

The Creative Launcher

An International, Open Access, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

UGC Approved- (Sr. No. 62952)

An Analytical Exploration of Existential Violence in Bama's Autobiographical Work, *Karukku*

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Abstract

Existential violence is that form of violence in which the 'essence' or 'being' of anyone is decided according to the pre-established norms, rules, ideas, traditions and rituals with a view to suppress the intrinsic nature of the subject. Fixation of 'being' has been a matter of controversy across disciplines since centuries; therefore, a great effort is made from every power center to decide the beings of others. They are taught how they need to behave if they want to prove their potential in various spheres of human life. *Karukku* is an autobiographical work of Fausthina Mary Fathima Rani alias Bama who records various events of her life as the testimonials of Dalits' lives in general and Dalit women's lives in particular in rural Tamil Nadu. She describes here how dalits become the victims of many layered violence in caste-based societies. This work also records how the identities of dalits are manufactured and their beings are decided and readymade meanings are imposed upon them with the sole purpose of their exploitation. She states that higher castes Christians in India misbehave with Dalit Christians in the same way in which Hindus have misbehaved with them. There, according to her, is no respite for Dalits in merely changing the religion because higher castes Christians have lent caste-system together with its prejudices from their ancestors who usually had been Hindus. Bama has strongly opposed many traditional notions about dalits with her hard work and proved that a person's worth must not be judged on the basis of mere birth. The present research paper would be a sincere effort to analyze the

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politics of controlling and deciding 'being' or 'essence' of dalits and forcing them to fall prey to 'bad faith' of Jean Paul Sartre.

Key Words- *Existentialism, Violence, Testimonials, Essence and Existence.*

Jean Paul Sartre, one of the leading philosophers of 20th century, initiates his existential philosophy with the statement that 'existence precedes essence' (*Existentialism Is a Humanism* 22) in the case of human beings whereas it is vice-versa in the case of other things and beings. The essence of anything can be defined as the basic quality of it as the basic quality of a knife is to cut and a pen is to write. But human beings are different from the human made objects and therefore, their essence can't be decided before their existence. They exist first and their essence is decided later. They are free or rather condemned to be free as Sartre has said to decide their own beings. Sartre states in his work *Being and Nothingness* that, "man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world--and defines himself afterwards... and then he will be what he makes of himself" (2). It becomes clear that human beings come out of nothingness after their existence and consistently try to shape their essence. He begins his idea with two basic categories of being; 'being in-itself' and 'being-for-itself' and finally adds a third one that is 'being for others'.

Being-in-itself is the 'being' in totality which is indefinable, concrete and unchangeable and to a great extent unaware of itself whereas being-for-itself is incomplete, conscious about itself and continually in the process of becoming. Being-for itself is what assigns meaning to the being, but at the same time withdraws from it as the perfection of any kind is allusive to it. Citing his famous example of a waiter in a restaurant, he explains that he saw a waiter who was working as a machine but he could not limit himself in the definition of only being none other than a waiter. Thus, he can never be a waiter as a chair is a chair or a knife is a knife. Thus, being always is in the process of becoming containing some elements of 'facticity' in it. But, being-for-itself is manipulated by another being i.e. being-for-others.

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Sartre states that human beings live in society and every individual's identity is shaped by the relationship which he/she maintains with the social world. Sartre is of the view that man is intrinsically free but his freedom is curtailed by others' gaze. An individual faces these gazes since childhood and tries to shape his/her identity according to these gazes which are present in the society at various levels. People are ideologically conditioned to such an extent that they forget their freedom and their own nature. Michael Foucault terms society a permanent 'carceral archipelago'.

Friedrich Nietzsche, another renowned philosopher of 19th century has denounced this idea of suppressing innate powers of human beings in the name of rationality and he complains that this trend in the Western metaphysics has been inducted with the arrival of Socrates and his followers especially Plato and Aristotle who believed in the superiority of reason and universal logic. 'The will to power' of humans has been killed by these so called universal laws and people have become living corpus under the pressure of these social, moral, ethical, religious and political norms and criteria which always favor a few people and most of others are not only neglected but also exploited.

Sartre's idea of 'being-for-others' becomes problematic when one enters the realm of others and others feel that they are being watched objectified. This 'thingification' or 'objectification' leads to internal as well as external conflict of the subject and he is found himself in a constant struggle with 'the other'. This is the stage when an individual feels his existence in crisis and in order to maintain his existence, he tries to control and curtail the freedom of 'the other'. This condition leads to two alternatives' either to control others' being according to one's own being or to be controlled by them and in both the situations; violence occurs and influences the weaker ones. In this dichotomy, the powerful ones impose their ideas and concepts with the help of multiple social, political and religious institutions and compel the weak to fall prey to 'bad faith'. People of marginalized sections are subjected to be the victims of multiple layers of violence, especially when they find that 'being-for-others' is such a condition of human beings which can never be realized in its totality.

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Fausthina Mary Fathima Rani, famously known as Bama, was born at Puthupatti village in Viruthunagar district of Southern Tamil Nadu. She is one of the first Dalit women writers and by profession a teacher who raises consciousness about major issues of Dalits through her novels and short stories. Her autobiographical novel, *Karukku* enlists all those major experiences, ideas, aspirations, joys and sorrows of a Dalit woman which she feels in and outside of her society. The book portrays various facets of Bama's life from childhood to adulthood. Her work becomes relevant because of its clear focus on the resistance which a Dalit woman puts forth against those norms and institutions which are said to be devised for enslaving the Dalits. Moreover, it reflects upon the importance of education and economic development in the lives of Dalits for their liberation instead of clinging to religions.

Bama does not believe that the problems of Dalits would be eradicated when they change their religious faith. She, instead of it, thinks that caste, is the major issue in the lives of Dalits. It has percolated down from Hinduism to other religions in Indian social order and engulfed Dalits from all corners. In India, caste identity prevails over other identities therefore, sticking to any such identity would eventually be oppressive. Dalit Christians are tortured in the hands of non-Dalit Christians because of caste superiority which itself is an Indian invention because castes among Christians are found nowhere except in India and she also asserts that Indian Christians believe more in superiority of castes than the values of benevolence, equality and brotherhood, found in the gospels of the Bible. Dalit Christians have to bear the same discriminatory behaviors as their counterparts bear in Hinduism as the priests and saints of both the religions are equally torturous. They try to decide the 'being' of their followers and curtail their freedom to enslave them according to their own benefits.

Bama gives a picture of the establishments of the localities of her village where Dalits have to live separately from the people of other castes. They are not allowed to mix up with the higher castes even if they are better than them in many ways and thus, the sense of being born in an inferior caste is impelled in the heart and soul of a baby who grows up with lots of burden on its back. Dalits localities are left with minimum amenities whereas other higher

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castes localities reap the benefits of most of them. She says, “The post office, the panchayat board, the milk-depot, the big shops, the church, the schools-all these stood in their streets” (Bama 7).

The behavior of a student is decided in the school according to his/her castes. Normally, the teachers use castiest remarks every now and then to scold Dalit students. Bama remembers such an incident when her headmaster reprimanded her because she had touched a coconut and it had fallen down as it was already twisted by many other students who were the part of a game which they played together one day before. Screaming at her, the principle said, “You have shown us your true nature as a Paraya (a sub-division of Dalits), you climbed the coconut tree yesterday after everyone else had gone home and, you stole a coconut. We cannot allow you inside this school” (Bama 19). When she had gone to bring a recommendation letter from the priest for her reinsertion in the school at the advice of a teacher of her street, the priest said, “After all, you are from a Cheri. You might have done it. You must have done it” (Bama 19). Bama has shown in her autobiography how the people of other castes and religions have developed prejudices against Dalits and look towards them with a certain perspectives. Their discriminatory behavior does not only solidify their base but it also compels the Dalits to feel that they are really weaker because of their being born in some specific castes and they fall prey to what Sartre calls ‘bad faith’.

This becomes very visible when the writer gives an account of how her grandmothers who were working in upper caste Naicker families assert that Naickers are superior to the people of their own castes. Bama complains how the Dalits have conditioned themselves according to the ideologies of their suppressors and do not dare to think individually about themselves. Children of Naicker families call the elders of Parayas by their names; Naicker women pour water to the Parayas from a certain distance and give leftovers in the morning which Paraya women accept as if they were accepting “nectar of gods” (Bama 16). Writer’s grandmothers used to spread the ideologies of their own suppression because they had imbibed these caste generated discriminations to the core of their hearts. Their torture since

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centuries have made them accustomed to it. They used to say, “These people are the maharajas who feed us our rice. Without them, how will we survive? Have not they been upper caste from generation to generation, and have not we been lower caste?” (Bama 17). Human beings are treated here as objects with pre-defined essences, and in such a condition existential violence reaches its zenith. It seems that a Dalit is born slave and is condemned to die the death of a slave.

Under such pessimistic milieu, progressive thoughts of writer’s brother emerge as a leading light in her life. She says to her:

Because we are born in a Paraya caste, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that. But if we study and make progress, we can throw away all these indignities. So study with care, learn all you can. If you are always ahead in your lessons, people will come to you of their own accord and attach themselves to you. Work hard and learn. (Bama 17-18)

Messiah of Dalits, Dr. Ambedkar also envisages the same progressive ideas for the annihilation of castes and development of all the marginalized sections of society. He believes that educational and economic development must be ensured before the religious advancements. Believing in these maxims, the writer completes her higher education and decides to join schools to raise the status of the poor.

She has completed five years of teaching in the schools when she feels a strong urge to join the religious order to truly help those who are downtrodden and humiliated without authentic reasons as she had already seen the nasty behavior of upper caste Nuns for the students of deprived sections. It is here that she feels an alienation from her own self because she has to bear discrimination at every step because of her caste. It seems that her being-for-itself is being controlled by others. Sartre’s maxim that ‘hell is other people’ properly fits in the life of the writer. Her developmental ideas and thoughts are discarded in the name of castes. She feels here that even the churches are not free from caste prejudices. On seeing

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discriminatory behaviors of her mates and instructors inside the order, she feels a kind of emotional detachment. She says, "I lamented inwardly that there was no place that was free of caste" (Bama 25).

When she completes her necessary training for being a nun, she is sent to join a convent and here she finds a clear gap between what is preached and what is practiced. She is appalled on seeing the luxurious lives of nuns in these convents and finds everything opposite of what had been taught to her about God by her mother, teachers, nuns and later on by priests. Every woman, before she becomes nun, vows to God that she will live in poverty and serve the poor, the downtrodden and the miserable in her best capability. But, Bama asserts, the convent does not know the meaning of poverty because the standard eatables of all kinds are found here in abundance, each one is provided with "a comfortable room...a bed sheet, a fan, table and chair, and drinking water" (Bama 77). All sorts of facilities have been given here to the nuns and they match the behaviors of the exploiters rather than helping the poor and the needy. On knowing the reality of these institutions, she is filled with disgust. She states, "Chi, is this all there is to the life of renunciation? Is there any understanding of poverty here?" (78). She elsewhere asserts:

In the name of God they actually rob the poor who struggle for their very livelihood. They teach them to shut their eyes when they pray, with the deliberate intention that they should not open their eyes and see...The so-called gods walking about here are the priests and nuns and their relations, no other. (Bama 108)

Here, the writer experiences double standards of religious morality in its ugliest form and tries to liberate herself from the sanctions of these rules and regulations. She has been frequently transferred from one place to another and finally sent to Jammu. She stays there for some time under the condition of indecision which Sartre calls 'anguish' a condition of indecision and finally she decides to leave the convent because she feels suffocation under such environment. When this decision is put forward by her, all the concerned authorities

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come running to her to convince that she must not leave as they fear that their own hypocrisies may be exposed, but the 'will to power' (Friedrich Nietzsche) of the writer prevails and she liberates herself from the vows of the convent and moves smoothly on the rough roads of life to create another 'being-for-itself'.

The very idea of caste superiority percolates down from the so-called people of the higher castes to the lower castes people. The Dalits maintain the worst form of caste hierarchy among themselves. This particular ideology of binary oppositions among castes is used as the weapon by the upper caste people to divide and rule. This becomes apparent when the writer gives an account of how Chakkiliyars were the bitterest enemies of Parayas and eventually Naickers ruled both of them. One of the worst forms of 'bad faith' is found here as people of sub-castes of Dalits exert violence upon one another in order to assert their caste superiority and the benefit of it is reaped by those who are at the top in caste hierarchy. Thus, they support the ideologies of their oppressors and help them to enslave the poor.

Karukku highlights multiple instances of atrocities caused by caste and class divisions, and religious institutions. It is said to be full of instances of resistance and assertion of a Dalit woman against the atrocities of the people of upper castes. She writes for her people in particular and humanity in general. It exposes the ways-Dalit identities are constructed and imposed upon them since centuries. What a Dalit would be' is decided even before his birth and his being eventually constricts all his paths of progression. Dalits are conditioned in such a way that they easily fall prey to 'bad faith'. They are supposed to shape their lives around the pre-defined notions. In this way, they are deprived of achieving their full potential. Finally it can be said that Karukku is a journey of 'becoming' of a Dalit woman writer who challenges all those who try to confine her freedom.

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