

Published By Scholar Indexing Society

E-ISSN: 2228-837X---DOI: <http://doi.org/10.53075/ljmsirq8905435664>Journal Homepage: <https://scholars.originaljournals.com/ojs/index.php/ojs/index>

Bama's Karukku: A New Dimension of Caste Hierarchy

(Submitted: March 2, 2020; Revision: April 17, 2020; Accepted: April 29, 2020)

Special Issue

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The emergence of Dalit personal narratives is a historic breakthrough because Dalits in India, till very recently, were voiceless. . . . [It] is an act of resistance because Dalits are using this opportunity to assert their identities through their writings. The growing number of Dalit autobiographies today is a clear instance of how Dalits have been breaking down an age-old barrier of silence. (Kumar 2012: 259)

Dr B. R. Ambedkar has articulated that "Caste is the natural outcome of certain religious beliefs which have the sanction of the *Sashtras*, which are believed to contain the command of divinely inspired sages who were endowed with a supernatural wisdom and whose commands, therefore, cannot be disobeyed without committing sin" (291). It clearly establishes that the caste has intrinsic relationship with religion. If we go back into the origin of the caste, we have to cite 'Purush Shukta' of the *Rigveda* which talks about the origin of four *Varnas*. In the age of *Smrities* and subsequent periods, the caste turned into hereditary system. "Caste in India means an artificial chopping off of the population into fixed and definite units, each one prevented from fusing into another through the custom of endogamy" (Ambedkar 254). Gandhi was of the view that ". . . if Hindu society has been able to stand it is because it is founded on the caste system. . . . Different castes are like different sections of military division. Each division is working for the good of the whole" (qtd Ambedkar 151). Gandhi's observation about the caste is that—"The spirit behind caste is not one of the arrogant superiority; it is the classification of different systems of self-culture. It is the best possible adjustment of social stability and progress. . . . Caste does not connote superiority or inferiority. It simply recognizes different outlooks and corresponding modes of life. . . ." (qtd. in Kumar 2012: 135). An American Sociologist, Harold Gould opined on the issue of caste system:

By modelling ritual behaviour on the division of labour and ranking all occupational behaviour on a pollution scale, Hinduism provided the basis for virtually unlimited permutation of Indian society into hereditary compartments ordained to perform their separate but interdependent religious and economic functions. The caste system was the result. (qtd. in Kumar 2012: 120).

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Jodhka has articulated that “Sociologists have often described caste as a “closed system” of stratification where social groups, often divided on the basis of their occupation, strictly follow the code of behaviour prescribed by tradition regarding marriage and kinship alliances”. Further he states: “Caste groups are unequal, ranked on a scale of hierarchy based on their ritual status, from pure to impure. Their ‘statuses or position in the system determines with whom they can interact and with whom they cannot. The idea and practice of untouchability is an integral part of the caste system” (xi). Thus, caste system is a unique phenomenon of Indian society believing in a religion termed as Hinduism. It is very rigid even in present society. Its rigidity has compelled Girish Karnad to create one speech in his play, *Tale Danda*: “One’s caste is like the skin on one’s body. You can peel it off top to toe, but when the new skin forms, there you are again: a barber—a shepherd—a scavenger!” (21 qtd. in Sonker 53).

In Indian society ridden with caste system based on purity and pollution supplemented with religious texts, those who are socially recognized as low castes have to live a wretched life wrapped in deprivation of basic human rights. To get rid of this caste-based identity and untouchability, socially low castes preferred religious conversion. “During British rule, and particularly in the nineteenth century, Christian Missionaries were important agent of change in the lives of the untouchables. . . . They gave the untouchables only such things which would immediately grant them social status and self-esteem. They built as many churches as they built schools and hospitals. . . .” (Kumar 2019: 26). A well-known authority on conversion opines: “New educational opportunities gradually came available to converts, and changes in life-style became accepted. Converts . . . were encouraged to show their greater cleanliness, and soon found it possible to enter a variety of occupations which had hitherto been closed to them, such as school teaching, or work in one of the mission industries” (Forrester 78; qtd. in Kumar 2019: 26). Thus, Christianity provided them a hope for a better life. Many low castes adopted new religion. But they could not get what they expected. They had to experience: “Heard melodies are sweet but those unheard are sweeter” (Keats). This is what Bama’s *Karukku* presents. It reveals caste hegemony in various aspects of Christianity. What Hindu converts expected of Christian missionaries and what the latter claimed in India and to which extent they could fulfill their promise constitute thematic crux of the autobiography. Aim of the paper is to reveal problem of caste prejudices within and beyond Hindu religion.

“Dalit (auto)biographical narratives and fictional narratives . . . neither hide nor romanticize anything. The people that inhabit these texts are not objects of pity. Their life is often miserable, humiliating, and filled with daily reminders of their impurity and pollutedness. . . . But these are presented in Dalit literature without romanticization or glib defensiveness” (Limbale 13). But Dalit women autobiographies add one more feature to the Dalit autobiographies i.e. influence of patriarchy on their life, thus, thrice subjugation forms the crux of themes. Bama’s *Karruku* transcends religious boundary and presents an account of perpetuation of caste discrimination even after conversion into a different religious order. Bama tries to create a new identity and new space for her community people

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through this autobiography. Possibly this is the reason that she negates her original name and moves from personal to public.

Pramod Kumar Nayar recognizes *Karukku* more as a *testimonio* than mere an autobiography. He observes: “*Karukku* as testimonial life-writing enables Bama to share her tale of pain, so that personal testimony becomes accurate historical witnessing of a social structure of traumatic oppression” (85). S. B. Biradar comments that “*Karukku* explores a new horizon for the marginalized and subjugated. . . . it explores many accounts of ‘unspeakable’ horrors and horrendous degree of exploitation” (218). Raj Gautaman opines: “. . . . Bama’s *Karukku* explores a changing Dalit Identity. It exhibits a very powerful sense of the self and community as a Dalit. . . . She proposes a new identity of her own and tries to change hearts and minds of the readers. It explores altogether a different world of experience” (qtd. in Biradar 217). Amala Dasarathi opines:

Unlike most autobiographies, Bama’s narrative is not linear. She does not describe events only in terms of the impact they had on her later life, but writes of the experiences she had as moments of oppression that composed her daily lived reality. In the book, one sees Bama’s quest to understand and present how her multiple identities as Dalit, Christian and woman have impacted her oppression. (n. pag.)

Bama wrote the book in Tamil after leaving the convent on 08th November 1992. In *Karukku*, translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom in 2000, Bama observed about the book: “That book was written as a means of healing my inward wounds. . . . *Karukku* made me realize potent a book can be” (ix). Further she opined: “*Karukku*, written by a wounded self, has not been dissolved in the stream of time. On the contrary, it has been of comfort to many who have been brought low, and who suffer the pain of caste discrimination, untouchability, poverty, and destitution; it has given them courage and helped them to love life once more” (x). She added that “*Karukku* stands a means of strength to the multitudes whose identities have been destroyed and denied. . . . [it] has enabled many to raise their voices and proclaim, ‘My language, my culture, my life is praiseworthy, it is excellent’. [it] insists only on a humanism which crosses all boundaries; the truth it tells may be bitter to some, to some they may be ridiculous” (x-xi).

Lakshmi Holmstrom stated in “Translator’s Note to the Second Edition” that “*Karukku* was written out of specific experience, the experience of a Tamil Dalit Christian woman” (xiv). Further, Lakshmi Holmstrom articulated in ‘Introduction’ to *Karukku*: “[*Karukku*] grows out of a particular moment: a personal crisis and watershed in the author’s life which drives her to make sense of her life as a woman, a Christian, and a Dalit. . . . It is her driving quest for integrity as a Dalit and a Christian that shapes the book and gives it its polemic” (xv-xvi). Preface to the first edition of *Karukku* Bama describes the issues which have been discussed in the book:

The driving force that shaped this book are many: events that occurred during many stages of my life, cutting me life, cutting like karukku and making me bleed; unjust social structures that plunged me into ignorance

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and left me trapped and suffocating; my own desperate urge to break, throw away, and destroy these bonds; and when the chains into fragments, the blood that was split—all these taken together. (xxiii)

Bama foregrounds her story in the social setting of her own community. She describes that plight of the people constituting of her community share the same fate as she has. In *Karukku* she narrates in this way:

The story told in *Karukku* was not my story alone. It was the depiction of a collective trauma—of my community—whose length cannot be measured in time. I just tried to freeze it forever in one book so that there will be something physical to remind people of the atrocities committed on a section of the society for ages.

At this aspect, Pramod Kumar Nayar has remarked: “. . . [*Karukku*] is not a personal autobiography alone, but a collective archive of suffering. Bama is the narrative voice through which the sufferings and atrocities of two communities, Dalit and Christian, are addressed to us” (85). Thus, the book covers three dimensions—personal, social, and religious. Atulkuma Parmar writes about this book:

Karukku is a part of the body of Dalit writing that has exposed the dominant versions of history and society that has been invoked through the centuries of legitimizing the caste system. *Karukku* also exposes the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church, which while claiming to care for the Dalit convert, exploits them, as much as the rest of society. (Parmar 222)

Personal accounts of Bama’s childhood are embedded in a Hindu social setup which has fourfold caste system. The Hindu society propounded a village settlement plan according to which there was a clear-cut divide between habitats of upper castes and lower castes in a village. Habitats of lower castes were often allocated at the outskirts of the village near pond which was used as the defecation area. In this autobiography also the author describes the village settlement. The autobiography starts with description of the geographical location and division of the village of its author like *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki. However, the present autobiography incepts with the positive and soothing geographical description. Situating amidst the beautiful mountains range, the village has a bus-stand at its entry and a stream which overflows if it rains and if not, “it is nothing but a stinking shit-field” (Bama 7). Left part of the village known as Odapatti was populated by Nadars, right by Koravars, then Chakkiliyar, some distance away were Kushavar, then Palla settlement; next to it was the Paraya settlement where the writer was living next to the cemetery. Apart from the writer’s settlement, there were the streets of Thevar, Chettiyar, Aasaari, and Naikar. Beyond that were Naikar and Udiyar streets. The point of attention is what the writer narrates: “I don’t know how it came about that the upper-caste communities and the lower caste-communities were separated like this into different parts of the village. But they kept themselves to their part of the village, and we stayed in ours. We only went to their side if we had worked to do there. But they never, ever, came to our

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parts” (Bama 7). This division of settlements pronounced the division of men as per their castes.

Castes are infested with purity and pollution concept having religious sanction. Those who are categorized the lowest in the caste ladder, they are treated not only inferior but also impure and thus, untouchable. The writer goes back to her childhood to describe untouchability. One day she was returning from her school and saw an elder man coming from the direction of market holding a small packet. The writer wanted to “shriek with laughter at the sight of such a big man carrying a small packet in that fashion” (Bama 15). But her laughter vanishes as her brother tells her the reason for holding the packet in the special manner. She expresses: “Annan told me the man wasn’t being funny when he carried the package like that. He said everybody believed that Naickars were upper caste, and therefore must not touch Parayas. If they did, they would be polluted. That’s why he had to carry the package by its string” (Bama 15). She is enraged after listening that the Naickars treat them as untouchables. She raises very apt and basic questions: “Because they had scraped four coins together, did that mean they muse lose all human feelings?” (Bama 16).

Caste works in day-to-day mannerism also. Upper castes claim to be very civilized and mannered but their behaviour is very shameful with socially created low castes. Even kids of uppers do not talk with older Dalits respectfully. It is the height of ill manner which questions the very ‘meaning’ of cultured and civilized. Bama narrates such a scene:

Both my grandmothers worked as servants for Naickar families. In the case of one of them, when she was working in the fields, even tiny children, born the other day, would call her by her name and order her about, just because they belonged to the Naickar caste. And this grandmother, like all the other labourers, would call the little boy Ayya, Master, and run about to do his biddings. (Bama 16).

Not only this, a Naickar woman poured water from a height of four feet in the cupped hand of a Patti woman. Castes are observed in the schools also. Dalit students were humiliated and tortured without rhyme and reason. Annan was insulted by the Head master of the Chaaliyar caste just because a coconut fell from his touch while he was playing a game of touching the coconut with others after the school as usual. He was not allowed to enter the school. He was suggested to get a letter from the priest by one of his master who came from his street. What priest said after listening to whole from his mouth is very shocking and reflects the traditional image of Dalits in the minds of the Sawarnas: “After all, you are from the Cheri. You might have done it. You must have done it” (Bama 19). It aggrieved him much and tears rolled down his eyes. Anyhow, the priest gave a paper with note to allow him into the school. After receiving the letter, the Head master again abused with bad words that came to his mouth before allowing him to enter. After finishing his eighth standard in his village, he got admission in the neighbouring town. He had to suffer humiliation there also. The Warden-Sister remarked ill about him and other low caste

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students: "Look at the Cheri children! When they stay here, they eat their fill and look as round as potatoes. But look at the state in which they come back from home—just skin and bone!" (Bama 20). While he was returning from school in vacation by bus, as soon as a Naikar woman came to know that he is from the Cheri Street, she got up immediately and sat on another seat or asked him to do the same.

Education is only tool to bring honour to the socially marginalized sections of society. Once Annan was given stool and addressed as 'Sir' when entered M.A. in the register in library. Annan told this to his sister: "Because we are born into the Paraya jati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect. We are stripped off all that. But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities. . . . Work hard and learn" (Bama 18). Though in the later part of autobiography and life of the author as well, Annan's suggestion stands futile in some aspects because every class of society has its own face of untouchability, however, it gives you some relief in one aspect and more grief in the other. After getting education, you acquire conscience and observe discrimination based on your social origin which trouble you every minute. Schools have its own mechanism to observe caste. Students of low castes were badly treated. "If anything, bad happened, they would say immediately, and without hesitation, 'It must be one of the Cheri children who did it'" (Bama 18). Harijan children in schools were seen with contempt but were always preferred to engage in the low work. ". . . they [upper castes] didn't hesitate to use us for cheap labour. So, we carried water to the teacher's house; we watered the plants. We did all the chores that were needed about the school" (Bama 18). When Bama scored first in SSLC exam, and her name was called out, she stood up with pride without feeling ashamed of her caste, Harijan. After finishing her school, Bama started her college studies. There also she faced caste discrimination against her idea that her caste would not be bothered in such a big college away from her village among so many students. After college, she finished BEd also facing and resisting caste differences. She joined a school as a teacher after finishing B. Ed. And there, she frankly disclosed her Paraya identity being asked by a nun who was a Telugu girl and cared less for the Dalits. She was happy there teaching students who were mostly Dalits. Because of education only, she managed to "survive among those who spoke the language of caste-difference and discrimination" (Bama 22).

As Hindu caste structure humiliated her due to her birth in a socially recognized low caste, she decided to be a nun to end oppression of Dalit children and teachers. Her decision to accept religious conversion speaks her desire to reject Hindu caste identity and adopt a new religious identity with hope of equality and respect. She did not pay any heed to the suggestions by his family members and outside person about not being a nun: "They said that caste-difference counted for a great deal within convents" (Bama 23). But the situation was just opposite to what she hoped for. It had no connection with the poor and downtrodden.

Religion establishes mental phobia. It is ingrained in the mind of a person that if you do not do this, something bad will happen. Being afraid of mis-happening, he continues to do illogical things. The writer reveals her childhood training in the church. She had to

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attend “morning Pusai” and “catechism classes” in the evening after school classes were over. If she was absent for any reason even in the rainy season when lake was swollen with water, she was beaten brutally with a cane by the priest or by the teacher. As a child, she had good memory and she was only student who could read prayers. When she was in the second class, she made her first communion which was confirmed by Bishop of Madurai. In her primary schools, run by nun, she was entrusted to lock up and open the parish church. She felt fear whenever she was alone in the church because the stories told by the sisters haunted her. She remembers:

They had told us that if we kept on committing sins, the Devil would put them all down in a long list written into a big notebook, which he would show to God. Sister said, in the Scriptures lesson, that if we committed so many sins that the notebook actually filled up then he would pee the skin off our backs and write our sins there. . . . The Sisters never seemed to tell us any cheerful stories. It was always stories of the Davil. (Bama 83).

Besides, she was warned repeatedly that Jesus was inside the host and we should neither bite Him nor should touch with our sinful hands because if it was touched, blood would flow down my hand. One day she tested it but nothing happened. Another lie told to her was that the Spiritus Sanctus would descend upon her the moment the bishop would slap on her cheek during the confirmation service, but it also did not happen. During college time, she realized that “. . . they are all hypocrites and frauds” (Bama 102). Gradually, influences of all the rituals and religious lessons vanished. After getting B. Ed. degree, she got a job in the school run by nuns. After sometimes she experienced, “. . . they were truly like whited sepulchres, as Jesus said” (Bama 102). She was happy to some extent working for the poor and Dalits but atrocities inflicted on them blazed her with anger. In the boarding school run for the destitute, she witnessed that the menial jobs were done by the children of low castes and caste, class and language division was very much in practice among nuns also. The way the Dalit children were treated brought in them hopelessness for any change which strengthened in her a desire to become a nun “to treat these [Dalit] children as all children ought to be treated, to look after them rather than torment and exploit them” (Bama 104). Her experience about the lessons on God is very shocking. Everybody taught 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” (Bama 104). “The oppressed are not taught about him, but rather, are taught in an empty and meaningless about humility, obedience, patience, gentleness” (Bama 104). The behaviour of nuns and priests lost her interest in Church. A time came when she felt that the Church is made up of priests and nuns and their kith and kin belonging to the upper castes and holding positions of power while most of the Christians are Dalits. Living a comfortable life, they possessed all the powers and robbed of the poor and low castes by thrusting in them blind beliefs and devotion and turning them into slaves in the name of God.

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After entering into the order, she expected that she would get an equal status and her Dalit identity would not follow her there. But she experienced just a contrary situation in training centre. There also, she faced discrimination in every aspect of life. She couldn't believe that poor Dalits do not get admission in the convent. She encountered a very odd situation one day, when she was enquired about her different dates of birth on marks sheet and christening certificate. Her reply that her date of birth on the mark's sheets depended on what dates school teacher wrote could not satisfy the sister and she complained: "You Tamil people want to get admission into schools under false pretences, changing the dates on your birth certificates" (Bama 24). Thus, a Tamil is looked down upon as a lower caste in the order. Every candidate who was taking training with her was curious to know her caste which she revealed when she was asked one day. When her training was about to over, a sister spoke that they would not accept Harijan women in some orders as nuns and there would be even a different order for them which came to her as a thunderstruck. It made her to cry inwardly: "I lamented inwardly that there was no place free of caste" (Bama 25). After finishing her training for nunnery, she was sent to a convent elsewhere. She was baffled to find out that ". . . this convent too was not without its caste divisions" (Bama 25). The convent employed low castes for menial jobs such as "sweeping the premises, swabbing and washing the classrooms, and cleaning out lavatories" and maltreated them (Bama 25). They didn't not consider low-castes as "human beings" which infuriated her but she did not have courage to retort as she was also "a low-caste woman" (Bama 25). The writer described attitude of the Convent towards low-castes: ". . . low-caste people are all degraded in every way. They think we have no moral discipline nor cleanliness nor culture. They think that this can never be changed. To aid us is like aiding cobras" (Bama 26).

This is what the writer had to listen continuously as a deaf and dumb having no sensibility and "dying several deaths within" (Bama 26). The idea that what would happen if they came to know about her caste, trembled her. She gave vent to her feeling translating the real situation of the low castes: "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 discriminations stalk us in every nook and corner and drives us into a frenzy" (Bama 26). Even caste of Dalits problematises life of Dalits every moment. As soon as upper castes come to know about caste of a Dalit, they "screw up their faces" and look at him with disgust which causes ineffable anguish in him. Bama questions why Dalits are not treated as human beings. No conspiracy is left for keeping them in pitiable situations where no progress could be made. Due to enslavement of generations of Dalits, there is no way for their redemption. She feels that "We must not accept injustice of our enslavement by telling ourselves it is our fate, as if we have no true feelings; we must dare to stand up for the change" (Bama 28). After finishing her training, she was sent to a convent as a nun. She found that the convent had value for rich students only. Each class was full with children from wealthy upper castes. As a token of gestures, they admitted four to five students from the Dalit castes. "These wretches usually shunned the rich ones and lurked in corners, trembling" (Bama 112). The rich children denied to sit next to these black skinned and play

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with them. The three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience taken by nuns to liberate them from prejudices to live life among ordinary people were turned into tools of “control and enslavement” (Bama 113). Before entering this order, the writer was living a life of poverty among poor people which she got rid of after she reached convent, however, her life was like one trapped in comfort within luxurious cage. In the convent, there was no freedom even to think differently. One has to fit in the framework established there. One’s self was destroyed completely to create a new one as per requirement of the convent. Almost no one in the convent knew who Dalits were and whoever knew its meaning had a poor opinion of them. Some of them say: “How can we allow these people to come into our houses? In any case, even if we were to allow them, they would not enter our homes. . . . There is nothing we can do for these creatures. . . . Because to do so would be like helping cobras” (Bama 115). They had readymade answer for any question that the whole school run from the income made out of rich students. If she wanted to do real service, she might go elsewhere. Thus, she left the convent within six months and came back home. After leaving convent, she did not get job because the village had a school run by Nadar where a Dalit was not given a job. Dalits had no school to get admission and to work in. Even the schools run by Catholic nuns marginalized Dalits addressing them as of poor quality. She faced difficulty in means of earning survival and saving her body as a woman. Her painful realization about Dalit community is true even today sometimes: “We think so many thoughts. We hope so much. We study so many things. But in real life everything turns out to differently. We are compelled to wander about, stricken and unprotected” (Bama 119). Here, Dr Ambedkar’s view seems to be very pertinent: “Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible. . . . Virtue has become caste oriented and morality has become caste bound” (Ambedkar 275).

The writer narrates that life in convent is very strange because there one cannot realize the other’s pain. She accepts that renunciation of convent life has landed her into problems but she does not regret for it because it was a ‘counterfeit existence’ for her. She explains her situation after leaving convent: “I am like a bird whose wings are broken. After wings are broken, it is protected only if it stays in its cage. But it comes out, it can only flap wings uselessly, unable to fly. And that is the state in which I am now” (Bama 121). In her bad days, she loses most of the people associated with her in prosperous days. Some of those who come to heal her wounds actually itch it. But she feels satisfied with her present state:

. . . with all pain, there still is a certain happiness in the depths of my mind. I have courage, I have a certain pride. I do indeed have a belief that I can live, a desire that I should live. . . . For the time being, I cannot see my way ahead. Yet I believe it is possible to live a meaning life, a life that is useful to a few others. I comfort myself with the thought that rather than live with a fraudulent smile, it is better to lead a life weeping real tears. (Bama 122).

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In her “Afterword” Bama reveals what she has experienced: “each day brings new wounds . . . I have seen the brutal, frenzied and ugly face of society” (105).

Thus, Bama’s journey of searching for a new identity as a converted Dalit Christian from a rural mooring in an Indian social system ends up in leaving convent and retreating to her roots which provides her with a new space of writing to express and assert her “Self” enthusiastically. Her wilful decision to adopt a pseudonym for her writings reflects her reaction to the patriarchal and caste based social structure. It also explicates rejection of Shudra identity imposed on her in a Hindu social setup. It is a unique autobiography because it travels through two worlds—Hindu and Christian—and creates a new world ‘self’ assertion. She gets a “resounding standing ovation”, recognition and becomes motivation for the thousands of the oppressed.

Bama treads between two worlds and takes shelter into the third world i.e. writing to create a space for expression of her ‘self’. No religion, neither Hindu nor Christianity gives her equality as a Dalit woman. The story of the autobiography continuously takes reference of the community feeling which reflects that this problem of caste is an archetype for Dalits. Thus, Dr B. R. Ambedkar’s view seems to be very pertinent and relevant, “Caste is not a physical object like wall of bricks or a line barbed wire which prevents the Hindus from co-mingling and which has, therefore, to be pulled down. Caste is a notion; it is a state of mind” (289).

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Published By Scholar Indexing Society

E-ISSN: 2228-837X---DOI: <http://doi.org/10.53075/ljmsirq8905435664>

Journal Homepage: <https://scholars.originaljournals.com/ojs/index.php/ojs/index>

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