

LIFE WRITINGS AS COLLECTIVE BIOGRAPHIES: *BLACK BOY* AND *KARUKKU* - A COMPARISON

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Abstract

African-American and Dalit autobiographies are parallel life writings in different socio-cultural spaces in the same milieu. The paper proposes African-American and Dalit autobiographical narratives as social documents of atrocity, pain and suffering. Using Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and Bama's *Karukku* my paper explores social functions of marginalized life writings in their respective social locales. For a Dalit or African-American, as for other marginalized groups, writing autobiography is an essentially political act registering their lived experiences and cultures. The marginalized identities of the self and the community is asserted and redefined in life writing. The paper would negotiate the texts as documents of collective community biographies. That is to say, the narratives have dual function: as individual biography and community biography. Life writing, now days, functions as alternate mode of historiography. When subaltern life writings attain academic spaces, they function as sources for study of history and culture.

Keywords: *Karukku*, *Black Boy*, Dalits, African-Americans, autobiography, narratives, life writing, collective community biography, trauma narrative, experience, oppression.

African-Americans and Dalits of India are oppressed social groups sharing similar experiences of trauma, pain and suffering at multiple levels of social interactions. The atrocity towards the Dalits and African-Americans are (re)presented in the literature emerging from the respective communities. This paper argues that literatures from the margins transcend genres and encompass multiple functions of trauma narrative, life writing and collective community biography. Comparing Bama's *Karukku* (2000) and Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945) the paper analyses the multiple functions performed by the autobiographical narratives.

Both Dalit and African-American autobiographies are narratives of oppression, pain, trauma, protest and resistance. Even though marginalized autobiographies seem to centre on the

protagonist, the life and experiences narrated does not constitute description of the protagonist alone. Bama's autobiographical work *Karukku* is a collective document of the marginalized lived experiences. Bama writes also for the people of her community who may not be able to express their voices. As she puts it,

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 Preface xiii)

Karukku functions as a collective community biography for it represents life and desires of other members of her community as well. In fact, the narrative transcends the scope of individual expression of protest and resistance and becomes a historical narration of suppression and discrimination of the Paraya-dalit community. Bama describes *Karukku* as follows:

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. (Bama Interview)

As asserted by the author, *Karukku* also functions as a social document of her community life in the margins. The narrative emphatically registers the culture, life, pain, suffering, and discrimination against the Dalit community in the margins of the mainstream society.

Richard Wright's autobiographical narrative, *Black Boy* is not a story entirely different. The frustration, anger and disgust at the discriminating social system Blacks experienced in America provoked writing *Black Boy*. Wright was sickened by the painful gory racial violence and cruelty that resulted in writing his autobiography. The racial segregation and marginalization of the Blacks were contrived by means laws, rules and doctrines. As the segregation was made lawful, the Blacks had no way out of pain, suffering and oppression in life. Wright performs the task of collective documentation of the African-American life in *Black Boy*. In his narrative, Wright represented voiceless 'Negroes' who were caught in the same socio-cultural prison. Thus, *Black Boy* is about the collective agony and suffering of the Black community: "Whenever I thought of the essential bleakness of black life in America, I knew that Negroes had never been allowed to catch the full spirit of Western civilization, that they lived somehow in it but not of it." (Wright 45). Wright follows the axis of subjectivity throughout his narrative. Though he attempts to articulate the agony and sufferings of blacks, he envisions and writes it in the subjective view as an "I narrative."

However, in *Karukku*, the narrative shifts between axis of subjectivity and axis of referentiality.⁴ In other words between the "I narrative" and the "we narrative". For instance, the text begins as, "Our village is beautiful." (Bama *Karukku* 1). Next, Bama goes on to describe her community: "Most of our people are agricultural labourers." (Bama *Karukku* 1) She never refers to her people as "my people" instead, she uses I person plural pronoun "our". In the autobiographical narrative, she sets aside four chapters to describe the community customs, rituals, social relations, hierarchy, caste system and myths working within the fabric of community life. Contrarily, *Black Boy* is devoid of any reference to community customs, rituals or myths of the African-Americans. Only references to the social aspects of community life are to the church and social interactions. In *Karukku*, "Bondan-Mama", "ayyangaatchi troupes", "Nallathangal" etc. are extracts from the folk oral narratives the community life. The narrative also includes anecdotes and folklore of the socio-cultural history. In the case of *Black Boy* the

oral narratives are hear-says among the black community regarding racial violence and cruelty of the Whites. The psychological fear for Whites dominantly intersperses African-American life writing. Life writing may be defined as:

An overarching term used for a variety of nonfictional modes of writing that claim to engage the shaping of someone's life. The writing of one's own life is autobiographical, the writing of another's biographical; but that boundary is sometimes permeable. (Smith 197)

Karukku, moving beyond the scope of cited definition of life writing, critically engages with shaping the lives in the Dalit community. It narrates socio-cultural life of Dalits shaping and reclaiming their identity. The text also juxtaposes liminal spaces in the mainstream social history against the Dalit identity and lived experiences. *Karukku* features multifaceted personality of Bama, the author. In the narrative, multiple facets of Bama's identity as a Dalit Christian woman writer are explored. As a life writing, *Karukku* depicts Bama's life within different social groups that shape her identity. The protagonist in *Karukku* narrates the lived experiences of a Dalit Christian woman writer. During different stages in the narrative, Bama's life and experiences evolve in constant social interaction with Dalits, convent community, and as a Dalit-woman-writer in a patriarchal castiest social order. Inseparably connected with the community, Bama's life writing moves through narratives of community biography. The function of community biography relies not only on the author's memory. The events, myths, rituals, customs and folklore depicted in *Karukku* are the evolving products of the community experience. The collective community memory and folklore forms fund the narrative. Therefore, *Karukku* is constructed based on the reservoir of the collective lived experiences, history and culture of the Dalit Christian community. In the collective community biography, Bama's life is one among the many lives that emerge indirectly between the lines of the narrative. Sharankumar Limbale also affirms the collective function of Dalit literature.

A unique feature of Dalit literature is its collective aspect. The experience described in Dalit literature is social, hence it is articulate as collective in character. Therefore, even when the experience expressed in Dalit literature is that of an individual, it appears to be that of a group. (Limbale *Towards an Aesthetic* 36)

Limbale's argument holds ground in the case of most of the literatures from the margins, as also in the case of African-American literature. Among the forms of marginalized literatures, autobiographical writings and life writings prominently display collective character as they seems deliver firsthand experience.

In *Black Boy*, the dominant theme that recurs is the Black fear for the White power and social institutions that maintain the racist social order. The narrative is often interspersed with narratives of racial violence and cruelty.

A dread of the white people now came to live permanently in my feelings and imagination... I would stand for hours on the doorsteps of neighbors' houses listening to their talk, learning how a white woman had slapped a black woman, how a white man had killed a black man. It filled me with awe, wonder and fear and I asked ceaseless questions. (Wright 83)

The narrative registers Wright's psychological fear of the White power, a common feeling that governed the Black community psyche. Apart from the fear, protest, and anger that pervades African-American community life, *Black Boy* seldom depict the quest for identity or socio-cultural elements of African-American community life. However, it could be called life

writing as it depicts the brutal violence and racial injustice the Blacks lived through. The collective nature of the oppression also qualifies *Black Boy* to be called a collective biography.

Apart from being a collective community biography, *Karukku* is also a historical social document of life in the margins of the mainstream. The narrative describes the segregation of Dalit life into limited spaces. Dalits are restricted from using public spaces, temples, water bodies, and natural resources.

On top of another peak is a Perumal saami temple. A temple where the Naicker community worship.... If you look in a westward direction, the lakes and ponds stand by side...baathraang kulam (named for the priests or podagars who lived nearby)...aiyar kulam (pond of the Aiyars)...(Bama *Karukku* 1-2)

To the east of the village lies the cemetery. We live next to that.

I don't know how ... the upper-caste communities and the lower caste-communities were separated... into different parts of the village. But they kept themselves to their part of the village and we stayed in ours. (Bama *Karukku* 6)

The extract describes strategies of segregation in caste hierarchy. The Dalits are seemingly restricted the social customs as their community is allowed to exist only in margins of socio-cultural spaces of the mainstream society.

We only went to their parts if we had work to do there. But they never, ever, came to our parts. The post-office, the panchayat board, the milk-depot, the big shops, the church, the schools – all these stood in their streets. So why would they need to come to our area? (Bama *Karukku* 6)

Above given is an instance how Dalits are denied access to public social institutions. In Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, the villages were segregated and divided into Dalit area and upper caste area. In his autobiographical narrative, Sharankumar Limbale refers to his village as Mahar wada - the place where Mahars live. In *Untouchable Spring*, G. Kalyana Rao depicts numerous descriptions of malle palle and madiga palle - the place where Mallas and Madigas live. Thus, Dalits are even denied agency as a social being. In *Black Boy* we have a biased society where government, law, and social system conspires together to maintain African-Americans as oppressed and marginalized. Wright depicts instances where the Jim Crow laws, 'separate but equal' doctrine, 'one-drop' rule and Klux Klan among other social institutions drag the Blacks and confine them in shackles within the margins of American society.

“Why didn't Granny marry a white man?” I asked

“Because she didn't want to,” my mother said peevishly....

She slapped me and I cried. Later grudgingly, she told me that Granny came of Irish, Scotch, and French stock in which Negro blood had somewhere and somehow been infused. She explained it all in a matter-of-fact, offhand, neutral way; her emotions were not involved at all. (Wright 56)

“Why are they taking mama that way?” I asked Uncle Edward.

“There are no hospital facilities for colored, and this is the way we have to do it,” he said.(Wright 110)

While the former quote above depicts an instance of 'one-drop' rule, latter portray an instance of 'separate but equal' doctrine. *Black Boy* is a social document in the sense that it depicts accurately the social system with historical veracity. *Karukku*, similarly, is a historical social document in the sense that it records the chapters of humiliation, discrimination and

segregation of the marginalized, erased from the mainstream social history. The long history of segregation, humiliating pain and suffering is documented in *Karukku* as it is experienced. The seeming distinction between the narratives is that while the former is largely a subjective narrative, the latter also includes the collective narration.

Apart from the functions described above, both *Karukku* and *Black Boy*, as life writings, also depict collective trauma of the marginalized community. According to Bama,

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.... I never aspired to become a writer. In fact, I never thought of writing *Karukku*. After my return from the convent I had a very difficult time. I was confronted with all sorts of problems. I was treated like an outcast... I could not take it any longer. And I began writing to stop myself from taking my own life. *Karukku* came out naturally. It was more of an outpouring of all my experiences than a literary act. It just happened on its own. I didn't even think of getting it published. (Bama Interview)

Thus, *Karukku* was written so naturally as a result of the author's traumatic experience of dalitality. As Leigh Gilmore notes, in the case of Bama too,

the subject of trauma refers to both a person struggling to make sense of an overwhelming experience in a particular context and the unspeakability of trauma itself, its resistance to representation(46).

As evident from her words, writing occurred naturally as a result of Bama's attempt to come into terms with the traumatic oppression. While *Karukku* also functions as a collective trauma narrative resulting from Bama's dalit experience, *Black Boy* was written as a way out for expressing Wright's deep anguish and disgust against racial violence he witnessed almost daily. Being a witness to racial brutality was his traumatic experience. While Bama keenly depicted gender discrimination and violation of Dalit body in her life writing, revealing a multi-layered exploitation: as a Dalit and as a woman, Wright seems to have written down on every massacre, bloodshed and violence he came across. Both the narratives profoundly bear testimony to the trauma of the life in the margins as it is experienced.

As most other life writings from the margins, *Black Boy* and *Karukku* also speak the collective experiences of their community. Defying the mainstream classification of literatures, they bring together multiple facets of marginalized experiences together. Thus they function as autobiographical, life writing depicting collective community biography and trauma, all at the same time. Reading such narratives in the academic spaces would expand the horizons of readerly experience resulting from the marginalized appropriation of mainstream spaces.

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