, religion and the role of these two entities in caste based societies. This paper aims to explore the depiction of that trinity, God, Church and Christianity in Karukku.

Exploitation in the name of Religion:

Dalits were exploited in the name of religion too. Although they had converted to Christianity, which is supposed to be religion without castes. Dalits, inspite of their deep poverty, had to spent a considerable amount of money in appeasing the priests and nuns. Bama once sees a fruit vendor with oranges coming to her street. She is amused because she knows very well none of the dalits have the practice of buying orange, which is unaffordable considering their salary. To her surprise, she sees people queuing in front of the fruit vendor and buying oranges. She found out that they were buying it, beyond their resources, so that they can give this as an offering / complement to parish priest and mother superior on the eve of New Year. This shows how, inspite of their poverty, the dalits strived hard to appease the religious authority. Bama says "Even though our people had never tasted the fruit themselves, they somehow 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 forehands" (65).

Bama highlights a numbers of inhuman acts of religious authorities. For accidentally urinating in the church, a child is cruelly punished. Bama records this incident as follows:

At the very centre of the church, just where the priest had sprinkled holy water and left, a small urchin was standing, completely naked. He then began walking along the grille, pissing as he went. Goodness knows whether he thought he was sprinkling holy water around, just as the priest had done. He was holding on to himself exactly as if he was dribbling out kolam-flour.

A nun who saw him rose to her feet, went up to him and gave him four sharp blows to his back. The boy couldn't stand the pain and screamed out, whereupon his mother yelled. 'it's New Year's Day, and he's only a baby; should you hit him as if he has committed some kind of heinous sin?' And with this, she picked up the child and walked out of the church. (66)

After paying hefty gifts to the religious authorities the dalits, who were child like expected nothing but trinklets from them. But neither the priest nor the mother superior was ready even to give trinklets like calendars and holy pictures. Bama describes the castism, caste based discrimination and untouchability that prevailed even within the holy orders. Bama says:

You see this attitude not only among the common people in the society about us. Far worse is the attitude within our own Church. They have made use of Dalits who are immersed in ignorance as their capital, set up a big business, and only profited their own castes. In the churches, Dalits are the most in numbers alone. (80)

After describing the role of church in discriminating the dalits, Bama speaks about the segregation within holy orders i.e. among nuns and priests. Bama says :

Even amongst the priests and nuns, it is the upper castes who hold all the high positions, show off their authority, and throw their weight about. And if Dalits become priests or nuns, they are pushed aside and marginalized first of all, before the rest go about their business. It is because of this that even though Dalits like me might wish to take up the path of renunciation, we find there is no place for us there. (80)

Bama recalls her relationship with God. She says that her idea of devotion has changed or evolved over the years. In the beginning it was her grandmother and mother who taught her to pray. Then her teachers taught her. During her convent days she was given religious instruction by senior nuns and priests. Bama says, "I believed entirely in what they told me. I prayed exactly as I was taught" (81).

Bama's early memories of church was that of running to the early morning service, daily, barely awake. Her participation in the early morning service was not the result of devotion. It was the result of fear of punishment. The people who gave religious instruction to Bama, especially the Nuns focused more on devil than on God. Due to this, Bama was in constant fear of Satan during her childhood. Due to the hell – fire stories, Bama suffered from pangs of terror and guilty consciousness throughout her life. In order to reduce the amount of sin, Bama used to help the sister in all chores. Bama says "In order bring down my pan of good deeds I did everything that the Sisters told me to do. I obeyed them in all things. I repeated my prayers very often". (83, 84)

Prayer, Confusion and all religious activities were grounded on this fear of devil and damnation. Bama's memories about her confirmation is also strange. All Bama could remember about her confirmation was that she received a sound slap in the cheek as the part of the confirmation rituals. Bama says:

As the Bishop neared me, I kept opening and shutting my eyes in expectation of the slap, so when he caught me a resounding blow upon my cheek. I wasn't aware of any Spiritus Sanctus descending. Still, I kept my head bowed in devotion. I still want to laugh when I remember this. (86)

The sisters/nuns had warned Bama to be very careful about the host given during the communion. They had convinced Bama that the host, 'wafer' is literally the body and blood of Jesus Christ. They had warned Bama that she should not touch the wafer with her hands. Similarly the sisters had threatened Bama that if she bit the host i.e. wafer, blood will continuously ooze out of it. Once, when curiosity over took piety, Bama secretly bit the host. (85). She was shocked to find that no blood oozed out of it. She understood that the belief was superstitious.

Bama highlights how most of the religious experiences was connected with physical abuse. She says that during the sermons "... the sister sitting nearby would land a stinging blow..." if the children fell asleep during the sermon.

Bama, being studious, was given the task of teaching marital vows and related prayers to uneducated brides. If the brides did not say the prayers correctly, it was Bama who got punished.

The differences in caste led to many problems in her day to day life. The upper caste people had easy access to church, school and other places. However the dalits had to walk miles together to go to church or school.

Even the deities the dalits worshipped where those discarded by upper caste people. Bama says that in her house they used to pray before "the head of a Baby Jesus" (91). Actually this is something that was salvaged by Bama's grandmother from refuse. From the church, they

had thrown out a broken image. Bama's grandmother had salvaged it and made it an item of worship in her home (91).

Bama portrays how the set of taking holy communion also turned into a mundane ceremony, especially during celebration. Bama says:

In the morning there would be a Pusai at the church. Even those who were half-asleep would somehow stumble in and take Communion at that hour. If they didn't take Communion then, it would only be possible to do so at the seven o'clock Pusai at the grotto. If they decided to go to the seven o'clock Pusai, then they would not be able to cook at the early morning. So somehow they would push and shove and manage to attend the early Pusai. (97)

Bama says that as she grew older she came to understand that the relying festivals were only for celebration and a spiritual person would prefer to pray in isolation in his home instead of being in the midst of the crowd in church ground.

There were discriminations and differences in celebration of religious festivals too. For example, the Easter celebrations were done only by dalits. Bama says: "There usually was a house to house collection for the festival, and a grand celebration with procession and drums. But it was just us, the Dalit Christians, who contributed to the festival." (98).

When one refuses to participate in a religious celebration or refuses to worship an image just because dalits participate in it, it shows the depth of hard core casteism.

Bama shares with the readers, different phases in her spiritual growth. She says that when she was in her ninth standard, "... the fear – bhayam, that I felt towards God gradually left me, and love-pasam, grew" (101). Bama began more and more spiritual during this period. Bama first toyed with the idea of becoming nun during their period. As years went on, Bama's devotion took a negative turn. Bama says "With difficulty I admitted myself into college. But it was during the time I was studying there that the love and devotion that I felt towards God gradually diminished" (102).

Bama's loss of confidence in nuns and priests led to a loss of confidence in the God about whom they preached. However Bama continued to read the Bible on her own. Bama began to recognize that she could approach God without any intermediary. Bama came to certain conclusion about the priestly class too. She says:

But as time went on, I realized they were truly like whited sepulchers, as Jesus said. Until I quite realized this, I was even tempted to enter their order and to become one of them. Fortunately, I didn't do so. (102)

Bama also points out that there were many issues, especially caste based ones within the convent itself. She says, “And even amongst themselves there were caste divisions, divisions between rich and the poor, and even divisions over the language that they spoke” (103).

Bama says that religious institutions are the sole reason for hegemony among dalits. She vindicates her point through following lines.

Besides the usual lessons, they could have educated the Dalit children in many matters, and made them aware of their situation in the world about them. But instead, everything they said to the children, everything in the manner in which they directed them, suggested that this was the way it was meant to be for Dalits; that there was no possibility of change. And mainly because of this, those children seemed to accept everything as their fate. From dawn to dusk they toiled away in the convent. (103)

In spite of her constant confrontation with the nuns (105), Bama cherished the idea of becoming a nun so that she could treat the dalit children as “.... all children out to be treated, to look after them rather than torment and exploit them” (103-104).

Bama also found out that during his life, Jesus had associated himself with poor (104). However this point was not stressed in the sermons. Bama says:

Nobody had ever insisted that God is just, righteous, is angered by injustices, opposes falsehood, never countenances inequality. There is a great deal of difference between this Jesus and the Jesus who is made known through daily pieties. The oppressed are not taught about him, but rather, are taught in an empty and meaningless way about humility, obedience, patience, gentleness. (104)

Bama was greatly inspired by the saint who found her order. She wanted to live a life like her and “. . . suffer for the sake of the poor then and in the future” (105). During those days she saw prayer as a weapon against social injustices. Bama says

At that time, all my prayers, my meditation, and my thoughts were directed towards oppresses and exploited people, and towards the Jesus who fought for justice and fairness. It seemed to me it was meaningless to repeat prayers in beautiful and decorative language, and to live without that correspondence and connection between prayer, worship, and life. I talked to others about my convictions. (105)

Bama entered the order with such lofty notions. However, all her lofty notions were shattered in the convent. As she was unable to withstand the casteist cruelties within the convent, she came out of the convent.

Conclusion:

By reading the autobiography of Bama, reader can come to following conclusions. Caste, in India, is not restricted to particular religion. It transgresses religion boundaries. Conversion from one religion to another religion is not a solution to abolish castes. It can be abolished only through ideological battles. Bama differentiates between personal, religion and institutionalized religion. She is for a personal religion. She points out that the Church has failed in projecting Christ as a savior for downtrodden and a warrior against oppression. She feels that Christ was a redeemer of subaltern and Christ always fought against injustices. In Bama's writing one can see echoes of the words of M.A.R. Habib. Habib says "to some extent we must undertake an 'unlearning' project, acknowledging our participation, even complicity in the objects of our own investigation and impingement" (749). To certain extent Bama's Karukku is such an exercise of unlearning.

Bama. Karukku. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 2016. Print

Habib, M.A.R. A History of Literary Criticism and Theory 2014 Wiley Blackwell. Australia.