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The Enigma of Survival: Narrating Victimization in Baby Kamble's *The Prison We Broke* and Bama's *Karukku*



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Abstract

The paper proposes to examine the dominant concerns of Dalit autobiography, taking Bama's *Karukku* and Baby Kamble's *The Prison We Broke* as a case study, with reference to the nodal features of victim-life-narrative and their 'affects' as pointed out by Pramod K. Nayar, a prominent critic and theorist of such writings. Nayar sees an affiliation amongst the victims and their narratives based on the victimization aiming towards what he calls 'affects'. He locates in victim-life-narratives an emerging genre of Human Rights narratives outside the legalistic/ political frames in the form of a 'cultural apparatus'. Bama is the first Tamil, Dalit, Christian, women autobiography writer. *Karukku* has been widely studied and translated into various languages. And *The Prison We Broke* is the first Marathi women autobiography. Can it be placed in the genre called autobiography? Is the individual or the collective more of a problem? Where does the writer place herself in the struggle for 'space' and 'identity'? The decision to articulate and speak out by Bama in *Karukku* and Kamble in *The Prison We Broke* operates at two levels, one: the re-enactment of the experience and two the 'discursive practice', both of which contribute to making her a 'subject' and an 'agency'. These and many such concerns are studied in my paper.

Keywords: Autobiography, Victim-Life-Narrative, Dalit Writing, Cultural Apparatus, Human Rights Narrative, Trauma.

Introduction

The objective of this paper is to explore the representation of victimization and human rights violations in the Dalit autobiographies with special reference to *Karukku* and *The Prison We Broke*. This paper explores how victimization and human rights abuse are related to caste and gender identity of the writers and their community. These texts have been studied within the framework of the genre of human rights narratives and their 'Affects', using primarily the theories of victim life narratives as given by Pramod K. Nayar.

Autobiographies or one can say narrations of the 'self' by Dalit women is an expression of gendered marginalized self in a genre which was traditionally very masculine in its form and orientation. A cursory look into the first history of Indian English Literature by M.K. Naik underlines the fact that most of the autobiographies are of men belonging to upper caste. Even in case of women autobiographies one can see its masculine nature. With reference to women's writings in India, they could write only of a few things and in a specified framework. The question of caste and gender discriminations were invisible.

This essay proposes to examine the dominant concerns of Victim Life Narratives as an emerging genre of Human Rights Narrative with reference to the features of such writings as studied by Pramod K. Nayar. Using the first autobiography in Tamil and in Marathi by women, Bama's *Karukku* (2000), and Baby Kamble's *The Prison We Broke* as illustrative texts, it demonstrates how these works can be placed into the genre of 'victim life narrative'. Nayar in his study of such writings sees it as an emerging genre of human rights narrative outside the legalistic or political frames of Truth Commissions, Commissions of inquiry and judicial settings in the form of a cultural apparatus. Mostly the legal, political, social, and religious apparatus/ structures in any society have traditionally tried to define who all can be placed in the group called "human" and therefore have "rights" and "power". But often adjacent movements and quieter ways of resistance and assertions have worked their way towards the centre. Nayar points out that "the cultural apparatus of newspaper coverage,

documentation of violations, narratives of and in civil society,...enables what may be thought of as the "popular" constructions of the ideas of the "human" as well, hence constitutes a significant cog in the non-state machinery of Human Rights Movement."(Nayar, 2009:1).

Baby Kamble's autobiography, *The Prison We Broke* published in 1986 in Marathi and was translated and published in English in 2008. Baby Kamble converted to Buddhism to fight the caste based discrimination in Hinduism. Like *Karukku*, *The Prison We Broke* can be located in the oeuvre of 'victim-life narrative'. This narrative is not only a representation of the Dalit community but is also an engagement with the history Dalit oppression and is located in the tradition of direct self-assertion (Pandit in her introduction to Kamble, 2008 ix). This community (Mahars) is located on the extreme margins of the social set up in Maharashtra, and the representation of marginality and victimization emerges as a "tremendous transformative, potential for oppressed people" (ibid, xi). *The Prison We Broke* reenacts the life of not only Kamble but also her community. It performs not an individual act but is collective in nature: "I wrote about what my community experience. The sufferings of my people became my own suffering. Their experiences became mine. So I really find it very difficult to think of myself outside my community" (ibid, 136). The use of we in the title of the book itself emphasizes this. Kamble does not use proper nouns or any specific subject position, as a writing strategy to create a narrative society which could freely interact with the Dalits through this text. It also foregrounds the absolute hegemonized state of the Mahars. Like *Karukku*, this text also begins with describing the difference in geographical location of various castes. Mahars are pushed to the outskirts of the village.

She says:

Come to think of it what kind of life did this people really lead? What was their worth living for? Generation after generation wasted away in senseless worship of stones, in utter misery. Generation after generation perished. (11)

The practice of untouchability pervades the lives of Dalit all over India. Right from childhood the upper caste Hindus were trained in the purity-impurity concept:

He (the upper caste shopkeeper) would give the innocent children lessons in social behavior, 'Chabu, hey you, can't you see the dirty Mahar woman standing there? Now don't you touch her. Keep your distance'. Immediately a Mahar woman gathering her rags around her tightly so as not to pollute the child would say, 'take care little master, please keep a distance. Don't come to close you might touch and get polluted'. (14)

Kamble's autobiography is also self-assertion:

When the Mahar woman labour in the field, the corn gets wet with their sweat. The same corn goes to make your pure rich dishes. And you feast on them with such

evident relish! Your palaces are built with the sweat and blood of Mahars. But does it rot your skin? You drink their blood and sleep comfortably on the bed of their misery. Doesn't it pollute you then?... and you have been flogging us with the whip of pollution. This is all that your selfish religion has given to us. But now we have learnt how utterly worthless your religion is...(56).

Through such assertions Kamble like Bama not only narrates victimization and human right violation but is also a performative seeking justice from the reader. This kind of reenactment of the past resurrects the history of experience and uses it to annihilate the structures which renew and underlie this experience (Guru,2012). Humiliation and victimization is individual, collective, social and political phenomenon. The articulated representation of Dalit woman's experiences of caste based victimization results in the visibility of the caste, which then scripts a polemical attack on the Brahminical patriarchy. The complex picture which emerges in the end of the text is one of a community moving towards transformation- with changing gender roles, resistance to change, participation in the Dalit movement and bringing about a social progress (Kamble,65).

Bama's first work, *Karukku*, was published in 1992 as part of a new series, *Jeeva Nathi or Life Stream/River of Life*, to motivate Tamil Dalits to struggle for their rights by giving inspirational life stories. It details the life of an individual and in the process reveals the caste based discrimination and violation of human rights in Indian society particularly within Christianity. *Karukku* is a powerful critique of the Indian society: the education system, the church and the bureaucracy and highlights the complicity between caste and class in post-independence India.

Bama is a pen name of Fustina Mary Fatima Rani, who was born in a Roman Catholic family in 1958, in the village of Puthupatti in Tamil Nadu. Her family belongs to the category of Dalit Christian family, her grandfather having converted to Christianity even though socially the status of the family did not change much, they remained the landless laborers working for the upper caste landlords. But her father entered the Indian army and did add change at least economically to the family- they had enough to eat when he came home on leave. She decided to join the church as a nun, at the age of twenty six. This was a well-thought out decision to fulfill her mission to educate poor Dalit children and in turn not only help uplift her community but to pull them up to the category called "human". Her decision to join the church was an attempt to free herself from the caste based discriminations and also to lay claim to rights and agency. She writes: "I felt that at the seminary I would be able to carry forward my work with the poor." However it was only disillusionment and failure that she achieved, hence decided to walk out of the convent in 1992 after seven years. Almost as a therapy, Bama began writing *Karukku* and completed it in six months. C.S.Lakshmi (who writes under the penname Ambai) says Bama is much more than a writer; she is 'a chronicler and a

recorder of Dalit life and struggle in Tamil Nadu' (Lakshmi, 6).

Bama's *Karukku* as well as Kamble's *The Prison We Broke* can well be placed into the genre of 'victim life narrative', an emerging genre of Human Rights narrative in the form of a 'cultural apparatus' expressing the victim's trauma addressing the affects, reverberations, and responses from the 'narrative society'.

As Nayar says:

While severely restricted and oppressed-rendered into victims, one might say-because of their social contexts, their very acts of writing, articulation and construction of affective moral-webs with other victims within their narratives shift their identity from mere victims to something else. This shift takes them outside the identity of a victim into a self-conscious subject who, in the act of narrating his/her own story and also that of others, constructs a whole new subjectivity. (Nayar, 2009:1)

Nayar goes on to say that he does not want to suggest that the immediate conditions of the victim and his/her marginal status is improved through the narration, but it does re-make a case for the 'narrative society' (readers) response to these narratives as the remaking of the society. Re-making is a kind of re-structuring of the space for the victim and the movement from the margins towards the status of belongingness. As Bart Moore-Gilbert proposes that though the decentred self in post-colonial life-writing is a legacy of colonialism, the genre also expresses "its subjects" agency and capacity for self-renewal." (Moore, 15) Nayar argues that victim life narratives are 'affective' narrations. Victim life narratives constitutes a "scene of strife...within the hegemonic struggle over so called national identity" (Spivak, 99). Traditionally it was presupposed that this kind of writing is not meant to be read. They not only disrupt the hegemony of "national" representations and invite us to perceive the "precariousness" of life. Nayar writes: "victim life narratives are speech acts and performatives of affects that impose upon us viscerally and invoke strong emotional responses" (Nayar, 2009:3).

Karukku, when it first appeared in 1992 was heralded as an autobiography is considered a classic of subaltern writing. *Karukku* breaks traditions in various ways: is not a conventional biography; has been studied as a 'testimonial'; and also a resistance and rebellion writing. It is considered a bold poignant tale outside mainstream Indian thought along with being a assertion and a re-claim of its space into it. Revolving around the main theme of caste based oppression within the church, there is more to the book, it is a historical, sociological work involving the friction area between the self and community. This book is a "speech act" as it presents Bama's experiences as a process of self-reflection and recovery from social and institutional betrayal. Bama in her note to the second edition 'Ten Years Later' says:

I left behind my life of renunciation and come out into the world. After that, I wrote my book, *Karukku*. That book was written as a means of healing my inward wounds; I had no other motives. Yes, it had unexpected results. I influenced people in many different ways. *Karukku* made me realize how potent a book can be. (Bama,ix).

Karukku is proceeded from the lived experience of poverty, violence, rejection and suffering. While this kind of writing is not simply a re-enactment of the experience but is also a strategy. It reveals not just the traumatic structure of events but also enfold the ways in which the victims have fought, overcome and survived. *Karukku* is about the re-construction of the self after the traumatic events of a life-time. Bama recalls 'ten years later':

Karukku, written by a wounded self, has not been dissolved in the stream of time. On the contrary, it has been a means of relieving the pain of others who were wounded.... *Karukku* stands as a means of strength to the multitudes whose identities have been destroyed and denied...*Karukku* has enabled many to raise voices and proclaim, 'my language, my culture, my life is praiseworthy, it is excellent' (Bama, x).

The location of caste (Dalit Christian) is central region where Bama as an individual becomes oppressed and once she was denied her 'space' through a set of social processes it automatically leads to her alignment with the others like her. Nayar sees this kind of alignment as "a process of affiliation rather than any filiation..." It is sufficiently clear that such life- writings' subjects are products of definite socio-historical contexts, but once they emerge as victims, being a victim, an oppressed remains the dominant identity. Their lack of agency as victims of social and structural conditions is what aligns them with each other (Nayar, 2009:4). *Karukku* is not just the story of Bama. The book resonates and gives solid form to the trauma and victimization upon individual as well as community. Bama says, "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. It just tried to freeze it forever in one book so that there will be something to remind people of the atrocities committed on one section of the society for ages." (Bama,xi) This kind of affiliation of the victims in the case of the Dalits is probably because of the fact that caste based discrimination has not been erased from Indian society in spite of the numerous reform movements: religious, legal and constitutional interventions over the years.

'Intervention' as Bhabha terms it is about articulation, voicing and the emergence of a discourse. Life-histories help to analyze and understand the socially marginalized and their position within it. One can clearly see in such arguments the emphasis on the continuing political consequences of such narratives, especially those that tantamount to disrupt the hegemony of the mainstream discourse. Such life-writings force the

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affiliated as well as the narrative society to at least re-assess the past and present. Nayar argues that victim-life narratives not only question the role, power, social programs and politics of the nation state, but also with a peculiar kind of “representational tenacity” insinuates itself into the larger national narrative in order to disrupt it (Nayar, 2009:5). Such life narratives regularly act as a ‘performative’ in the sense that it makes sure that the mainstream narrative of India remains perpetually open to interrogation by these histories of trauma and victimization. The power of the performative resides in the simultaneous heterogeneity (difference from the mainstream pedagogue) and homogeneity (trauma, suffering, the human rights discourse) (Nayar, 2009:3). Even in the global India we can find such pockets of the disenfranchised/ the have-nots, the Dalits, women, the tribals, the homeless, dissolute children and many others. “Together,” says Nayar “this coalition of the oppressed has created a Human Rights narrative tradition that upsets the rhythms of the public sphere. This narrative is an affective one.”

In much of the literature by Tamil writers/critics, this term is used but the term Dalit is preferred as it implies an alliance, an affiliation with the other repressed groups, and an intervention into the national identity. More recently, Raj Gautam (1995) has elucidated various functions of Tamil Dalit writings, and the different local and global readership it addressed. He says that the first and foremost function of Dalit writing is to awaken in every reader a consciousness of the Dalit and to share in the Dalit experience. At the same time, according to Gautam, the new Dalit writing must be a Tamil and an Indian version of the worldwide literature of the oppressed; its politics must be an active one that fights for human rights, social justice, and equality. Bama’s *Karukku* also seeks an affiliation by talking about not just the writer’s personal life but about the whole community of oppressed.

In *Karukku*, the narrator throughout the text moves from individual to the community. Nayar has placed *Karukku* in the genre of a Testimonio and points out that the narrator is not a person of some social status but a commoner in a “problematic collective situation” (Beverley, 95). Bama begins the Preface to *Karukku* with the personal I: “there are many congruities between the saw-edged palmyra *Karukku* and my own life” (Bama, xxiii). She describes the contexts of her life- “events that occurred during many stages of my life”; “unjust social structure that plunged me into ignorance”-in the second paragraph. But by the time she reaches to the third paragraph the narrative voice changes from I to we: “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.” (Bama, xxiii) *Karukku* begins at a point of personal crisis but takes the form of a declaration for the entire community, showing the narrator’s affiliation to the others: Dalits, Christians, and women. Chapter two has been divided into two sections; one describes the personal experiences of Bama, a Dalit woman in a caste-based society. The

second section once again like the preface is a passionate plea to the oppressed as well as the ‘narrative society’ for the Dalit cause, social reform and change. The movement is repeated in chapter nine which also begins with a personal ‘I’ and later changes to ‘we’. This kind of transition from personal to community is because of the affiliation which Bama feels to the group of the victimized and it is their victim position which holds them together. Bama writes:

Today I am like a mongrel, wondering about a permanent job, nor a regular means to find clothes, food, and safe place to live. I share the same difficulties and struggles that all Dalit poor experience. I share to some extent the poverty of the Dalits who toil far more through fierce heat and beating rain, yet live their lives in their huts with nothing but gruel and water. Those who labour are the poorest of the poor Dalits. But those who reap the rewards are the wealthy, the upper castes. This continues to happen in my village to this day. (Bama, 78-79)

The rest of the chapter is a painful description of the ways in which caste in India has been the source and space of victimization and perpetual injustices.

The victim life narratives is a performative in the sense that it is a space where the victimized collides with the readers seeking justice. These are stories of exploitation, brutalization, emotionally charged narrations, the denial of subjectivity-trauma. Nayar has outlined certain features of victim life narratives- one it re-performs the past traumas; second, it frequently gives trauma a spatial specificity; third trauma’s spatiality is accompanied by the sense of entrapment and resultant helplessness; and fourth point is that trauma has to do with agency and subjectivity.

The very act of writing of this book becomes a kind of re-performance of the past for Bama. *Karukku* though written out of a specific experience- the experience of a Tamil Dalit Christian woman, reaches out to all those who are victimized. Bama writes:

The driving force that shaped this book are many: events that occurred during many stages of my life, cutting me like *Karukku* and making me bleed; unjust social structures that plunged me into ignorance and left me trapped and suffocating. (Bama, xxiii)

Bama in the Afterword to the first edition says:

Almost seven years after I wrote *Karukku*, I have read it now... the emotions that I felt during its writing rose up once again, in a great flood. (Bama, 137)

The book moves back and in time and is a kind of reliving/a re-performance of the past. Describing the turbulence and brutality of the experience of her personal life as well as of her community, Bama clearly makes caste as the space of suffering not only outside and within the church but also within the convent as a nun. Bama as a child was

not able to understand the humiliation, exploitation, and caste-based atrocities which were inflicted on her and on people like her. As she steps into adulthood she still is not able to reconcile with the inhumanity she experiences. As Cathy Caruth says, "trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival." *Karukku* unfolds the structure of the traumatic experience which Bama and others like her face while also revealing the process of lonely self-discovery and how the victims have fought, overcome and survived it. Bama opens her book referring to the life full of hard work of Dalits in the farm land of the upper-caste people; the spatial/geographical organization of her village and the rituals, customs, and superstitions binding her people. Land ownership and caste hierarchies are closely linked in India and both become cause of suffering for the Dalits. The sense of entrapment and resultant helplessness becomes all the more glaring and harsh as even the efforts of self-upliftment are cast in corporeal terms:

I studied hard, with all my breath and being, in a frenzy almost. As Annan (elder brother) had urged, I stood first in my class. And because of that, many people became my friends, even though I am a Paraichi. (Bama, 18)

In her Afterword to the book Bama returns to the corporeal descriptions, "each day brings new wounds...I have seen the brutal, frenzied and ugly face of society." (Bama, 138). Her early life as well as her life spent in the convent were spaces of victimization for Bama. She enters the convent to "work hard for other children" but discovers that "the convent I entered didn't care to glance at poor children" (Bama, 77). The lifestyle of nuns in the convent is also a shock to her: "before they became nuns, these women take a vow that they will live in poverty. But that is just a sham. The convent does not know the meaning of poverty...It is only upper-caste Christians who enjoy the benefits and comforts of the church...if Dalits become priests or nuns, they are pushed and marginalized...."(Bama,77-112) *Karukku* talks not only of the casteism prevailing amongst different communities but also in the state run agency like law and police. *Karukku* is significant as it exposes shameful secrets into the public eye. In fact Bama's ethics consists of breaking the aesthetic silence around issues of caste oppression, social inequality, biases in the legal system, bureaucracy, and the officialdom. Nayar writes:

Speaking makes the victims the subject of their own lives because affective speech performs the agency of the speaking subject. This "speaking" possesses two levels, the embodied experience and discursive practice, both of which contribute to making of the subject. (Nayar, 2009:11)

The first level affect can be understood as an embodied experience. The victim while narrating his/her experiences underscores it vis-à-vis a structure of oppression-family, home, institution (church in Bama), law (police/legal systems) and caste-and presents herself up as one who has been a

victim within a context. The second 'affect' level that of discursive construction via affective narration of an affective solidarity of victims is a crucial component of all victim life-narratives. Every single victim life narrative refers to other similar events and victims. The affective narrative is not just a personal tale but a collective biography (as *Karukku*) and a narrative of cultural trauma: it demonstrates the victim's links with others.

Karukku and *The Prison We Broke* are a record of not only their victim status but are also an expression of similar cases of victimization inflicted on others like them. By speaking out for others they not only become a witness recording the anger, pain but the other's victimhood enables them to exert agency as a feeling subject which in turn is a construction of "moral webs" (a term used by Christina Zorowsky). "Moral webs" in victim life narratives build affective solidarities among victims. Bama and Kamble through their writings positions themselves as agents of hope and change. Bama writes in her Afterword, "almost seven years after...And I could not help but reflect upon many changes that have taken place since then...my perspective about my life and about society." Bama feels that as an independent woman (after she decides to finally leave the convent) she has come across many opportunities to live a useful life and work especially for the upliftment of the Dalits. She expresses her happiness to see many victims like her aiming to live a life of self-respect and gain political, economic, and cultural rights/strengths. Her efforts towards a decent life began with the renunciation of the convent, and the writing of *Karukku*, and culminates in seeing in people a fighting spirit against the unjust and inhuman actions of the victimizers. Nayar says that the decision to take control of one's future is the real construction of the subject agent and an assertion of their sovereign rights. It is an affective solidarity against violation of human rights. To that extent such narratives also function as 'claims narrative'. Bama reasserts her unshakeable objective once again in the Afterword, "beyond all this there stands firm a fierce anger that wants to break down everything that obstructs the creation of an equal and just society, and an unshakeable belief in that goal," (Bama, 138). Even beyond *Karukku* Bama sees a task to fulfill. This paper brings to light the causes and consequences of such violations and shows how caste identity is of such prominence in India. Through this study the author has suggested how the Dalits can be brought from the marginalized position to the main stream. Towards this Dalit autobiographies play a very important role. Such writings from a 'cultural apparatus' not only upholding the Dalit cause and also build a narrative society which would understand the trauma of such victims and hence support their cause.

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