

Dalit Testimonials as Voices of Resistance and Self-justification: Bama's *Karukku* and Gunasekaran's *Vatu*

- C.G. Shyamala

Abstract: This paper compares the dalit experiences of Bama the Tamil dalit woman writer with that of the erstwhile male dalit writer and teacher Gunasekaran. While Bama's *Karukku* relates the bitter personal experiences of dalit Christian women who suffer double marginalization due to caste and gender discriminations, Gunasekaran's *Vatu* delves into the psychological pathos of being marginalized.

Keywords: Dalit, autobiography, resistance, violence.

Autobiographical writing, an act of the conscious self is often chronicled through the perception of memory. Since human memory is short-lived, the autobiographer tries to make up the forgotten past by inventing things which suit the narration. Dalit autobiography is a narrative that constantly negotiates with the society. For this reason, it can be considered as *testimonio*, which Beverly(1992: 92) defines:

A novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed, as opposed to acoustic) form, told in first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a "life" or significant life experience.

The events of life, which the narrator thinks are significant, are narrated. Writing an autobiography becomes a political act as there is always an assertion of the narrative self. Dalit writers have termed these narratives as 'self-stories' (Atmakatha) or 'self-reportings' (Atma virtta). Most of these narratives record the personal sufferings of the dalit writers fused with their interpersonal responses and community feelings which they experience in a Hindu society. Dalits are those communities "that fall beyond the four-fold *varna* system" (Rajkumar v). Hence they are considered the *avarnas* (casteless ones). According to Kumar (2010:146), "The term dalit refers to the existential conditions of a group of people who are subjected to all forms of oppression, that is, social, political, economic, cultural and religious." While dalit men are victims of caste and class oppression due to internal colonization in India by cast Hindus in the Hindu community, dalit women find themselves triply marginalized due to caste, gender and class differences within the system. Indian Dalit writing that exists at the periphery of representation provides evidences of atrocities perpetrated upon specific communities. As Kumar (2010: 150) reiterates:

On the face of several oppressive social forces, these writers, with their growing perceptions and mature imagination capture the tensions which grow out of a continuous battle between 'loss of identity' and 'asserting of self'. Thus, the very purpose of writing

autobiography by the dalits is a form of resistance against various forms of oppression. Instead of celebrating self the dalit narrator records a life of pain and suffering and their autobiographies stand apart from the mainstream writing.

This paper attempts to analyze and compare the autobiographies of two prominent Tamil dalit writers Gunasekaran and Bama. The need for comparison gains significance as the experiences of men and women in the dalit Tamil community are different in the society. While men usually struggle to voice themselves in the society, women find themselves weak to raise this voice. Dalit men autobiographers face societal indifference of various degrees so they are not very sure about their social positions and hence they seem to be insecure till the very end of their autobiographies. Women on the other hand, remain incognito in the so-called mainstream literary circles. The fact of women's subordination "has to be set against the diversities of social structures and cultural formations", says Ortner (1974:68). It is believed that lack of education, suppression by men, and financial insecurity are the pivotal causes for the situation. Both Gunasekaran and Bama belong to the *Paraya* community in Tamil Nadu. Dayanandan asserts that there are seventy-six Dalit and thirty-five Tribal communities in Tamil Nadu (Nirmukta). The term *Parayan* is derived from the Tamil word *Parai* (drum) as certain *Parayas* acted as drummers at funerals and village festivals. In Tamil Nadu the caste system was quite rigid and the three-fold division of caste was delineated. While *Brahmins* lived in *agraharams*, the *Adi Dravidas* lived in thatched huts located slightly away from the main village, commonly known as *cheri*. The *Pallars*, *Parayas*, *Chakliyors* and *Arunthathiyar* were considered schedule castes. The *Brahmins* and a few upper middle castes such as the *Vellalars* and *Chettiars* treated the *Pallars* as untouchables. The schedule castes were prohibited from fetching water from the wells, not allowed to walk along the path used by the upper class, were to sit on the ground, prohibited from riding bicycles, place their towels in their armpits while addressing the caste Hindus. They were expected to do the manual work outside the premises of the caste Hindu houses and paid a meager wage. From a report that appeared in Gazetteer of India, (1972:15) a Government of Tamil Nadu release, one understands, "Evidence discerned from the thirteenth century Tamil inscriptions indicates that the *Parayas* were close to the bottom in the caste hierarchy" and were engaged in diverse field of activities. However, Ramaiah (2010:63) asserts, "There has been considerable decline in the last two decades in the rigidity with which these restrictions are observed, particularly in villages with a high concentration of their population." With social changes and the dalit awakening gaining momentum, the need for reform becomes inevitable. Dalit consciousness is the manifestation of the realization of bitterness of human apathy along with an irresistible urge to seek the outlet of suppressed consciousness that often transforms into rebellion and retribution. Dangle (1992:234) affirms:

Dalit is not a caste but a realization and it is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows and the struggles of those who are in the lowest stratum of society. It matures with a sociological point of

view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finding as revolutionary.

Through their writings, the dalit writers articulate their experiences and raise questions at the ideologies and institutions that have marginalized them. *Vatu* (*Scar*) emphasizes the fact that Indian villages are caste conscious and cruel. Dalit emancipation rests in better education. The narration unfolds his deep pains and sufferings from childhood at Elayankudi village, Ramanathapuram district, Tamilnadu. Dailts were forced to live in filthy enclaves segregated from mainland upper caste residence. Gunasekaran had first- hand experience of his depraved low-birth identity while studying in the sixth, seventh and eighth standards. A school clerk would enter the class and ask:

How many in this class are Parayas? He would ask. "Put up your hands! How many are Pallars? Stand up, I will count. Look, all of you should come to the office after class to pick up your scholarship forms which should be filled up within a week's time....They would reinforce caste identities by labeling us Pallar, Parayas and Chakiliyas.... (*Scar*5)

In the early period of Gunasekaran's boyhood, he recognized caste discrimination. In spite of this he was respected by Muslim friends. The congress leader Kamaraj appreciated his voice and offered him the Kalimar color. He was also allowed to sing the prayer and the national anthem at school. Later, he sung for AIR Trichy and became popular as Elayankudi Gunasekaran. His brother Karunanidhi enrolled him in the Harijan Hostel for free education. Every year, when school reopened, his father would ask some rich Muslims to help towards the cause of his son's education. Whenever Gunasekaran needed signature for the scholarship application, the village headman would humiliate him and his father. The headman would ask him to do some work to show his caste superiority to get the signed application:

If they saw us in the village they would ask us to tie up their cattle, dig out a canal etc. and only then would they sign the forms. Father would feel frustrated every time he had to approach them for their signature. "It's horrid, the way they display their caste superiority before they sign anything," he would say. (*Scar* 9)

Gunasekaran was mentally tortured by the injustice and ill-treatment of the headman. The magnitude of caste superiority devastated his independence and the psychological injustice remained a scar, a deep cut that would never heal. He narrates the incident where upper caste children feel privileged and crave for social dominance. While working in his relative's shop with a gift sheet in front of Thovoor School, a boy of the upper class who scratched many times but never won a gift ran away without paying any money. When Gunasekaran asked for money, the boy said "Get lost Paraya" and began to run (*Scar* 25). When Gunasekaran chased the boy it led to a great upheaval. The same evening eight upper caste men came to his aunt's house. In fear, his relatives fell at their feet and requested them to spare him, but the upper caste men openly insulted them:

Ayya, he is my younger sister's son and is brought up in a town. He does not know anything about our village ways. The men kept

asking, “how can a fellow from your caste enter the upper caste street? And worse, how dare he enter our house?

If the fellow had entered our house without knowing the limitations of his caste, then he must really be very arrogant. Where is he? Let's tie up his feet and hands, and carry him away, they shouted. I was panic-stricken. (*Scar* 26)

On being warned of dire consequences by the Konar people, Gunasekaran had to leave Elayankudi. One day, his grand mother sent him to a shop at south Keeranoor mainland where the Konar people lived. When he saw a man of the upper caste coming in the opposite direction, Gunasekaran took one leg off the track and gave him space to walk. A harsh slap fell on his cheek and he screamed in pain:

Look at the cheek of the Paraya boy! The man spat out, and then went on his way. It took me five minutes to come out of my state of shock. I put the box down and sat on the bund crying....

...I started walking back home. I had too many questions with myself. “Why did that man beat me? What mistake did I do? Why did he call me a Paraya?” I didn't get any answer.... (*Scar* 42-43)

The moment his grandmother heard the entire story she said:

See we belong to a Paraya household and they are Maravars. When men and women of the high caste come, we need to stand at least eight feet away from them. We ought to step aside to give them way.

That is why the man has beaten you. (43)

The pain of atrocities and humiliation of dalits is overwhelming. Anthropologist Srinivas (1962:151) opines that though differences exist “between various regions and castes in the strictness and elaborateness of the rules regarding pollution and purity”, ideas of purity and pollution “cover a large sector of life.” Gunasekaran could not accept the impure status assigned to him as he did not believe in notions of purity and pollution. Unfortunately, many of the deprived classes are “too familiar with tradition and custom to be bothered by their inconsistency” (Zankin, 1962:18). This accounts for perpetuation of injustice in spite of efforts to curtail hierarchy and deprivation. During summer holidays, Gunasekaran used to go to Tanjavur to perform *karagattom*, a traditional folk dance. He earned money and used it to pay his hostel fees. After receiving his MA, he became faculty of Performing Art at Pondicherry University. He is interested in folk theater, music in theater, play writing, novels and directions. Currently the Director of International Institute of Tamil Studies in Chennai, he tirelessly works to promote folk art forms.

Gunasekaran's life experience portrays traumatic experiences from childhood to manhood along with his concern for under privileged classes. A person's life is not justified by his own kinsmen and society. In such a case a person may demand justification of his life through his autobiography. Thus, self justification may be considered as one of the objectives behind *Scar*.

Unlike dalit men, only a few dalit women have written their autobiographies. Dalit women who are fortunate to get some education have written their autobiographies in Indian languages because English remains a language of the dominant caste and class. Bama's

autobiography *Karukku* is one of the examples. Her other works are *Vanmam*, *Sangathi*, and *Kusumbukkaran* in Tamil. Widely known as a dalit writer and activist, she has been working against caste domination and social discrimination. *Karukku* is an unusual kind of autobiographical novel. It is the narration of painful memories and pathetic conditions on the life and culture of people. She describes the village and its surroundings, forests, rocks and fields. She states, "When I saw our people working so hard night and day, I often used to wonder from where they get their strength..." (*Karukku* 47). Though they work hard and suffer bodily pain, they laugh and remain cheerful. For her this is a community that was born to work. Caste formations are severe and the Parayas, considered untouchables had a separate settlement, far away from the main village. Social interactions between the so called upper class and the lower caste communities were strictly prohibited except of special occasions when such interactions were inevitable for both. Poverty was rampant in dalit families. Their earnings were meager. Except during harvesting seasons, most families went hungry. She writes, "We couldn't afford to pay that much for what we ate." (*Karukku* 2). Instead of going to cinema and learning books, dalit children spend their time in creative activities. Parents from the dalit community support their families by doing manual work:

Such people have just enough time, if they wake up before cock crow, to sweep their front yard...swallow some gruel if possible and rush of to work as best as they can. (68)

Parents do not recognize the importance of formal education because their poverty forbids them:

In the face of such poverty, the girl children cannot see the sense in schooling and stay at home, collecting firewood, looking after the house, caring for the babies and doing household chores. (68)

This passage shows that even when they are depressed and ill-treated, they are ready to accept everything by saying that it is their fate. They prepare themselves to accept everything as part of their lives. The sufferings of dalit women begin with their infancy. They live "hard and hot lives" as Bama recalls (6). But the situation is different with boys. "If a baby boy cries he is instantly picked up and given milk. It is not so with girls" (7). "Boys are given more respect. They will eat as much as they wish and run off to play. As for girls, they must stay at home and keep on working all the time..." (7). The girls are conditioned to prepare themselves to accept everything as part of their lives. The mistakes and evil deeds of the upper class men are caste upon the dalit women. They suffer more cruelty at the hands of men for no fault of them. Kumaraswamy tried to molest a dalit girl. When he was caught, he puts the blame on her and she is labeled whore and "asked to pay fine of Rs. 200..." (26). The mistakes of men fall on women, and the words of innocent pleading falls on deaf ears. Bama blames the society as a whole:

Because of our caste and because of our poverty, every fellow treats us with condemn. If ever there is a problem or disturbance, everyone, starting with police, chooses to blame and humiliate the women of our community. (66)

The men take advantage of their situation and when women protest they are labeled as whores. The material deprivation of dalits and their “political powerlessness perpetuate the symbolic structures of untouchability which legitimizes the upper castes access to dalit women for sexual exploitation”, believes Rao (2003:35). Possession by spirits happen only to dalit women:

And even among women, I never heard of upper caste women becoming possessed or dancing in frenzy. The *peys* always seem set on women from the pallar, parayar, chakkilyars and koravar communities. (58)

She gives the answer that these women have to work the whole day and at home they are pestered by their husband and children. Tired with the daily chores of life they must give to their husband's pleasure every night. “Even if a woman's body is wrecked with pain the husband is bothered only with his own satisfaction. Women are overwhelmed and crushed by their own disgust, boredom and exhaustion, because of all these” (59). The social evil of dowry system does not exist among the dalits. The groom's family gives money as *parisam* for the betrothal. Remarriage is not a sin for them and it is there in their custom and “...a woman can marry again after her first husband dies” (91). Bama likes to put an end to the sufferings of women, so she asks them to treat both “boys and girls alike showing no difference between them as they grow into adults” (122). Girls too must be given freedom and made them realize their strength. Then she is sure that “there will come a day when men and women will live as one, with no difference between them; with equal rights. The injustices, violence and inequalities will come to an end and women can soundly break” (123). The word *Karukku* means “the saw-like double-edged stem of the palmyra leaf”. She recollects “not only did I pick up the scattered palmyra *Karukku* in the days when I was sent out to gather firewood scratching and tearing my skin as I played with them, but later they also became the embryo and symbol that grew into this book”(Introduction xiii). The embryo Bama refers to is the dalit consciousness and the symbol is the new revolution, which aims at bringing a new social order into the Indian society. Apart from scratching and tearing, *Karukku* has other functions: it can help dalits to regain their lost identity. As she writes, “There are other dalit hearts like mine, with a passionate desire to create a new society made up of justice, equality and love. They, who have been the oppressed, are now themselves like the double-edged *karukku*, challenging their oppressors.” (Introduction xiii) Thus, *Karukku* signifies both dalit oppression and dalit struggle to get out from such an oppressive state.

Religious conversion does not necessarily bring emancipation in a dalit's life. Through hard work and perseverance Bama completes her college education and becomes a teacher at a convent. With modern education, a secure job and access to material comforts during her time at the convent, she finds it difficult to associate her life with that of her community where life is marked by physical labor and daily struggle for existence. Inspired by the life of Jesus Christ she becomes a Catholic nun and prepares herself to serve the poor and the destitute. But when she enters into a religious order she finds that obstacles exist for people

from the lower caste. Upper caste church authorities deliberately discriminate people from the lower caste. Bama herself was humiliated several times because she happened to be a dalit Christian. She resigns her job and goes back to her village to join the community life. She settles in her village with a sense of guilt. She realizes that she has been drifting away from the world of dalits due to the change of her personality. Her yearning to be a part of the community and the burning desire to share its pain and pleasures takes a concrete shape when Bama consciously chooses to write her narrative in spoken dalit Tamil. In order to cope up with her tension she started writing her life stories which ultimately became her testimony.

Lanjewar (1996: 193) a dalit poet and critic, after evaluating the portrayal of dalit women in dalit literature writes:

They fight for truth and for themselves. They revolt to protect their self-respect. They do not brood over the injustices perpetrated on them, nor do they just rave against it, but take up arms and prepare to fight. The revolt of dalit women is not person-centred but society-centered. The fight for values by these women who refuse to sit in the shadow of evil persons to avoid starvation, is important. The courage to fight, resoluteness, rebelliousness are the very essence of their life. That is why dalit writers do not portray dalit women as hollow idealists, overflowing with love, as embodiments of sacrifice.

The autobiographical narratives by dalits do not celebrate the rise of an individual to a position of power and glory, but emphasize complex interpersonal relationship and a sense of solidarity concerning a much wider spectrum of issues relating to social relations at the micro level encompassing village, family, caste, peer groups, school, factory, urban streets, slums and the like. Treatment of these issues is direct and incise, rooted in self-perceptions and experiences. The dalit experience is firmly grounded on divisions in the society. While the dalit men writers gain encouragement and have the freedom to climb up the ladder of success, the women counterparts have only begun to raise their claims. One must accept the fact that the autobiography serves as the medium that transfers the cultural ethos of the dispossessed and underprivileged sections of the society. As men gain recognition, women should attain the voice to shout their space and end class and gender oppressions. Every dalit autobiographer falls back upon one's community to gain one's social identity. This suggests that they are deeply-rooted in the culture of their community and want to use them for dalit solidarity and self-assertion. It is for this reason that every dalit autobiography reads like an ethnographic account of a community rather than a narrative account of a personalized self and this is what marks out dalit autobiographies as different from other autobiographies.

References :

- Beverley, John. 1992. "The Margin at the Center: On *Testimonio* (Testimonial Narrative)." *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*. Ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 91-114.
- Bama. 2000. *Karruku*. Trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom, Chennai: Macmillan.
- ---. 2000. Introduction. *Karruku*. Trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom, Chennai: Macmillan. 1-20.

- Dangle, Arjun. 1992. "Dalit Literature Past, Present and Future." Trans. Avinash S. Pandit and Daya Agveral.
- *Poisoned Bread*. Trans. Modern Marathi Dalit Literature. Bombay: Orient Longman.
- Dayanandan, P. 2012. Nirmukta. "Tamil and Dalit Literature." Retrieved from <http://nirmukta.com/2012/06/08/dalit-and-tamil-literature/>
- Gazetteer of India: Tamilnadu State. Ramanathapuram. 1972. Madras: Government of Tamilnadu. 1-25.
- Gunasekaran, K.A. (2009). Scar. Trans. V. Kadambari. Chennai: Orient Black Swan
- Kumar, Raj. 2010. *Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation and Identity*. New Delhi: Orient Black Swan.
- Lanjewar, Jyoti. 1996. "Dalit Literature and Dalit Women." *Dalit Women in India: Issues and Perspectives*. Ed. P.G. Jogdand. New Delhi: Gyan. 190-198.
- Ortner, S.B. 1974. "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" *Woman, Culture and Society*. Ed. M.Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere. Stanford: Stanford UP. 67-87. Print.
- Rajkumar, Peniel. 2010. Introduction. *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation: Problems, Paradigms and Possibilities*. England: Ashgate. 1-24.
- Ramaiah, A. 2010. "Social Democracy in Indian Villages: The Experiences of Dalits in Southern Tamilnadu." *Dalit Assertion in Society, Literature and History* Ed. Imtiaz Ahmad and Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay. New Delhi: Orient Black Swan. 61-65.
- Rao, Anupama. 2003. Introduction. *Caste, Gender and Indian Feminism: Gender and Caste*. New Delhi: Kali. 1-47.
- Srinivas, M.N. 1962. *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays*. London: J.K.
- Zankin, Taya. 1962. *Caste Today*. London: OUP.

