

RELIGIOUS DISILLUSIONMENT: A STUDY OF CHRISTIAN CASTEISM IN BAMA'S KARUKKU

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ABSTRACT

Karukku presents the spiritual development of the narrator through her beliefs as a Christian and her realisation as a Dalit. The protagonist Faustina Mary Fatima Rani, a Roman Catholic as well as a Tamil Dalit woman, provides a deep insight into how the Church shaped and regulated the lives of Dalit Christians. Due to the caste and social system based on the Chaturvarnik order outlined in the Vedas and Puranas, Dalits have been pushed to social, cultural, spiritual and political margins. Through Mahanirvana (conversion to Christianity), Dalits hoped to get rid of the clutches of the caste system and dreamt of establishing an egalitarian society. However, the hollow practices of conversion have proven a nightmare for Dalits as they face oppression at the Church and convent too. The paper observes the contradictions between Christian ideals of equality and the reality of caste discrimination as depicted in Bama's autobiographical narrative Karukku. It examines how the deceptive religious beliefs contribute to the social and spiritual marginalisation of Dalit Christians. The paper contends that Karukku reveals a profound disillusionment with Christian institutions, emphasising the disparity between doctrinal ideals of equality and the discriminatory practices of convents, Churches and educational institutions. Bama's writing serves as both a critique of tyrannical religious systems and a significant declaration of Dalit identity, empowerment and resistance. By elucidating the falsehoods of institutional faith, Karukku prompts readers to reconsider the connection between caste, religion and social justice in contemporary India.

Key Words: Dalits, Christianity, Oppression, Church, Religious Beliefs & Disillusionment

Karukku is a landmark text in Dalit literature and is regarded as the first female Tamil Dalit autobiography. It documents the life journey of the protagonist Bama as a Tamil Dalit woman and a Roman Catholic nun. The narrative presents the spiritual development of the narrator through her beliefs as a Christian and her realisation as a Dalit. It chronicles Bama's life from childhood to adulthood as a nun, from her life of renunciation to the outer world, from a disheartened spirit (after convent) to an established writer and from a divided soul to a powerful 'self'. It is an unconventional autobiography which grows out of Bama's struggle to find her identity, her personal crisis, conflicts between Christian beliefs and practices, and her stubborn hope to get socio-political and educational awareness for her entire community, to free them from the clutches of 'Untouchability'. It exposes social exclusion, marginalisation and ostracisation of Dalits, their dehumanised status and the social and environmental injustices against the entire Dalit community.

Dalits- the fifth varna, after Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra, are referred to as 'Outcaste'. The ancient Indian Hindu treatises bestow higher positions to the upper caste in society and relegate the Dalits to the lowest rung. They even treat them as marginals and force them to live a life of deprivation. Historically subjected to dehumanised behaviour, justified through the Vedas and Puranas, Dalits have been made victims of social, cultural, spiritual and political exclusion. They have systematically been excluded from socio-economic and political opportunities and hence ostracised and subjugated at every stratum of life. Confined to menial labour and forced to survive on the remnants of dominant caste people, they have been deprived of the life of self-respect.

In the post-independence era, however, a number of educated untouchables rose in protest, voicing their resistance against the tribulation inflicted upon them. The natural outburst of feelings and thoughts found expression, with distinct form and aesthetics, in a new genre of writing called Dalit Literature. Dalit literature has been emerging and providing new perspectives to the discourse of marginality. It strives to create a counter culture and asserts a separate Dalit identity. At its core, Dalit literature aspires to bring 'total revolution' and affirms a dignified identity to Dalits'. Dalit autobiographical form has a distinct 'confessional tone', invoking the bitter experiences the authors have endured in their lives. They recount their experiences with a realisation that the others in their community also have suffered similar hardships. The raw and un-distilled life experiences, voiced in stark, coarse and crude language of slums make this form of writing an embodiment of Dalit literature' defiant honesty and resistance.

The hope of social mobility and spiritual development has led Dalits to be in a different religious order, where they can get liberation from spiritual and social marginalisation. Discrimination, injustice and humiliation of the

Chaturvarnik caste system became the foremost reason for mass conversion. 'Mahanirvana' under the aegis of Baba Saheb Ambedkar has played a significant role in the empowerment of Dalits. Conversion, for Dalits, has been a quest for identity, social acceptance, freedom, equality, dignity, justice, human rights and also for political representation. Christian beliefs and practices shaped by the promise of liberty and dignity enthused new hopes in Dalits. Dalit Christianity positioned conversion as a means of escaping caste oppression; however, in practice, caste distinctions have persisted within Christian communities, where segregated Churches, separate burial grounds and discrimination in religious institutions remain common.

The study examines the contradiction between the fundamental principles of dignity, equality and universal brotherhood, and the perpetuated caste discrimination within the Christian religious institutions. It looks at the obvious ways in which religious authorities reinforce caste hierarchies, while masking their actions under the guise of spiritual discipline or divine will. It also investigates how Bama transforms her personal disillusionment into a broader political and social critique. Through the close reading and textual analysis of *Karukku*, the paper brings forth the truth of Dalit Christianity in India and contributes to a deeper understanding of the rift between religion and caste for the community often overlooked in mainstream discourse.

Bama demonstrates Churches, convents and schools as powerful sites of dominance where caste hierarchy is systematically reproduced. She questions the functioning of Christian institutions, which proclaim equality before God but follow the same hierarchical structures that dominate Hindu society. Bama states, "It struck me that I would not be rid of this caste business easily, whatever I studied, wherever I went" (22). Casteism is so much ingrained in the Indian system that even the conversion to another religion cannot annihilate it. According to Bama, though Christianity values equality, social justice and human rights, even the churches in India are not different in respect of casteism. *Karukku* gives a deep insight into the Roman Catholic Churches in India on casteism. The lived experiences of Bama, narrated in *Karukku*, show the biased attitude of the Church towards Dalit Christians.

The Church, under the guise of a religious order, becomes an instrument to reinforce caste boundaries. Bama reveals how Dalit children are given menial work at the convent under the pretext of discipline and humility; priests maintain distance from Dalit parishioners at Churches and Dalit nuns are not allowed to join mainstream places and become the victims of harsh treatment as necessary for spiritual growth. Bama writes:

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. In everything else, they are the least. It is only the upper-caste Christians who enjoy the benefits and comforts of the Church. 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 marginalised 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)

The disguise discrimination under moral instruction creates fear and violence among Dalit Christians. Bama recalls how Dalit Christian girls were forced to attend catechism classes at church. After school, suppressing their ravenous hunger, they rush to attend Mantra classes, as these classes cannot be skipped. In the morning, when the others are fast asleep, they get up and run to attend morning Pusanai. It is not just out of devotion, it is the fear of blows by the priest and the sharpness of the whip which springs them out of their bed. Bama frightfully writes, "If you didn't go, the next day at assembly, you were beaten by the priest or by a teacher. Nor were these ordinary blows. The cane fell on us with the sharpness of a whip. It left great weals. Enough to be reminded of those blows. Then we'd spring out of our beds at last" (82).

Bama reveals religious silence on oppression, which highlights the hypocrisy of Christian institutions. Even the priests, despite witnessing caste injustice, urge for patience and obedience to make Dalits accept their sufferings as divine will. The manipulation of chastity often creates an environment of fear, superstitions and violence. Bama admits how she was afraid of getting inside the Church all alone due to the stories of the Devil, who has a long tail, sharp horns and teeth, and who keeps a balance and a long list of bad and good deeds in his hand and peels the skin off the backs as the balance of sins increases.

The fractured realities of the Church are often exposed by Bama through her fragmented stories. She often juxtaposes biblical teachings with actual church practices to highlight the enormous gap between doctrine and reality. Moreover, her use of personal anecdote, sometimes angry and sometimes sorrowful, allows her to

articulate both the emotional damage and the moral contradictions inherent in Christian casteism. Through these techniques, Bama dismantles the illusion of the church as a benevolent institution and exposes its complicity in sustaining caste oppression. Bama remembers the beatings and pinches by sisters for drooping the eyes in the morning, Pusai. The behaviour of the sisters was so harsh that even the girls would wet their skirts. The confession was mandatory for girls, and the faith of Dalit Christians was rooted in fear, brutality and violence. Bama admits that the Church was not a benevolent institution for Dalits; rather, it was a site of caste oppression. The enormous gap between the biblical doctrines and realities was sowing the seed of hatred instead of love. Bama states, "On that day, I thought to myself secretly, that when I grew up, I would pick up a stone and fling it at my sister. I also thought to myself that I would never attend a catechism class or go to a church service ever again. My anger abated a little with this thought" (88).

The painful encounters with institutional hypocrisy diminish her love and devotion towards God and Christian practices. She states:

All sorts of questions beset my mind, such as, 'Why should I go to Pusai every day? Why should I take communion?' I began to think that the priests and nuns had deceived me hugely. Up to that time, I had thought that God came to me through these people, but this belief changed to the extent that I now began to feel strongly that God was not with them. They are hypocrites and frauds. (102).

The spirituality and bond which make a connection between God and human was totally lost in the convent. The brutal and discriminatory practices at the convent made her believe that there is no place for Dalits where they can find dignity and solace. Bama reveals how the convent was just as biased as the external world. She recalls when a sister mentioned that some orders excluded Harijan women as potential nuns and even created a distinct order for them, she quietly mourned that her vocation was also affected by untouchability. Even within schools, the influence of caste-based division remains common. Dalit students handle tasks such as sweeping, mopping, cleaning the premises and classrooms, and even sanitising the restrooms. Occasionally, teachers request that Harijan students stand during assembly or even in class, which causes them to feel embarrassed. Talking about her belief and the revelations at the convent, Bama painfully writes:

The convent too was a well-endowed one. And the Jesus they worshipped there was a wealthy Jesus. There seemed to be no connection between God and the suffering poor. Neither the prayers that were said morning and night, nor the daily Pusai, showed any evidence of that connection. I couldn't make it out at all. I found I had to search hard to find God. (106)

Bama explicitly asserts that the Church fails to adhere to its own teachings. Discrimination exists between the wealthy and the impoverished, the higher and lower castes. Even death cannot eliminate this discrimination. Dalits are prohibited from interring their deceased in the church; they have a separate graveyard outside the village. They are prohibited from touching the sacred text 'Bible', even though they are Christians, but are either Dalit or converted individuals. Talking about the impact of the discriminative practices of the Church on her, she writes, "Convent life had changed me fundamentally. I, who had once been bold, had become an extremely timid person, fearful of everything, ready to burst into tears, and without any strength. I felt orphaned, as if I had no family" (78).

This internal struggle heightens in the convent, as Bama's yearning for spiritual fulfilment conflicts with the harsh actions of her superiors. Her path evolves into a conflict between her belief in Christian principles and her harsh experiences with institutional hypocrisy. Bama's disappointment culminates as she realises the inherent presence of casteism within the Church system. Her choice to depart from the convent is not merely an act of defiance but a restoration of identity. She understands that organised religion cannot deliver the freedom it claims as long as caste is ingrained in its operations. This point of leaving signifies a significant shift from false beliefs and a movement towards a Dalit-focused spirituality grounded in dignity, self-respect, and communal unity.

By opting to leave the convent and go back to her village, Bama reinforces Dalit awareness in contrast to institutional religion. She starts to grasp her identity not via the classifications dictated by the church but through the real-life experiences of her community. In this way, she reevaluates faith not as mindless compliance but as a dedication to justice, opposition, and communal empowerment. Her individual disenchantment thus evolves into a broader critique of religious organisations that do not practice their own moral and spiritual principles.

Thus, the study has examined the functionality of Christian Institutions, which create a great rift between the egalitarian ideals and discriminatory practices of the Church. Through the textual analysis, it has been observed that the spaces like Church, convent and schools, which are supposed to embody love, compassion, equality and

integrity, often become places to justify and reproduce caste hierarchy. Bama's *Karukku* unmasks the hollow practices and deceptive religious beliefs of spiritual language and institutional silence on caste-based oppression. The findings present *Karukku* as a powerful socio-political critique which not only serves as a personal narrative but also reflects on the spiritual crisis of Dalits and the state of contradiction between the religious liberation and caste-based exclusion. It reveals how the conversion has proved a trap or deceit for Dalits, where they hoped for justice, equality and dignity, but on the contrary, what they actually received were conflict, humiliation, discrimination and marginalisation.

In the end, *Karukku* serves as a bold declaration of honesty and self-empowerment. Through revealing religious hypocrisy and confirming the strength of Dalit awareness, Bama's story persistently confronts oppressive systems and sparks fresh discussions regarding faith, caste, and social justice in India

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