

## **KARUKKU: MOUTH PIECE OF CHRISTIAN DALITS**

Dalit literature emerged in India after the 1960's, starting with the Marathi language and later on it flourished in other languages as well like Hindi, Kannada, Bengali, Telegu and Tamil. However, Dalit studies could not find a place in Tamil literary domain till the 1980s and early 90s. In order to gain respect, a movement was started in 1925 by E.V Ramasami in Tamil Nadu with the aim of building a society where the low caste would be given economic and social rights. Sivakami, a dalit woman, published her first novel in 1989 which was *Pazhiyana Kazhidalum*. The novel focuses on the need for educated Dalits youth who can work for the empowerment of Dalits. As Dalit Patriarchy is an important subject of discussion in Tamil Dalit literature, the novel also foregrounds Dalit men's violent treatment of Dalit women at home. Sivakami's novel prepared the ground for the critique of domestic violence and abuse of Dalit woman at home by Dalit men, father, brothers, father in law and brother in law apart from sexual and occupational harassment faced by them outside the four walls of the house at the hands of the upper caste men. In her second important novel, *Aanandayee* (1992), she discusses exploitation of women and also the novel points out that Dalit women's sexuality is repressed. Abhimani, another Tamil writer, has brought three collections *Nokkadu* (1993), *Tettam* (2001) and *Oorchoru* (2003).

Earlier most of the Dalit writers use to write poetry in order to convey their feelings. But later on they started writing autobiographies, which they felt would convey better. The transition from the poetry of 1960s to the autobiography of the 1980s marked a radical shift in assessing the Dalit writers earlier the writers used to convey through poems but this shift towards autobiographies helped them to convey better. Though Dalit poetry combines the rebellion

against social injustice with dreams of a life of dignity for the oppressed however, Dalit autobiographies are life stories of persons, they can be described as ‘social epiphanies’, expressions of a never before mentioned intensity (Preface, *The Outcaste* xxiii).

In the preceding chapter it was categorically mentioned that Indian society is a caste ridden society right from the day of coming into existence. In order to get an equal status and also to achieve an identity, people choose the path of conversion. *Karukku* the first Dalit autobiography in Tamil is written by Bama and it focuses on the predicaments of Dalits after conversion. The autobiography has grown out of a particular moment: a personal crisis and watershed in the author’s life, she breaks the rules of written grammar and spelling throughout, elides words and joins them differently. Pramod K. Nayar finds *Karukku* closer to a testimonio than an autobiography. He asserts:

Generally in autobiographies, narrator has some social status but testimony described the common man/woman who stands in for the community. In testimony in place of “problematic hero”, “problematic collective situation” is found. And that problematic collective situation in *Karukku* is caste. (85)

Hence, *Karukku* becomes the voice not only of a Dalit woman rather it encircles in itself the pains, sorrows, sufferings and worries of Christian Dalits. *Karukku* seems to declare this truth and testimonies this fact that conversion, fails to wipe the tears of the Dalits. It fails in realising the dreams of the down-trodden. She has tried to bring this harsh reality at home that the Dalits were Dalits when they were Hindus. The Dalits are still Dalits when they are Christian Dalits. There is no difference in their sufferings, their lives are devoid of respect, self-esteem, happiness and even of enough food. If there is any difference it is only this that earlier they were

discriminated by temples, now they are discriminated by Churches. Being a sensitive child from the very beginning, Bama came to know the hard fact of her identity when she was studying in the third class. She heard that people of her community had been talking about untouchability but she could not understand the real meaning of this term. It is later that her elder brother told her that they were living in a village dominated by the people of Naicker class. One day he said; “Naickers were upper caste and therefore must not touch Parayas if they did they would be polluted” (*Karukku* 15). Bama belonged to the Parayas castes who were untouchables that is why the Naickers had to carry the package of Vadais by its string. On hearing this Bama felt “so provoked and angry” that (she) wanted to go and touch those “wretched vadais (herself) straight away” (*Karukku* 15). She thought that if she belonged to the family of Parayas where was the harm in it, “we too are human beings” (16). Bama’s elder brother told her that “because (they) are born in Paraya jati (they) were never given any honour or respect, (they) are stripped of all that but if we study and make progress (they) can throw away these indignities”. (18) After this knowledge the fact of untouchability entered into the psychology of Bama and she saw a couple of examples of untouchability around her which troubled and tortured her mind. She saw that Naicker woman would give drinking water to Parayas “from a height of four feet . . . while Parayas drank it with cupped hands held to the mouth” (16). She also observed that her grandmother would bring unwanted food from the house of Naickers which was a sought of wage which her grandmother received after doing work. Since Patti was considered untouchable, after finishing her chores, “Patti places the vessel that she had brought with by the side of the drain” (16). However, this incident can be compared with Anand’s *Untouchable* where the confectioner throws jalebis at Bakha like a cricket ball and also when Bakha gave the money, the shopkeeper splashed some water in order to make them pure, free from the touch of an

untouchable and then he put those coins in his pocket. Also there is one more incident where the housewife attends the Sadhu with great concern and on the other hand she throws the stale bread at Bakha from a height, that too, with abuse and rebuke.

Even at school the children of Bama's caste were discriminated as untouchables. The condition of Harijan children at school, at college and in society was contemptible. As an illustration of this contempt, Bama refers to the attitude of a headmaster who was of the Chaliyaar caste and who treated the children of the Parayas with contempt. Once the headmaster charged Bama with the punishment, he shouted: "You climbed the coconut tree yesterday after everybody had gone home and you stole a coconut. We cannot allow you inside the school stand outside". (*Karukku*19).

This is how untouchable children from the Parayas were discriminately treated at the schools. Everywhere Bama had to confront the problem of untouchability. Once she was travelling in a bus, there was a Naicker woman sitting next to her in the bus who asked her which place Bama was going to and what street. When Bama told her that she was from the "Cheri" street, she immediately got up and moved off to another seat" (20). This shows that how much the author is discriminated everywhere in her life. However, this incident can also be compared with Limbale's autobiography, *The Outcaste*, where he tells that while he was in third class he was abused by his teacher who called him 'son of a bitch, 'you like eating an ox' which had hurt him deeply (*The Outcaste* 4).

There are several more examples of the atrocities perpetrated on Bama's caste due to the practice of untouchability. Bama recalls that the Dalit children at school were made to stand either at school assembly or during lessons. She remembers how once she was awarded a prize

for standing first among the Harijan children of the district who took the SSLC examination. On that day of honour she was congratulated by all who attended the function that a Harijan child got prize. Bama says that she did not like the praise as much as she was hurt at her being called a 'Harijan'. Bama did not like the praise as she felt herself marginalised in the midst of all other children of the school. We see that the talent of a low class is never appreciated. In the same manner Om Prakash Valmiki, in his autobiography *Joothan*, says that even though he was a good student but even then he was given low marks in the practical test due to which he failed his board exam and his career was brought to a doom.

There are examples of untouchability confronted by Bama even at the college level. After leaving school she went to college but caste discrimination did not spare her even at the college level. A lecturer of the college once announced, "Will Harijan students please stand, the government has announced that the schedule castes students should get special tuitions in the evening" (22). Bama stood up with another girl only because she was Harijan otherwise she did not need any tuition. Even in the hostel the principal refused Bama to go home during holidays while she allowed the students of other caste to go home. Bama says; "I lost my temper and challenged them head on; how is that you are allowing these others to go, why is that you only refuse me" (22).

When we look at the problem of untouchability meted out to Bama in her society, in her school and in her college, we are immediately reminded of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, where the hero Bakha is subjected to similar atrocities committed on him by the people of higher class. In the concluding chapters of the book we see that Gandhi ji has arrived in the society of Bakha and the menials of the village have heard that Gandhi was very keen in uplifting the untouchables.

He called them ‘Harijan’ children of God. However, Ambedkar preferred the word Dalit, he was of the view that Gandhi would not go far enough in the direction of emancipation of Dalits (Limbale xvi). In *What Gandhi and Congress have done to Untouchables* (1945), Ambedkar says that Gandhi “never wanted to ‘hurt the interests of the upper caste Hindus’”. In order to create a democratic society he asked them “to educate, organize and agitate” (qtd. in Limbale, *The Outcaste* xvi).

We take pity on Bama for her being a victim to the malady of untouchability. We are also reminded of Om Prakash Valmiki’s autobiography, *Joothan*. In the preface, he writes:

Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that did not find room in literary creations. We have grown up in a social order that is extremely cruel and inhuman. And compassionless towards Dalits. (Author’s Preface vii)

The author comes from the ‘Chura’ caste where they were destined to do menial jobs and where the upper caste people did not call out their name and instead addressed them saying “Oe Chuhre” or “Abey Chuhre” ( *Joothan* 2). The book is filled up with the most harrowing incidents which leave the reader in a shock. Valmiki was admitted to the school with great difficulty where also he was reminded of his caste. He was made to sit on the floor whereas the Tyagi boys used to sit on the benches and also he was never allowed to participate in any of the cultural activities of the school. Though, Valmiki was good at studies still he was not given good marks and also he failed in the board examinations. Valmiki says, “It was such ideal teachers that I had to deal with. Moving from my childhood to adolescence when my personality was being shaped, I had to live in this terror filled environment . . .At times I feel

like I grew up in a cruel and barbaric civilization” ( *Joothan* 48). In the latter part of the book he describes his higher education at Dehradun, Roorkee, and Jabalpur etc; even there caste followed him like one’s shadow follows one (*Joothan* 49).

Bama feels that the title of her novel *Karukku* contains, “events occurring during many stages of my life, cutting me like a *Karukku* cutting me like a *Karukku* and making me bleed” due to the unjust social structures that plunged her into ignorance and left her “trapped” and “suffocating”. She says, “There are other Dalit hearts like mine with a passionate desire to create a new society made up of justice, equality and love” (Author’s Preface). Those who have been oppressed are now themselves like the double- edged *Karukku* challenging their oppressors. Bama is grieved by the unhealthy attitude of the non-dalits towards the children of Dalits. People at the helm of affairs even in Christianity have in their minds a permanent notion that Christian Converts and their children are in the habit of telling lies and in order to gain any government benefits granted by the authority these children furnish wrong certificates. They concoct facts and forge certificates to prove their points in favour of them. As an illustration of this fact Bama refers to a Sister who was supervising the training course. With a preconceived notion of the falsehood of the Dalits the sister asked Bama; “Why the birth dates were different on my birth certificate and on my Christening certificate!”(24) .The sister thought Bama had concocted a wrong date of birth on her degree certificate. When Bama told her that people at her school had put down whatever birth date they chose, the teacher would not believe her and levelled a charge against all Dalit children saying, “You Tamil people want to get admission into schools under false pretences of changing the dates on your birth certificates!”(24). Bama felt herself humiliated by the remarks of the teacher and she thought that all such charges on her were due to her being a member of a marginalised Paraya community. Indeed the charge of

falsehood, concoction and distortion of papers is the most heinous charge levelled against anyone. Bama could not forget throughout her life that all such charges on Dalit children are a part of the society of higher caste. Likewise, in “The Story of my Sanskrit” by Kumud Pawad, the protagonist who attains degrees in Sanskrit is made to remind of her caste. The people felt that she has polluted the language of the Brahmins. She concludes by saying, “What comes by birth, but can’t be cast off by dying- that is caste” ( *Karukku* 112).

Another discrimination against Dalits is that even after conversions Dalit women were not accepted as prospective nuns and that there was a separate order for the Christian Dalits to be accepted as nuns. Against this predicament of the Dalit women Bama says: “I lamented inwardly that there was no place that was free of cost” however at last, Bama became a nun after a hard struggle but was sent to convent elsewhere. In the convent there were caste divisions, the people of low caste Parayas were looking for jobs in the convent like “sweeping, swabbing and washing the classrooms and cleaning out lavatories” (25). Bama was so much distressed when she noticed the predicament of Dalits on the basis of caste- divisions. Earlier she had assumed that those who convert to Christianity can never think of caste discriminations after conversion, but Bama noticed that all menial jobs were done by Dalits who were abused all the time and were treated in a shameful and degraded manner. She strongly believed:

In this society, if you are born into a low caste, you are forced to live a life of humiliation and degradation until your death. Even after death, caste difference does not disappear. Wherever you look, however much you study, whatever you take up, caste discrimination stalks us in every nook and corner and drives us into frenzy. It is because of this that we are unable to find a way to study well and



progress likes everyone else. And this is why a wretched lifestyle is all that is left to us. (*Karukku* 26)

Here, one is again reminded of the narrator of “The Story of my Sanskrit”, where the narrator who is proficient in her subject is unable to get a teaching job because of her caste. She used to hear the comments: “So now these people are to teach Sanskrit!” (120), so it is evident that the web of caste did not spare the low class at any point.

There is absolutely no relief for the people of Dalit caste who have to work at the pleasure of people of higher caste. They are constrained to go about filled with caste hatred. Even the nuns and priests who claim that all are equal in the eyes of God, Bama asserts, “their hearts are set upon service to God, certainly discriminate according to caste. And in my heart I have even grieved over the fact that I was born as I am” (*Karukku* 27).

The fact is that Dalits have so been exploited and discriminated against that while fighting for their cause when they do not get any positive result; they are constrained to accept their position as Dalits. Though in accepting this they are not happy yet as a sense of revolt against the society, they accept their position as Dalits. For purpose of illustration the example of Bakha from Anand’s *Untouchable* may be referred here. When Bakha is fed up with the pranks of the higher society, he asserts with a sense of revolt; “For them I am a sweeper, sweeper-untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That’s the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable!”(43).

Another predicament of Christian Dalits is that outside their castes they seem united but in fact they are prone to inter-caste fights. The other castes take advantage of their weakness of fighting with each other over ordinary matter and they feed fat on their weakness. Bama narrates

an incident that Dalits used to bury their dead in the symmetries, where Christians buried their dead next to Chaliyaar community school. The upper caste Christians had their symmetry beyond the bus stand fights arose between the Parayas community and the Chaliyaar community over the question of symmetry. The Chaliyaar people had stabbed a person from the North street; “never in history had it been known for a Paraya to die at the hands of a Chaliyaar” (31). Bama is perturbed overseeing the fights between the low caste communities. The predicament of the Dalits is not only that they are exploited only the higher caste people but it arises from the fact that Dalits with Dalits over trifles like claiming the land of burial. Since Dalits fight Dalits the people of higher caste take advantage of their fight and inflict atrocities on them. Bama says that low caste communities are often subjected to skirmishes between them on many occasions. Bama says that when the lower caste fight with one another of course the upper class men will laugh at them instead uniting together in a village of many castes, if they keep challenging each other to fights what “will happen to all these men in the end”?(47).

According to the *Bhagvad Gita*, work or karma is the sinequonon of all human beings living on this Earth. Yet Bama says that manual work is written in the fate of lower caste Christian converts. There is no other alternative left for them but work, work and work to sustain their lives. In rural areas the low caste converts have no land of their own have to work in the fields of their upper caste employers, the landowners in the rural area? Each Paraya family to which Bama belonged is attached to a Naicker family as bonded labours. She says, “As far as I have seen it is only Palla and Paraya community who work in this way.” So far as the other communities of the village are concerned they have not to work as hard as these two communities do. For example, “The Korava or Gypsies and leather working caste are constrained to clean the streets, clean the drains and make a living that way”(49).About her own

community Bama says, “Everyone in my community had to work hard for livelihood only a few of teacher’s families live in some degree of comforts” (49). From this statement, one thing is clear that the atrocities on low caste Christians by non-Christian communities and even by Christian communities are perpetrated on them because of their illiteracy. But those who are educated among them and are in private or government service as teachers or otherwise do live a comfortable life. It means education is the only panacea that can save the Dalits from the atrocities of upper class caste conscious people. Even Bama’s brother also suggested, “Because we are born in the Paraya jati we are never given any honour or dignity. We are stripped of all that, if we study and make progress we can throw away these indignities” (18). Even in Valmiki’s *Joothan*, the narrator’s father keeps on emphasising on the need for education for the down trodden people believe that it is only education that is a powerful tool which alone can remove the caste discriminations of which they are the worst victims.

The upper caste Naickers is a dominant caste in Bama’s village that owns land to alarmingly large degree. The low caste converts are so poor that their mothers have to go to the fields in the neighbouring forest to collect firewood with which they would prepare for the members of their families. The harvest time is a heyday time for the business class Nadars who run their petty shops. The Nadars swindle the poor working class people during bartering sessions. The poor, “Never realised how badly (they) were swindled during these bartering sessions” (53). It is due to this forced exploitation of the poor that it was not possible for the poor Dalits to make any progress in life the poor remained poor throughout their life as “There is no way at all for the Dalit who sticks to fair methods and who toils hard all her life to make good”. (53) The long and the short of everything is that the Dalit communities of Bama’s village were fated to work, work and work. As Bama says that this community that was born to work and

however hard they toil, it is the same Kuuzh every day. The same broken grain gruel, the same watery dried fish curry (55). The children of these Dalits being poor had no chance of studying in school. They were constrained to work in matchbox factories and fire crackers factory for meagre income (55). In *The Outcaste*, Limbale tells us that they carried Bhakaris with them and that meal could not fill his stomach. Whenever there was any feast in their community all the children would run and would eat greedily. The spicy smell of the food attracted them and they ate the leftovers it was a sought of nectar to them. His also tells us that the children of their community had to work in order to fill the stomachs of their families, his friend Harya was made to work by his father. (*The Outcaste* 1)

In *Karukku*, Bama underlines the worst condition of the children of the Dalits with regard to their evocations and entertainments. She says that Dalit people in her village were dominantly surrounded by the people of higher castes like Nadars and Naickers. Nadars were a community of businessmen and petty shopkeepers in the village. The Naickers were the dominant caste, the landowners who had very large agriculture holdings in the village and the surrounding areas. The Dalits due to their having been crushed under poverty, illiteracy and lower income were constrained to live in subjugation of the people of higher caste on whom they depended for labour, employment and food. The children of the downtrodden could not afford to play games on an equal level with their counterparts of the upper classes. They had discovered and devised the games which were suitable to the Nadars and Naickers. The children of the Dalits had nothing special that was laid for them by way of recreation or pastime in our streets (56). The boys would play the role of Naickers and imitated them in exploitation of the downtrodden by way of taking work in the fields from them. This entertained them and pleased their upper class masters. They pretended to work in the fields of the Naickers all the day and “take their wages

and go home” (56), then they played as the Nadars of the village who would sell to the workers items of their daily needs. The money used in games was the “tile money” made from the pots. With that money the children pretended to buy all sort of groceries, needed at home. The girls from the working class would play with the dolls made of clay as they could not afford to play with the real dolls which the girls belonging to the higher caste played with. So even with regard to the entertainments and pass time of the poor boys and girls of the working class people there is a pathetic tale of the predicaments of the Dalits. At the same time we are reminded of Limbale’s autobiography *The Outcaste* where he tells that they could not join the upper caste fellows. They played different games while the high-caste village boys played another. The two games were played separately like two separate whirlwinds (*The Outcaste 2*). Sometimes the children of the Dalits played as nuns and priests of the Church to punish the poor downtrodden Dalits with rebukes and blows (57). Some boys would play fish catching games, spinning tops and marbles while some boys played Kabaddi and some of them used to carry petromax lamps in the procession of the upper class people. The tiny boys and girls would go the matchbox factories till the sunset (58). The grown up men would play cards, sitting under the trees, “they gambled for money and sometimes came to blows” (58). But if the police turned up suddenly they would run ‘helter shelter’. During the Christmas and Easter days people would set up radios and mike sets on which they would say “hello, hello!”(53). For all these religious functions it was the Dalits who used to collect money to celebrate them. Regarding marriage Bama writes that it is the will of the parents that basically worked. The society of the Dalits often forced a boy or a girl to marry in obedience of his/her parents will. When the priest would ask the boy “are you willing to take this woman for your wife! To follow a ritual of the Church if the boy answered “no I am not willing”; even at the refusal of the boy, he had to marry the women which his parents had

selected.

Bama was much pained at the atrocities perpetrated on the Dalit converts. She realised that the basic cause of the predicament of the Dalits is their lack of education and their poverty which must be fought with at all cost. She says; “I don’t know when such atrocities will ever end”. (80) When she analyses the untoward attitude of people about the Dalits she realises that more than this attitude of common people towards them is the attitude of their own people in the Church which is more difficult to fight than fighting with common people. As she asserts:

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 caste. In Churches, Dalits are the most in number alone . . . . It is only the upper caste Christians who enjoy the benefits and comforts of Church. Even amongst the priests and nuns, it is the upper castes who hold all High positions . . . and if Dalits become priests or nuns, they are pushed aside. And marginalised first of all . . . 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. (*Karukku* 80)

Thus, Bama is very critical about this state of affairs within the Church with regard to the exploitation of the lower class Christians. The people at the helm of affairs and on the basis false interpretation of the Bible created fear and awe about God and the Church in the minds of the poor converts. There was a time when it was believed that Lord God dwelt in the Churches but now with a materialistic attitude of rich Christian’s things have such come to such a pass that priest and nuns have created the impression that ritualism of the Church must be followed in order to please God. Bama says that if we look at the Churches today we see that Churches

made up of priest and nuns and their kith and kin that are all from upper caste. They have acquired such high positions in the Churches that they boss over “lowly people and Dalits” (108). The Church men have been able to assume power and control over the Church that they have created an impression on the poor that they are merely slaves in the name of God, while the rich themselves live in comfort (108). In *The Outcaste* Limbale says, they had a constant fear of entering a Temple. One day Sharankumar and his friend Parshya entered the temple when the recitation of Holy Scriptures was going on. Parashya’s father had seen him entering the temple. He became angry and shouted, “I will break your leg if you behave like this again. We were supposed to say our prayers from the steps outside our entering a temple will make God impure. We were expected to behave responsibly. The untouchable must not enter a temple”. (*The Outcaste* 62)

Bama was so fed up with the state of affairs in the Churches that she revised her opinion about Bhakti and belief in God in the wake of new developments. She was surprised this change in her own personality, the cause of which was ritualism in the Churches. Then she records some samples of Church ritualism. The first thing she underscores is that the priests have frightened the minds of Dalits by virtually beating them and perpetrating torturing punishments on them. Fear of God, Of Churches and of priests is the root cause of atrocities committed on the Christian Dalits. Bama cites an example from a real incident: “The cane fell on us with the sharpness of a whip it left great wheels. Enough to be reminded of those blows. Then we would spring of our beds at night” (109). Reciting other illustrations of atrocities Bama writes that when she was a student at primary school the sisters interested her to lock up and open the Parish Church. She was interested to clean the vases, polish them and put them at the proper place after the sisters had arranged them with flowers. Bama always took one of other children with her because she

was frightened to go inside the Church as she remembered the stories that the sisters had told them about lessons in scripture about the Devil. They had told them that the Devil always writes down the sins of people and he never allows them to confess their sins. Bama would see very clearly and within her vision “the dark devil that she had been shown in the pictures with a long tail, sharp horns, nails and teeth, coming towards me to show me the notebook in which my sins were written down. I would die of fear then” (83). The nuns never told them any cheerful stories of the God it was always the stories of the Devil, wandering about with a pair of balances which contained people’s sins in one pan and the merits in other. Every time she went near the Church she would be stupefied with terror imagining the devil with his balance yelling above her head, “We used to imagine the devil to be exactly like the creature in the advertisement of Onida T.V. only the real Devil would be even more terrifying to look at” (84). The sisters told them that if they sinned greatly it delighted the Devil and made our guardian angel very sad. Then they were taught how to confess the sins by going to confession box in the Church. The confession was addressed like this, “I praise the Lord omnipotent. Bless me Saami, for I have sinned . . . . I lied four times; I stole five times; I have not obeyed my elders; I was day dreaming in the Church; I repent these and those sins that I have forgotten, Saami”(84). This was always the formula adopted by Christian Dalits at the time of confession.

When they received a host at Communion they were “Not supposed to touch it either their teeth or fingers” (85). They said that if she touched it, blood would flow down from her hand, “I told myself that the sisters had spoken empty words. But I couldn’t say that to anyone” (85).The sisters and nuns had created a sense of fear on worshippers, on Sunday evenings there was catechism class after which there was blessing in the Church. When children would feel sleepy, the sisters sitting would land a stinging on their back. As they grew older the sisters



stopped beating them but they had started giving them sharp pinches that hurt even more.

One day when Bama was repeating the prayers, sisters turned up suddenly, Bama was nervous and she made a mistake. The sister gave her a knock on the forehead and she says “I nearly died of pain” (87). Her forehead began to swell where she was struck she was weeping bitterly and at the same time repeating the prayers “I also thought to myself that I would never attend a catechism class or go to a Church service ever again” (87). In the school there were scripture lessons for the children and moral education for the Hindu children.

In the house of Bama there were several pictures of icons of Jesus - Our Lady, Saint Joseph, Saint Anthony, Saint Sebastian, Saint Ignatius, Archangel, Michael, The Holy Family and the Crucifixion. There were several versions of Our Lady in any case. When the house was electrified these entire set of pictures looked beautiful. After finishing the school Bama joined the convent boarding school, to study in the ninth class. When she admitted herself in the college her fear of Priests and Nuns flitted away. She felt in her heart that she could speak directly to God without their intervention or “I could no longer believe that God could only be reached as they had thought us through prayers . . . through pious practices, through novena and the rosary” (102). Bama realised that God can be seen even without any ritual through the mind’s eye, in nature and in the ordinary events of everyday so all the rituals that she had followed seemed meaningless and just a shame. She learned that God has always shown compassion for the oppressed and Jesus always associated himself with the poor. Yet nobody had pointed this fact out. Nobody had insisted that God is just to the righteous and is angered by injustices. Thereafter she directed all her prayers, her meditation and her thoughts towards the oppressed and exploited people and towards Jesus who fought for justice and fairness. She shared her life with the poor

and the suffering. She concludes the Chapter with the following words:

When I look at the Church today, it seems to be a Church made of the priest and nuns and their kith and kin. And when you consider who they are, it is clear that they are all from upper castes. They are the ones who are in the positions of power. (*Karukku*108)

Bama was born in a small village as a small girl. As she grew up she worked for five years and then entered a convent. It was only after she had joined the convent that she came to know of the true state of affairs in the convent. The members of her family dissuaded her from joining the convent she did not care for the exhortation of the family and joined the convent. Bama says: “It was only after I had entered the convent that I came to realise that what they had warned me about was entirely true” (110). In the convent, it seemed that they girls had independence they talked a great deal about their personal matters and also spoke about Lord Jesus, they had good meals and all the comfort and conveniences were available to them in the convent. But when she came to know that the building of the convent was that of a Naicker and was filled with the prejudices against the higher caste. She became fed up with it and asked herself was this why she choose to come there. Nuns were required to keep three vows- of poverty, chastity and obedience, but in effect “the three vows became a means of control and enslavement” (113). She had come from a poor family but inside the convent she could not see even the traces and tracks of poverty. Bama had heard that all poor people are the children of God but here to her dismay she came to know that; “the wealthy too are God’s children” (113). She tells that many people in the convent did not know what is meant by the word Dalit. Those who knew, they had very poor opinion about Dalits as they spoke ill of them, Bama did not like

it. They did not know then that even she was a Dalit. When she heard their opinion she “used to wonder how these people could bring into being God’s kingdom where there are neither nor low” (115).

After three years Bama was transferred to different places. Then within a month she was asked to move five times. The authorities told her that it was due to the order of the Spiritus Sanctus. She could not understand why Spiritus Sanctus was so indecisive about her. Bama thought herself how people can run schools for profit. The authorities told her that the profit of the school was used in “real service elsewhere” (116). She was intimidated with the talk of obedience and faith. She served there for six months and after that she “walked out of the convent” (116).

After leaving the convent Bama felt, “I now in position of having to endure the hardships of being alone in the outside world, and of having to seek work and even food and drink for myself” (118). But when she came to know that most of the schools in the area were run by either by Naickers or by Nadars. She did not if there was “such thing as a Dalit school” (119). In the schools run by Catholic nuns and priests it was held that with the presence of Dalit children on rolls the standard of the school would fall. Circumstances made Bama realise what it means to be poor, hungry, to suffer illness in solitude, stand without a paisa in the hand to be embarrassed by lack of clothes, to be orphaned, to swim against the tide of circumstances against the people of money and authority. Without job she was like a bird whose wings were broken and who is protected only in a cage. But if it comes out, it would not be able to fly. She says, “I don’t know when my wings will heal and gain enough strength so that I will be able to fly again” (122). But she satisfied herself with the idea that: “It is better to lead a life weeping real tears than live with

fraudulent tears” (122).

After Bama became a nun she worked for three years as a teacher of Mathematics in a school in Madras. At the end of third year of her service she heard that she would be transferred to another convent. She was transferred to Jammu and Kashmir and was ordered to “leave by the first week of June” (125). Since Bama was much too disturbed by her frequent transfers from one place to another she made up her mind to leave the convent and she told this fact to Mother Superior there. The Mother Superior told her that it was not that easy for her to leave the convent. She was in need of money and as such she wrote to friend of hers to send her money (127). The money arrived within a week due to her being busy in the convent she was not able to get that money. Meanwhile she heard that the provincial officer of the convent returned to India, she went to the Mother Superior told that she wanted to see her at Delhi. She was given a ticket for Delhi when she alighted from the train at Delhi when some sisters meet her on the railway station. Obviously they had come to brainwash Bama she was reminded of her father who often spoke against the converts. The long and the short of everything is that her request was sanctioned and she was made free from the service of the converts. After getting relieved from the convents Bama wondered whether she had made the right decision of bidding goodbye to the convent. She says, “That now she would be able to take decisions about herself alone like independent women. “I had been courageous enough to come out into the world now I must seek out a way of living in the world I thought I would manage whatever troubles came my way . . . the Lord would show me the way. Yes, after I found a job I would be alone . . . I learnt to live through so many painful experiences” (136). When she reached Madurai by bus, once again she felt like travelling in the bus forever without getting anywhere. At last when it was past eleven, Bama reached her destination.

In the end, Bama ponders over Jesus but not in a proper manner. She is not happy the way the Jesus has been made to belief. She explains: “I learnt that God has always shown the greatest compassion for the oppressed. And Jesus too, associated himself mainly with the poor. Yet nobody had stressed this nor pointed it out. All those people who had taught us, had taught us only that God is loving, kind, gentle one who forgives sinners, patient, tender ,humble , obedient. 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” (37). Bama feels that Jesus sympathises towards the Dalits and the poor. She feels that all those who talk about Jesus have never told them about his love and pity towards the poor. Though they explain about his being generous, love , kindness, humbleness and that he forgives his sinners, but at the same time nobody tells that how he is just and right. Apart from all this he never takes up injustices and never gives up people who tell lies and never tolerates inequality. The daily pieties give completely false picture of Lord God. Dalits from the beginning have been exploited in the name of Jesus and also given false teachings. They are taught meaningless things. God also gets angry when somebody is showing injustice on Dalits and the oppressed. Everybody is equal in Christianity. One should not show any inequality either saying one is superior or the other is inferior.

Bama’s *Karukku*, can be viewed in the light of William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence* and *Song of Experience*. In the beginning, when we meet Bama we see that she is a small girl studying in the third standard, but by the end we see her as a fully grown Dalit Christian who feels that even the Christian religion has not spared her community in using them as “stone steps” and “trodden on”

them (38). The Dalits have also realized that it is not only Hinduism which has made them to suffer but also even after conversion things have not become better in fact they have worsened. The upper castes have only thought of improving their position in the Church and they have never felt for the betterment of the lower caste. They have always exploited the Dalits or the Down Trodden in the name of religion. The down trodden have never felt any sought of freedom or happiness neither when they were Hindus nor as Christians.

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