

Studying Bama's *Karukku* as a *Bildungsroman*

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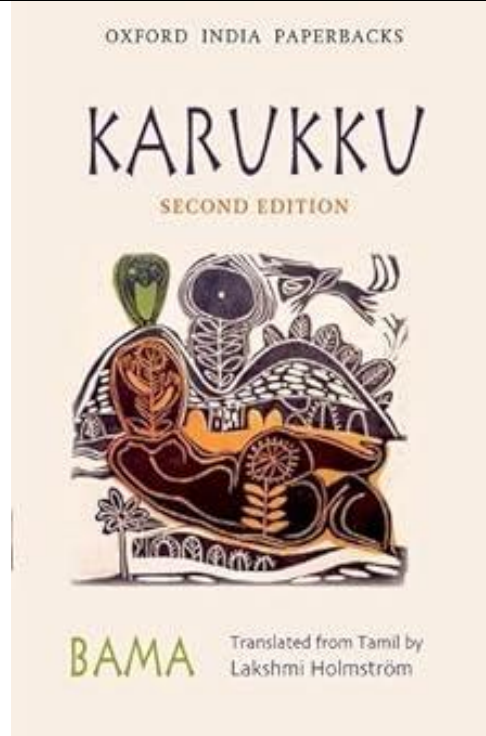
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Abstract

Bama (born 1958) is considered a significant Dalit woman writer from contemporary India. In her seminal work, *Karukku* (1992), Bama records her most traumatic experiences in the Convent, Church, seminary, and the Christian community that become the centres of discrimination based on caste. Besides the narratives about the separate human settlement in the village, lower caste people working for upper castes on low wages, the tradition of leftover, hierarchical possession over natural resources like water of lakes, rivers or pastures showcase the

mindsets of society. This research paper discusses how *Karukku* is a Bildungsroman while tracing the growth of the protagonist from childhood into maturity imparting moral and social values through this novel.

Keywords: Bama, *Karukku*, Bildungsroman, discrimination, Convent, Church, seminary, Christian community.



Bama Faustina Soosairaj

Courtesy: <https://english.mathrubhumi.com>

Bama's autobiographical novel, *Karukku*, narrates her experiences starting from a village in Tamilnadu since her childhood where her Christian parents live, revealing the customs and rituals of the village, folktales and myths she listens to from the elders, her experiences in the school, hostel, Convent, Church, at workplace and society at large all contribute to transforming her character.

Bildungsroman, a subclass of a novel, is a German term which originated from two German words: 'Bildung' and 'Roman' meaning 'education'/'formation' and 'novel' (your dictionary.com) respectively which refer to the German tradition of 'self-cultivation'. This signifies the "novel of formation". The subject of a bildungsroman is the development of the protagonist's mind and character in the passage from childhood through varied experiences, often through a spiritual crisis, into maturity. Besides, this process or evolution generally involves the recognition of one's identity

and role in the world around them (Abrams 255). This mode began in Germany with K.P. Moritz's *Anton Reiser* (1785-90) and with the publication of Johann Wolfgang Goethe's Wilhelm Meister's *Apprenticeship* (1795-96), the genre came into vogue. Though the genre proliferated in Germany, it influenced writers across the globe rapidly. In England, the term was popularized by Carlyle with his translation of Goethe's classic work into English in 1824 which paved the way for the other English writers to toe the line. It includes Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847), George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861), Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* (1915), and Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (1924) (Abrams 255) The term was coined by Karl Morgenstern and used by Wilhelm Dilthey who legitimized and popularized it in 1870 and 1905 respectively.

Bildungsroman is different from the other subclasses of the novel because the narrative in such novels revolves around the protagonist—may be either 'an artist', 'an orphan', 'a runaway' or 'a misfit'--- who while grappling against the issues of 'class struggle', 'sexual frustration' or 'alienation' finally become able to evolve his/her character. Secondly, it emphasizes the protagonist's attainment of maturity and recognition of his/her roles and identity in the world and besides these, such novels give a deep insight into the lives of the characters and their struggle against the inner and outer crises. In simple words, yourdictionary.com describes the characteristics of a bildungsroman: 1) the main character questions something in his/her life that might have due to some big loss or some emotional change. 2) Such a questioning the protagonist feels inside pushes him/her to gain life experience or seek knowledge. 3) The journey the protagonists take towards maturity or enlightenment becomes full of twists and turns and the outcomes they expect might change or their life can take a twist they do not expect. 4) Finally, through their journey, the character grows mentally and physically. They gain maturity they did not have at the beginning of the story. They blossom into grown-ups. In addition to this, there is a long list of novels centring on the theme of the protagonist's attainment of role and identity in the world. In this context, Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Johns: A Foundling* (1749), Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815), J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) etc. can be seen as an example of Bildungsroman. To focus on the protagonist's journey to the formation of his/her character through several thick and thin, the plot in Bildungsroman generally unfolds as mentioned below: Protagonist's emotional loss, departure from family, encounter with self and society,

attainment of knowledge and maturity, reconciliation with changing values of society, and family reunion. While dealing with some of the common features of the proposed subclass of the novel, it is generally observed that societal constraints compel the protagonists' propensity for the attainment of maturity to leave their locale and family with a view to going to a more developed city for the betterment of their condition. This separation helps them realize their roles in the world. On their journey to the attainment of maturity, the protagonists are always accompanied by some strangers who play a crucial role in broadening their understanding and practical knowledge about the world. After the attainment of knowledge, the protagonists unite with their families. Bildungsroman always ends with a positive note that people's mental strength enables them to overcome all that hampers their gateway to success (Rawat 10).

An important subtype of the Bildungsroman is the **Kunstlerroman**, "artist-novel" which represents the development of the novelist or the other artist from childhood into the stage of maturity that signalizes the recognition of the protagonist's artistic destiny and mastery of an artistic craft. Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1849-50) is considered an early example of this subtype (Abrams 255).

In the opening of the novel, Bama describes her village as beautiful encircled by the mountains, a sort of natural border. There are numerous lakes and ponds in the village separate for every caste or community. There is a small bus stand at the entrance of the village. Beyond the bus stand, there is a stream that runs full of water only in the rainy season otherwise it stinks as it is used by the villagers as an open toilet. In small settlements of Nadars twenty families known as Odapatti live there on the left and climb Palmyra palms for livelihood. To the right, the Koravar there live who used to sweep streets. Some distance away there was Kusavar who used to make earthen pots. Next to that, there was Palla. Thereafter, exists the protagonist's settlement, the Paraya settlement. It is almost near the cemetery. Bama writes:

I don't know how it came about that the upper-caste communities and lower-caste communities were separated like this into different parts of the village. But they kept themselves to their part of the village, and we stayed in ours. We only went to their side if we had any 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, and the schools-all these stood in

their streets. So why would they need to come to our area? Besides, there was a big school on Naicker Street which was meant only for upper caste children. (Bama 7)

In this way, Bama acquaints the readers about the human settlement in her village which reveals the division of the village and its natural resources based on castes. She shows that the institution of education, health, civil supply, and worship were in the jurisdiction of the upper-caste people and an instance of untouchability being practised in the form of a school that restricts the lower-caste people.

Thereafter, Bama shares about the ways the people of the village both i.e. upper-caste and lower-caste earn their livelihood and reveals their economic conditions. She writes:

Most of our people are agricultural labourers. When there is no call for work in the fields, they go up to the woods on the mountains and make a living by gathering firewood and selling it. People from the better-off castes never have such problems, though. They own fields with boundaries; they have dug wells and established pump sets; they can pump their land all year; they eat well and live in comfort in their homes. Anyway, besides wells there are any number of ponds in these parts. (2)

When it comes to the lower caste streets in the case of fetching water from the water pump, there used to be a lot of long queues waiting for their turn fighting and arguing for their turns after 5 O'clock in the afternoons (8). Bama exposes the practice of bonded labourers in respect of her family and society. She writes, "More than three-quarters of the land in these parts are in the hands of the Naickers. People of our community work for them, each Paraya family is attached to a Naicker family, as panniyaal, bonded labourers. As far as I have seen, it is only the Palla and Paraya communities who work in this way. Other communities don't have to work so hard" (48). Everyone in Bama's community has to work hard for their livelihood except the fewest of teachers' families. Besides this, Bama says that her father was in the Indian National Army and whenever he used to be at home for vacation, he managed a variety of delicious food for the family. Although he left some money at home, as it is spent, the family had to experience a financial crisis. Sometimes the family is forced to starve and during such circumstances, the basic needs of the family are managed by her mother and grandmother. Her grandmother used to work in the homes

of Naickers and bring leftovers which used to feed the stomachs of the family members (16), whereas her mother feels compelled and works as coolie to meet the basic needs of the family (72).

Further, Bama shares her poignant experiences as a student during school and college days like how the idea of casteism or discrimination based on caste remains consistently prevalent in the minds of educators or teachers even those who are supposed to spread the light of wisdom to remove the darkness of ignorance. Despite the provisions of eliminating untouchability under Article 17 of Fundamental Rights in the Constitution of India, whatever the protagonist experiences and observes becomes an irony in this respect (Bakshi 55). The protagonist shares an experience when she was in seventh class. She says that she used to play with other students after school in the evening every day. Once they were playing and climbing onto the trees like neem and coconut in front of the school. While playing a coconut falls at her touch just by mistake. The students got scared and ran home leaving the coconut there only. They named her before the headmaster when got enquired. Bama writes:

The next morning at assembly, the headmaster called out my name. 'You have shown us your true nature as a Paraya,' he said. You had climbed the coconut tree yesterday when everybody else had gone home, and you stole a coconut. We cannot allow you inside the school. Stand outside.' I was in agony because I had been shamed and insulted in front of all the children. (19)

Here we see the student could have been rebuked for not climbing the trees generally or she should have been counselled, but chiding and humiliating her in the name of her caste in front of all children showcases the casteist mindset of the headmaster. This incident remains indelible in the heart of Bama as a child and haunts the rest of her life. When she stays in the hostel after eighth class, Bama says that the Warden-sister used to behave badly with the lower-caste students. She used to comment publicly that these Cheri [lower caste] starve at home and become weak when they go home on holidays whereas turn fat here in the hostel (20). Sharing one more experience, she says:

All the same, now and then, our class teacher, or the PT teacher would ask all the Harijan children to stand up, either at assembly or during lessons. We'd stand. They'd write down

our names, and ask us to sit down again. We felt really bad then. We would stand in front of nearly two thousand children, hanging our heads in shame, as if we had done something wrong. Yes, it was humiliating. (21)

Besides these, Bama experiences discrimination based on caste in the convent (25) and in the college (73).

The life of Bama's grandmothers as she mentions her two grandmothers becomes an epitome of deprivation, struggle, and humiliation which they undergo with patience for the sake of her family. Bama writes:

Both my grandmothers worked as servants for Naicker families. In the case of one of them, when she was working in the fields, even tiny children, born the other day, would call her by her name and order her about, just because they belonged to the Naicker caste. And this grandmother like all the other labourers, would call the little boy Ayya, Master, and run about, and run about to do his bidding. It was shameful to see them do this. Even the way they were given their drinking water was disquieting to watch. The Naicker women would pour out the water from a height of four feet, while the Paati [grandmother] and the others received and drank it with cupped hands held to their mouths. I always felt terrible when I watched this. (16)

Besides experiencing disrespect and humiliation while working for the upper-caste families during the day, Bama's grandmother had a very strict routine. She used to wake up before dawn and go to the Naicker houses to sweep the cowshed, to collect the dung and dirt. After that, when coming home, she used to bring the leftover rice and curry from the previous evening. After having brought the leftovers home, she used to feel as if she had been given the elixir of the Gods (16). Everyone considered her a true and proper servant. She was also a Kotthaal who used to hire labourers for them and used to bring them to work regularly. She used to supervise them and used to clear their wages. Generally, she used to go to work every day except Sundays. Even on Sundays, "Sometimes, the Naickers insisted, she would rush through Pusai before daylight on Sunday, and then run to work. She'd rise before cock-crow at two or three in the morning, draw water, see to the household chores, walk a long distance to the Naicker's house, work till sunset,

and then come home in the dark and cook a little gruel for herself” (49). The hectic routine, discrimination being a lower caste, and humiliation make Bama agonistic and compel her to think about the upliftment of her community.

One of the most significant things Bama exposes through this novel is her realization of the real faces of the convent, the Church and Christianity. Whatever discrimination Bama had experienced, observed, and had her community undergone since her childhood and she had been acquainted with by the diverse narratives in society by the older generation and folktales gets approved with her direct encounter with the practices and rituals in the Convent and Church. After seeing her community working hard for their livelihood and survival (48), children going to work instead of schools (55), corruption being practised by the government agencies (64), the practice of giving lower wages to women than men for the same work (55) and several other unjust practices encourage Bama to take an initiative for the liberation and upliftment of her community because she feels agonistic at every step of her life seeing how the upper caste people treat her community. Having been inspired in this way, Bama turns a rebel and while going against the wishes of her parents joins the college on the advice of a nun and desires to become a nun to change the destiny of her community through her consistent efforts. Her parents had wished her to stay at home as there was no money for her college studies. After her admission her father writes a letter to her, ““You listened to the nun’s advice and joined college; so now ask them to give you the money; go on go to them”” (75). But Bama did not go back. She endured all the shame and humiliation and stayed on with deprivations. After completing her Bachelor of Education, she starts working and her life becomes secure and stable because of the regular money in hand, and she realizes "those who have the cash to spend can always afford to live in comfort" (76).

At this point, she thinks about the people of her community as Bama writes, "I realized that if only the children on my street acquired a little education and found jobs and found jobs, they too could live reasonably well. But, then, how are they to educate themselves? The struggle to fill their bellies is their main struggle, after all" (77). She says that it was this desire to change the destiny of the children to better themselves that motivated her to become a nun and enter a convent. But after entering the convent she sees the reality that the convent did not care to help the poor people, it only wished to serve the children of the wealthy. Students were discriminated against

based on their class. This was not the objective of a convent. It differed in practice and for it stands. The nuns were required to make three vows: of poverty, chastity, and obedience and were supposed to observe them. But these vows become a means of control and enslavement. Nuns in that convent did not know the meaning of poverty. As Bama raised her voice against discrimination based on class and caste, she was transferred to Jammu. She finds it difficult to spend time there as other nuns do not talk to her. Having experienced the hypocrisy being practised in the convent, Bama decides to leave the convent (126). She experiences endless hardships after leaving the job, and becomes unable to meet her basic needs but for her mental peace and justice matter more than hypocritical self-materialism without her community's liberation. Instead of going home, she reaches Madurai in the hope of finding some job outside the world she has just left.

The above analysis of the novel presents the arduous journey of Bama's life. The novel, while tracing her journey since her childhood confirms the features of Bildungsroman like Bama questions the fate or conditions of her community, the convent, and the Church that privileges the upper-caste people. The agonistic conditions of the lower-caste people compel Bama to find some way for the liberation and upliftment of her community. Therefore, she rebels against her parents i.e. takes admission to the college against the wishes of her parents, becomes a nun and enters the convent. She finds just the opposite of what the convent stands for. Here, she becomes aware of the reality of this world. She had desired to bring about a change in society through this medium but now realizes that it is not possible from the convent in any way. So, she decides to leave the convent and the order. She returns to her home but before reaching home she meets her friend in Madurai to discuss finding a job for her. Through her lifelong journey with twists, Bama grows mentally and physically to maturity. She shares the essence of her life that an individual can change his or her life with education only. Education is the only tool to change the destiny of any individual. Moreover, Bama's *Karukku* becomes an appropriate example of Bildungsroman.

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