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Bama's Karukku: Dalit Autobiography As Testimonio

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ABSTRACT

Dalit autobiographies must be treated as testimonio, atrocity narratives that document trauma and strategies of survival. Using Bama's Karukku as a case-study, it explores the shift between the generic conventions of individual life-writing and collective biography in this text. It analyses the strategy of witnessing in Bama's narrative, arguing that she functions as a witness to a community's suffering, and calls upon readers to undertake "rhetorical listening" as secondary witnesses. This act of recording trauma and witnessing, the essay proposes, is one of subaltern agency.

KEYWORDS: dalit, autobiography, rhetorical, listening, Bama Karukku

INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts to explore the significance of reading Karukku as testimonio. Generically speaking, Karukku, the life-narrative written by a Tamil Dalit woman, Bama has more similarities with a testimonio than with an autobiography. While a conventional autobiography foregrounds the vicissitudes of an individual self this testimonio narrates the tales of deprivation suffered by a community in a larger socio-political context. Narrated from a 'skewed' subject position, it questions the monopoly of the dominant, mainstream discourse and offers an alternative world-view. As a literary genre, testimonio has emerged in Latin America out of the angst of the indigenous communities who have been continually tortured by various agents of the oppressive state. The testimonio's refusal to be apolitical asserts its rebellious zeal and hence the very act of reading a testimonio not only makes the readers aware of the humiliation and violence endured by the marginalised communities but also inspires them to contribute meaningfully to the ongoing struggle against oppression. Karukku offers enough opportunities to read it as a testimonial narrative and asserts the oppositional consciousness of Dalit communities. The primary purpose of raising political and social awareness against injustice and state-aided violence will be lost if Karukku is read only as an autobiography. The aim of this paper is to show how a generic recasting of Karukku can sharpen the narrative's political edge and help the narrator spread the revolutionary message of transforming the existing framework of our caste-stratified, gender-biased society.[1,2,3]

Dalit life writings are narratives of trauma and resistance, pain and protest. However, they uphold the saga of suffering not only of one single individual, but of the entire community. Told by an author-narrator who has been both a witness to and a participant in the collective struggle of the Dalits, these narratives reveal the hypocrisy of the democratic (italics added) Indian society where people are forced to live on unequal terms in the name of caste, class

and gender. Generically speaking, these life narratives though often categorised as autobiographies, are yet largely akin to the testimonios in their structure and content. Testimonio which is a form of resistance literature embraces within its fold, the anguish and angst of the socially – ostracised communities, deprived of their rightful representations. The testimonio, as John Beverley defines it is "a novel or novella length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the 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 experiences" (24). According to him, the testimonio is a "post fictional form of literature with significant cultural and political repercussions"(38). However, this form has enjoyed a rich development in Latin America where it has been sanctioned as a literary genre. The emergence and acceptance of the testimonio as a distinct genre mark the victory of subaltern voices which have been silenced or altered by official interpretations. The institutional legitimacy of the testimonio was affirmed when in 1970 the prestigious Casa de las Americas admitted Cuban ethnographer Miguel Barnett's Biography of a Runaway Slave (1966) , a recording of the life-story of a 105 years old former slave, for its literary awards and accepted testimonio as a literary genre in its own rights. The very nature of the testimonial narrative forces it to peak the boundary of any particular discipline of study and hence turns out to be a 'hybrid' genre assimilating elements from history, sociology, anthropology, ethnography and literature. Yet, a tendency to read testimonial narratives as autobiographies is frequently observed in literary circles.

The idea of autobiography, in the conventional sense of the term is associated with the notion of individualism propounded by western discourse. According to beliefs accepted in the West, autobiography is supposed to affirm the individual identity of the autobiographer. But the testimonio negates this notion of a single individual narrating incident of personal significance. The writers of testimonios believe that self can be defined only as a collective-self engaged in a common struggle. It is not just the personal experiences of the narrator, but the collective experience of the entire community to which the narrator belongs, comprises the core of a testimonio. The narrator's voice is one of the many voices that tell the tale of suffering and struggle. Dorris Sommer in Not Just a Personal Story: Women's Testimonies and the Plural Self comments: "the singular represents the plural not because it replaces or subsumes the group but because the speaker is a distinguishable part of the whole" (108).

DISCUSSION

Dalit life narratives often focus on the miseries of the entire Dalit community. Therefore, it is not the self but the community that matters as far as Dalit life narratives are concerned;, it is this emphasis on the notion of collectivity that particularly brings these life narratives close to the genre of testimonio. An echo of this is heard in Bama's voice when she says:[2,3,4]

The story told in Karukku is not my story alone. It was the depiction of a collective trauma of my community- whose length can not 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. Recognition for the language of my people is the biggest award I can win. (Bama Interview)

Pramod K. Nayar shows that although Bama in the Preface to Karukku begins with the personal that states "there are many congruities between the saw- edged palmyra Karukku and my own life" (Bama, Karukku Xiii) and plans to narrate "unjust social structures that plunged me into ignorance"(Xiii) , yet she gradually moves on to declare in the third paragraph of the preface that "there are other Dalit hearts like mine" (Xiii). This is a clear proof of the fact that Karukku is not merely her autobiography; it rather is the account of the entire community. Again her declaration that "They, who have been oppressed, are now themselves like the double-edged Karukku" (Xiii) hint at the fact that Bama's narrative does not stop at the description of painful sufferings endured by her community. Like the testimonio, it is also a narrative of survival. Affirmation of this purpose is found as Bama boldly asserts in the Preface that all Dalits "instead of being more and more beaten down and blunted . . . must write, think about their rights and battle for them"(Xiii).

The community is a predominant element in the writings of Rigoberta and Bama. Both reveal through their narratives the power that their respective communities have over their people. While Rigoberta mentions the customs peculiar to her own community with regard to birth, death and marriage ceremonies, Bama talks of rituals that the Dalits practise to mark the observance of the social customs of her community. They provide detailed accounts of the festivals and 'entertainments which help these people come closer to each other. They also lay considerable stress on the use of legends and myths (for example, the legend of Nallathangal in Sangati: Events) which often act as a binding force of any community. Bama even uses pet names and nicknames and maintains a colloquial tone with an un-sophisticated language in order to emphasise the bond that exists among the members of her paraya1 community. It is worth mentioning here that Bama does not use her own name in Karukku. In fact, Bama is her pen name. This perhaps, shows the eagerness of erasing one's own self from a narrative that foregrounds a community's collective experience of suffering and resistance. Though at times accounts of Bama's personal life have been highlighted, yet very soon the voice of this autobiographical 'I' merges itself with the voice of the entire Dalit community who suffers the fate of deprivation and humiliation. The testimonio has already established itself as a subversive genre in Latin America since it has the potentiality to raise voices of protest against the system of State-sponsored oppression. Karukku, too, reveals the hollowness of Indian civil society that marginalises Dalits from every sphere of life with the help of education, the bureaucracy, religion and so on. In Pramod K. Nayar's words, Karukku "highlights the complicity between class and caste in post- independence India" (84). Bama depicts how the Dalits are tortured and exploited by the state- aided machinery run by the wealthy upper caste people.[3,4,5] The first common experience that all Dalits share with each other is the experience of untouchability. This barbarous practice starts affecting the course of their lives even before they fully comprehend what 'caste' means. Bama's experience of watching an elderly Dalit man carrying a packet of 'vadais' (a savoury made of lentils) for an upper- caste man by its strings so that the food item does not get polluted by his untouchable touch reveals the humiliation that all Dalits have to suffer in this caste-ridden Indian society. They are discriminated everywhere- in schools and colleges, in the bus (Bama, Karukku 18) and even in the bathing wells (Bama, Sangati: Events 116-117). The

upper caste, upper – class people cast contemptible glances at them and Barna remembers in Karukku how once in her school she was branded as a thief because she belongs to a low-caste community.

The next morning at assembly, the headmaster called out my name. 'You have shown us your true nature as a Paraya' he said. "You climbed the coconut tree yesterday after everybody else had gone home, and you stole a coconut. We can not allow you inside this school. Stand outside." (Karukku 16)

We come to hear from Bama that the upper- caste people even guard their bathing wells to stop the "lower- caste donkeys from going there and polluting water." (Bama, Sangati: Events 117). Dalits are discriminated by their religions too. Bama who is a Christian Dalit narrates the experiences of humiliation that most of the Christian Dalits have to endure in the church and in the convent. She writes:

. . . in the convent, ...they spoke very insultingly about low-caste people. They spoke as if they didn't ever consider low- caste people as human beings . . . According to their notions 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. (Karukku 22-23)[4,5,6]

However, Bama does not merely narrate these incidents and accepts the life of humiliation. She protests against such contemptible social practice as casteism and expresses her anger at the exploitation of the Dalits as she says: "Everyone seemed to think Harijan children were contemptible. But they 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" (16). Her voice of protest also echoes in Sangati: Events as she narrates the activities of Sammuga Kizhavi, a Dalit woman, who defied caste-restrictions, bathed in a well meant for upper castes and later in an act of revenge pissed in the water pot of an upper caste man. Bama thinks it might be good to have Dalit people with Sammuga Kizhavi's 'guts' because "everywhere you look, u see blows and beatings; shame and humiliation" (Sangati: Events 118). In I, Rigoberta Menchu, the element of rejection also persists. Rigoberta narrates how badly the indigenous people are treated by their Spanish or even ladino2 masters. While she was working as a maid in the capital, she was once not allowed to meet her father, even in the corridor of her aster's house because her father was poor and dirty. She was not given proper meals and was treated in the most humiliating manner possible. This sense of rejection comes out as we hear Rigoberta saying:" I didn't feel hurt because I hadn't eaten it (she refers to the 'tamal'3 given to her by the mistress) but because they'd given it to me as if they rejected me, as if to say, this is what is left over for you. And even then she'd taken it away" (100).

Both Bama and Rigoberta represent their respective communities which are located at the bottom of this hierarchically stratified society. Both tell a similar tale of exploitation and torture inflicted upon their communities by the socially privileged class and/or caste. The hardships that the Dalits face while working in the fields of the upper caste people is no less than the pain that the people of Rigoberta's community feel during their work in the finca.4

Extreme work pressure, filthy accommodation, meagre food and constant threat to be replaced by other labourers are some among many common dangers that both the communities experience. The grim reality stares at us when Rigoberta talks of her two brothers who died in the final. The eldest brother, whom she had never seen, died of the fumes of pesticide while the youngest died of malnutrition at the age of two. But the horror of their situation is increased manifold when Rigoberta tells: "The time came when my mother couldn't spend any more time with him (the dying younger brother) or they'd take her job away from her"(38). A similar tone of helplessness is echoed by Bama as she points out that the men and women of her community, even today, cannot survive without hard and incessant labor. Even the pregnant women cannot afford to take rest and immediately after child birth they have to get back to their work. Like the children of Rigoberta's community, Dalit children, too, start working right from the childhood. They do household chores or look after their younger siblings till they reach the age of ten or twelve when they are considered fit for working along with the adults in the fields. A striking similarity sweeps through these two narratives as both the communities depend on the availability of the natural resources and go to perilous jungles in mountainous regions in search of alternative means of survival. The agony that Rigoberta felt during her stay in the city as a maid is not less intense than the pain that a poor Dalit girl feels when she prepares herself every morning to go to work in the town. They work from dawn to dusk but are paid very low wages. The accounts of Rigoberta and Barna reveal that the phenomenon of exploitation brings Guatemala and India close to each other as in both countries the marginalised section of the society is deprived of their natural rights and is also forced to live in a condition of utter poverty. Hunger and malnutrition are their daily companions. While a hard piece of tortilla5 and some atol6 comprise the principal meal of the people of Rigoberta's community, the Dalits, too, survive on a meagre supply of rice and kuuzh.7 Barra writes: "Usually in our street, no one cooked at noon. It was only in the evening that people cooked rice, made a curry; at other times it was always kuuzh, millet porridge" (Karukku 7). Though they find opportunities to eat 'good meals' on some specific occasions of their communities, yet in general their daily existence is threatened by poverty and misery.[5,6,7]

Thus, it is not an exaggeration that even today, a considerable number of Dalit population is forced to live in a state of helplessness and uncertainty. They are trampled down not only by the upper caste and upper class people; but also by the state machineries like the police, judiciary, bureaucracy, religion and so on. In Karukku, Bama narrates a vivid account of the torture perpetrated by the police upon her community as a result of an intra-caste riot. They couldn't bribe the police since they were poor and hence the police "baton in hand" chased the men of her community and beat them up mercilessly before arresting them. The image of a corrupt, claustrophobic society is etched as Bama recounts the terror in vivid terms:

That night, nobody could sleep. All through the night the police prowled round and round our streets. There was no sound at all, except the sound of the policemen's boots and the barking of the dogs . . . . Each step felt as if the boot was treading on my chest and pressing down. (32)

However, this should not be treated as a response of one single individual who witnessed the brutality that night. Bama's voice soon blends with the voices of the people of her community as she bursts out in protest against the corrupt practices prevalent within the social system: "Here we are struggling just for this watery gruel. So how will the police or the Government be on our side?" (31). Rigoberta, also provides an eye-witness account of the torture and death of her brother along with many other men of her community. The severity of the torture shocks us as we come to know how the military punished (italics added) these men for having alleged relationship with the Communists. There were around twenty men in that group and most of them were disfigured due to excessive torture. Finally all of them were burnt to death by the military in front of a crowd of indigenous people because the military wanted to teach (italics added) them a lesson. Rigoberta also lost her father who was shot dead during the occupation of the Spanish Embassy. However, the most gruesome account of torture by an oppressive state was told when Rigoberta narrated the circumstances in which her mother died. Her mother who was actively involved in organising numerous ethnic groups scattered over the land was kidnapped on 19th April, 1980. Though Rigoberta herself did not see the torture inflicted upon her mother, yet she claims that she has details of every step of the rape and physical violence suffered by her mother. She does not reveal the whole truth to ensure the safety of her fellow comrades and yet the account that she has narrated makes the readers frightened and sick. Apart from being severally raped, her mother was put to tremendous torture that increased gradually with time. First her head was shaved and then on the third day "they cut off her ears. They cut her whole body bit by bit. They tortured her the whole time and didn't give her any food for many days" (Menthe 198). Finally the army took her to a hilly area and left her there under a tree alive but dying enduring the pain of her wounds for four or five days. Her body was covered with worms. Rigoberta's words make the cruelty and inhumanity of the Spanish army explicit:

My mother died in terrible agony. When my mother died, the soldiers stood over her and urinated in her mouth; even after she was dead! Then they left a permanent sentry there to guard her body so that no-one could take it away, not even what was left of it …. After that, my mother was eaten by animals; by dogs, by all the zopilotes8 . . . and other animals helped too. They stayed there for four months, until they saw that not a bit of my mother was left, not even her bones, and then they went away. (20)

Though Karukku does not record such a severe picture of torture yet it is the experience of oppression that binds it with I, Rigoberta Menche. Moreover, like Rigoberta's narrative, Karukku also exhibits testimonial qualities as it stresses on the aspect of raising consciousness not only among their own people but also among the educated intelligentsia. According to Arturo Arias, testimonio has the ability to inspire the readers to take some concrete actions. There is no doubt that I, Rigoberta Menche is successful in eliciting positive responses from its readers all over the world. Like a true testimonio, it contains the essence of a continual struggle not of an individual or a family but that of an entire community which faces the threat of extinction under an oppressive regime. Rigoberta's narrative created such a huge impact that it pressurised the Guatemalan Government to accept UN sponsored peace talks which eventually ended the conflict in 1996. Bama's Karukku also records this spirit of

unceasing battle against the century old hegemony of caste, class and gender. In Karukku Bama's Unshaken voice addresses all Dalit people and inspires them with bold words: "We must not accept the 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 change" (25).

Bama's narrative inspires spirit of rebellion which is necessary to organise a full-fledged battle against oppression. Bama was even awarded prize for Karukku which has the capacity of making significant contribution to the development of the lives of the low-caste people. This book as well as Sangati: Events truly provides "a discursive space where an alliance between the intelligentsia and the subaltern can take place" (Nayar 97). Both Rigoberta and Bama emphasise the need for spreading education among the people of their communities since ignorance is one of the main reasons for their deprivation. It is true that education is often manipulated by the State and is used to further the interests of the State. Yet Rigoberta stresses on the necessity of learning Spanish because it is through the mastery over the master's language that the monopoly of their power can be challenged.[6,7,8]

Thus a comparative analysis between the narratives of Bama and Rigoberta suggests that Karukku follows the pattern of a testimonio though many scholars like to treat it as Bama's autobiography. The narrative's emphasis on the collective experiences of the community's struggle rather than the accounts of limited self-interests of an individual sharply distinguishes it from an autobiography which due to its bourgeois lineage privileges self over community. Furthermore, these narratives draw heavily on the oral tradition—a quality that sets the testimonio apart from any established literary genre. This is more apparent in Sangati : Events where a host of women characters tell the tales of their suffering and Bama as the official narrator-author helps in quilting these real stories of everyday life. However, Bama does not merely follow the testimonial pattern. She also enriches this particular genre by adding novelties to the existing framework. Karukku and Sangait:Events are distinctly different from a testimonio like I, Rigoberta Mencha in one important aspect. Testimonio as a Latin American genre engages a non-literate narrator who narrates the accounts of trauma and survival experienced by his/her community to a learned interlocutor. This interlocutor/interviewer/editor first records and then transcribes the whole account in a language that can communicate the narrator's message to a larger audience. Rigoberta's narrative was recorded and transcribed by Elisabeth Burgos Debray. But Karukku is written by Bama herself who has been the witness to and a participant in the community's struggle against the oppression of an authoritative social system. In my opinion, this aspect of Bama's narrative places it in an advantageous position and helps us see beyond the given structure of the testimonio. Karukku and Sangati:Events being written by Bama, are free from the charges of critics who question the authenticity of the narrator's words in a testimonio. Rigoberta's accounts were severely challenged by such critics as David Stoll and Dinesh D'Souza who accused Rigoberta of presenting a fabricated version of real incidents. Moreover, the critics of this genre also doubt the revolutionary intent of a testimonio since the presence of an educated interlocutor is capable of turning the pattern of a horizontal dialogic relation between the interviewer and the interviewee into a vertical one and thus it can reduce the subaltern narrator to a "ventriloquised" status (Spivak qtd. in Kumar 32). However, these

accusations prove to be inadequate while a testimonial narrative is written by the narrator herself /himself. Texts like Karukku and Sangati: Events provide the opportunity for the subaltern (Bama, a Dalit woman) to speak on behalf of her/his community in her/his own tongue. The veracity of the narrated document will be less challenged in such cases and the readers, too, may feel a more keen sense of intimacy with the author who along with her/his community has been suffering a fate of humiliation and torture. In fact, Catherine Davis in her review of the book Woman as Witness: Essays on Testimonial Literature by Latin American Women (edited by Linda S. Maier and Isabel Dulfano, 2004) underscores Dulfano's suggestions about the two forms of future testimonio. While one takes testimonio closer to fiction, the other future possibility turns testimonio into a genre that becomes structurally capable of enabling the subaltern to "do their own talking without the need for an intellectual intermediary." (qtd. in Davis n.pag.) However, this authorial privilege does not fully ensure a minority community's control over itself. But even then, to a small extent, it empowers the marginalised to stand up and speak out for them. Again, the success of Bama's narrative is supposed to inspire many other members of her community to be educated and to communicate their experiences with the rest of the world without being dependent on any borrowed tongue. Debates regarding the in/ability of the subaltern to speak may continue; but no one can deny that the power to tell their tales of suffering and resistance endows them with an agency to assert their distinct identities. This in turn, will generate more political and social consciousness among them and lead them to wage a war against the power centre of this unjustly structured society.[7,8,9]

RESULTS

Reading the testimonio is never an apolitical act. Hence in the final analysis we can say that the political fervor that a community can generate in order to bring social transformations will be missing if Karukku is read merely as an autobiography. Just like a testimonial narrative it is also pregnant with an immensely subversive potential as it foregrounds the oppositional consciousness from below. I strongly feel that Karukku as an account of Bama's life-story cannot create space for the subaltern to break their silence and/or make the privileged readers think about the politics of social relations. It may not also compel our revolutionary ideologies to be translated into political activism. But, perhaps, recasting Karukku as a testimonio may bring that wind of change. Bama is originally known as Faustina Mary Fatima Rani. Bama is the pen-name of a Tamil Dalit woman, from a Roman Catholic family. She was born in 1958 and has written many novels, including the autobiographical novel 'Karukku'. The book was published in 1992 and was written in Tamil. Later, it was translated into English in 2012 by Lakshmi Holmstrom. The book portrays the journey of a woman and how she struggles to raise her voice against the suppression faced by her and her community.

Karukku refers to Palmyra leaves which are like double edged swords. The novel acts as a double -edged sword in two ways. The novel archives the repression, atrocities, faced by the people of low stratum of the society. The novel is written from the perspective of a Dalit woman, Bama who was agonized and suffered under the dominant Hindu social structures. The book is the first Tamil Dalit literature of its kind. The book is more of a memoir than an autobiography because it voices the joys, sorrows of the people of her community who were

oppressed by the higher and the elite class of the society. She even talks of the sufferings she faced after being converted to Christianity. She believed that shifting her religion to Christianity will put an end to her troubles, but it did not happen so.[8,9,10]

The converted Christian Dalits were even treated inhuman, and she realized the truth that the situation of the Dalits will always remain the same. Being a Dalit woman she was marginalized, but she mastered over her will and worked hard to emancipate the fate of the Dalits. The book is a semi autobiography because it talks more of the people of her community, their culture, the food habits, and traditions. It gives voice to the silence and oppressed sections of the society. She uses simple narrative techniques and the style is different from the writing style of the mainstream literary texts. It is written more out of her own experiences as a suffered Dalit woman. It basically deals with the Dalits of Tamil Nadu. She grieves over the pitiable conditions of the people of her community. She talks about how the Dalit women were subjugated in the hands of the so called 'pure' Brahmins.[9,10,11]

CONCLUSION

Through her writing, she raises the voices of those who are pushed aside and marginalized. The book can even have a different reading. Women should not shut their mouth and should rise against the ignominy of sexual torture, subjugation, or any other forms of violence because women are not objects to be consumed. Bama was influenced by her brother to study hard because education is the only way to gain dignity in the society. The book talks of the travails and trauma faced by a dalit woman. She becomes the representative of the entire community. It is not only the tale of Bama, but hundreds of such other deprived and ostracized people under the Brahmanic hegemony.[12]

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