

Critical Pedagogical Contraventions in and Through Bama's *Karukku*

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ABSTRACT

The reading and teaching of *Karukku* (2017), permits the interrogation of conventional orthodoxies through critical contraventions. *Karukku* offers complex and enriching possibilities since it deals with Bama's reformulation of pedagogic practices within the catholic convent. Paulo Freire, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), looks at pedagogy as political, interventionist, and performative rather than as innocent, neutral and pedantic. Bama's experience as a teacher shows pedagogy to be always-already implicated in one's social situatedness. It also "teaches" her about the sordid relationship between capital (market economy) and cultural capital (ideological economy of knowledge production). The classroom needs to be "read" as an interrogative discursive text, where resistant histories of the subaltern subject/pupil struggle gets narrated and the teacher's irredeemably personal experience becomes "politicized". I see Bama as a Freirean pedagogue whose pedagogy is humane, caste sensitive, personalized and remedial. I would like to see Bama's radical pedagogy as a recuperative and revisionist one; it then becomes a hermeneutic of exclusion. Her book can be re-imagined and re-contextualized across a variety of subjects such as women's studies, minority studies or the English literature classroom.

Keywords: Pedagogy, hermeneutics, ideological, discursive, instrumentality

As a teacher in a catholic convent, Bama found that the classroom was a site of unassailable conflict and struggle for knowledge production. Similarly, while teaching *Karukku*, a Dalit autobiography in a classroom, the teacher faces a struggle with the dominant structures of representation and ideological models of intelligibility. This is because within the "innocent" space of the classroom, the infiltrating political contexts of class and caste constitute a discursive and unequal

relationship. The classroom thus becomes saturated and contaminated by extra-pedagogical machinations of ideological power. Paulo Freire, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) looks at pedagogy as political, interventionist and performative, and not as innocent, neutral and pedantic. Pedagogy for Freire becomes part of a broader discursive universe, and functions as an instrument for political resistance. Freirean pedagogy is a pedagogy of and for “consciousness raising”; it performs a methodological violence on dated and retrogressive institutional knowledge formations.

Bama’s experience as a teacher in a Catholic Convent showed her that pedagogy was always-already implicated in one’s social situatedness and was organized around the broad anchoring points of caste, class, religion and gender. Her experience as a teacher “taught” her about the sordid relationship between capital (market economy) and cultural capital (ideological economy of knowledge production). Bama recognized that her “location” within the classroom duplicated and reproduced her situation outside of the teaching sphere; pedagogical instrumentalities reified existing structures of power to replicate a Dalit woman’s sense of shame and subordination within the convent. Bama’s disillusionment within the convent and with the presiding church mission, serves as a confirmation of Freire’s thesis. She states, “I dreamt that I would share my life with the poor. Instead I was sent to a prestigious school. All the children that came there were from wealthy families. There seemed to be no connection between God and the suffering poor.” (Bama, 2017, p. 106).

Bama’s identity as a Dalit woman as well as the identities of the children belonging to Pallar, Parayar, Chaaliyar, Cheri and other Harijan communities were not dissolved but reified within the classroom through the material forces of institutional power. Historical structures of oppression, economic struggles of survival and social narratives of caste prejudice were anchored in a Dalit’s everyday school-going experience. *Karukku* reminds us that the classroom is like an embattled political sphere, where there is a struggle between Dalit aspirations and self-assertion on the one hand, and casteist orthodoxies and hegemonic instrumentalities on the other.

Each class was full of children from wealthy families. All they had to do was to be light-skinned and arrive in cars. As a token of gesture they took four or five poor children. The rich children would say, We don’t want to sit next to these ones, they are dark-skinned, they are poor, they are ugly. It seemed to me that it was a waste of my time to teach such children. (Bama, 2017, p. 112-13).

A conventional, hegemonic market-driven (progressive) model of pedagogy would like us to believe that there are disruptions and discontinuities between our identities outside and within the classroom. It views the classroom as abstracted from the broader context of untouchability, violence and injustice. The divisive “nature” of the convent and the differential/differentiating experience that the Dalit children bring to the classroom shows that any knowledge production is deeply contingent on the material forces of the society. The institutional authority such as was shown by the Church superiors towards the imaginative methodology of Bama's teaching, the monotonous indoctrinating regime of coercive catechisms and a stagnant teaching curriculum that perpetuated social prejudices and caste orthodoxies so as to reorganize the Dalit's classroom experience around visible and ineradicable historical, economic and cultural forces.

Freire's critical and transformative pedagogy has taught us to “read” the text and social con-text. Barthes in *Writing Degree Zero* (1968) has shown the text to be a field of action, a social object since language is a collective inventory and a sedimented corpus of history. Barthes's work opens up the possibility of the “functionality” of literary text; the transmutation of a purely personal and self-directed language into a social utterance. The classroom thus needs to be “read” as an interrogative discursive text where resistant histories of the subaltern subject/pupil struggle get narrated. Also, institutionally regularized curriculum and ideological relations of power try to withhold this resistive utterance. The teacher's personal experience becomes “politicized” as it delegitimizes and unsettles particular forms of knowledge.

Bama as a Dalit Christian tries to locate herself in this complex narrative, where her self-location as a poor, ostracized untouchable determines her ambivalent relation to the Church, her rich pupils and Dalit students. The Frankfurt School, especially Horkheimer and Adorno have established the material basis of cultural production. Freire similarly locates culture at the intersection of political, pedagogical and ideological relations of power. So one is led to interrogate the role of the teacher in this complex cultural production. If education shapes social structures and is implicated in being a state apparatus for ideological indoctrination, then is the teacher an unwitting facilitator or a willing accomplice in the dissemination of propagandist orthodoxies? Can the teacher reinvent a pedagogical contravention which appropriates the classroom as a site of on-going resistance? Can the teacher be both within and outside what Gayatri Spivak (2009) calls the *Teaching Machine*? The Dalit student stares at an existentialist absence and unknowingness, which is actually an ethnico-political erasure of the Dalit culture. Similarly, the subaltern subject finds no mention of his/her ancestors in the official curriculum. Such a pedagogy of cultural repression and historical evasion creates a practice

which is lacking in methodological rigour and is populist, morally void, saleable and abstracted from political formations.

In opposition to this, the Freirean model recognizes the inevitability of a politically engaged, interrogative, non-conformist, subversive pedagogy which is experiential in praxis and ethical in its objective. For Freire, the teaching subject (proper) and the learning subject (in-making) are experiential subjects who need to interrogate and resist dominant relations of power. The Dalit subject is not an uncontaminated subject of humanism, or an unfinished project of enlightenment, but is engendered by historical structures of oppression and these structures are being reproduced. The Dalit student and teacher for that matter embodies the failure of enlightenment. I see Bama as a Freirean pedagogue whose humane, caste sensitive, personalized and remedial pedagogy challenges the Catholic school's insular, depersonalized, caste oblivious and punitive pedagogy.

Bama discovers the absence of Dalit presence in textbooks, and in the official nationalist history canonized and disseminated in the classroom. Her strenuous efforts to resist indoctrination and what Althusser calls interpellation within the dominant relations of power show her quest for a transformative practice; one that recognizes the historical and social legitimacy of the Dalit student's experience of subjectivity. I would like to see Bama's radical pedagogy as a recuperative and revisionist one, as her strategy is to seek out blind spots in the dominant historical and religious narratives being produced and reproduced in the classroom. It becomes a hermeneutic of exclusion. She formulates a displacing, threatening and alternative model of theology which is disavowed by the Church. Her "subaltern" exegesis of the scriptures accommodates the specificity of the Dalit student's experience within the dominant representational system. She reconceives the Dalit student as corporeally embodied and caught up in recognizable circuits of social organization, institutional discourses, experiential relations, and relations of equalization, autonomy and socialization. By re-organizing her classroom practices around the specificity of everyday Dalit oppression, Bama reorganizes the pedagogic model itself. Such a practice of knowledge production is ideologically inspired and necessarily political as it is a pedagogy of contestation. It is a "living" pedagogy, as it engages with the diverse context of the Christian classroom. Rather than see her students as uncritical recipients of theological indoctrination, Bama humanizes and localizes Christian teachings. Her classroom becomes a strategically positioned locus of knowledge formation, where students bring age old customs, practices of segregation and other disempowering social traditions into their classroom experience. Experiences of oppression and subalternity are inscribed upon their desocialized bodies. Her classroom helps the Dalit students to interrogate rather than "learn" about their lived experience by using extra-

pedagogical and non-discursive tools such as anecdotes, village legends, myths and memories of historical oppression. Such a collective pedagogical practice which is critical, interventionist and contextual, delegitimizes dominant forms of knowledge production. The politically disengaged conventional pedagogical practice which does not have the democratic goal of social justice, wilfully erases these differences in order to promulgate a fictitious and mythological fable of social egalitarianism within the classroom. Difference is not incidental but integral to facilitating a robust critical dialogue.

Bama's classroom as described in *Karukku* as well as the teaching of *Karukku* in a classroom should be seen as a social practice, since teaching the text helps the Dalit student in the recognition of his/her identity. Moreover, it constitutes a broad interdisciplinary negotiation between different discourses and institutional models. The book may get re-imagined and re-contextualized when dislocated and displaced across a variety of subject positions such as in a women's studies classroom, a minority studies classroom or an English literature classroom. Such a heterogeneous multidisciplinary recognizes that the "subaltern" is not an unchanging epistemological monolith but a Dalit, a woman, a Christian, a teacher and a writer.

The differences in the culture outside the classroom are not attenuated within the institution. Bama's classroom becomes a representational model of the discontinuous, differentiated and divisive nature of Indian classrooms. By interrogating the asymmetrical alignment of caste configurations within the "public" classroom, Bama shows how the same curriculum conforms and secures the privilege of a certain class, while de-recognizing the backwardness of certain communities. The classroom therefore manufactures false representational models which distort the reality of the subaltern subject's lived experience. To "produce" a unified, nationalist culture through educational practices, the dominant semantics of postcolonial modernity, liberal progressiveness, constitutionally sanctioned rights and guarantees, all serve to perpetrate the illusory erasure of economic and caste formations. The political and institutional structures accomplish this through a form of hegemonic pedagogy, a pedagogy oriented not towards freedom and liberation as Freire postulated, but rather towards creating a "false consciousness" amongst students. The Freirean pedagogue in the Indian classroom must acknowledge his/her debt to Bama's pedagogical reinvention. By teaching "of" the text in a comparative context, he/she must also enable the student "through" the text to demolish dominant structures of misrepresentation outside the classroom.

Pedagogy must be attentive to the epistemological polyvalence generated when

Karukku is taught in translation or to non-Christian or upper-caste students. A pedagogical model which reads *Karukku* as an oversimplified Dalit autobiography and not as a tale of institutional hypocrisy, everyday caste oppression, collusion between upper-caste and the State machinery, and the inegalitarian nature of convent schooling will legitimize and reproduce the *acceptable* text in classroom. It is here that Freire's ideas of "problem-posing" comes into play. If a Dalit student refuses to receive this acceptable meaning, then it opens up the possibility of resistance which can lead to the creation of an alternative, unacceptable narrative and representational model.

Lakshmi Holmström, in her introduction to *Karukku*, cautions against reading it as a feminist diatribe since Bama "does *not* make a connection between caste and gender oppression". Such a strategy legitimizes reading the text in isolation from contexts of gender and sexuality. Firstly, Holmström errs in presuming that the text has a pre-eminent meaning prior to being read by students, whereas meanings are generated by student experiences and within historically produced cultural instruments such as the language of teaching, the bracketing of text as minority literature or mainstream writing, etc. Secondly, Holmström fails to understand that the "feminist" meaning of *Karukku* will become intelligible only when it is read within certain specialized discourses and systems of intelligibility such as gender studies programme. The female Dalit student will engraft her own experience of caste-related gender oppression onto the text. The student's interpretation, ideological consent or critique arising out of disparate historical, economic and gender locations must be rooted in the pedagogical process. Thus, the translator's introduction can be seen as inattentive to the contradictory nature of the reader's experience and invalidating the frames of reference which lie outside of curriculum. Bama's gender politics cannot be abstracted from caste politics and her narrative of Dalit assertion cannot be read outside the contexts of Ambedkarite politics or Dravidian reformation of the Periyar. This again resonates with Freire's idea that knowledge is produced only through the pedagogical encounter between teacher and student; knowledge cannot be pre-suppositionally located before or outside of the encounter between the teacher and the student.

Bama's radical pedagogy is rooted in ethical dissent and differentiation, as she interrogates the classroom as a site of democratic tolerance and social cohesiveness. Bama's pedagogical adventurism is therefore a refusal to endlessly play out an outmoded and retrograde semantic which ignores material relations of social and economic exchange and in a way re-subjectivizes the subaltern pupil by giving a voice to his/her marginalization. However, one can see her that her classroom experiments are limited to only reworking the technologies

of knowledge production; the epistemological content of this knowledge remains unchanged. The “content” of knowledge being disseminated to the student remains ideologically rooted in a casteist frame. This knowledge is seen as an *a priori* textual excess, a hallowed corpus of purist wisdom produced outside of the classroom and untouched by the pedagogical encounter between a Dalit teacher and her Dalit students. The ideological friction in this pedagogical encounter and the unassailable social tension between upper class Naickers and Harijan children has the potential to mobilize difference and innervate it within the text. The reorganized context has the power to reshape the text, thus producing the text through discursive and non-discursive practices rather than simply receiving it. This “living” text becomes an ongoing site of articulation for different experiences of the subaltern communities. But, Bama’s critical pedagogy falls tragically short of reinventing what I would call an Epistemology of Oppression.

Freire emphasized the location of the classroom and how modes of learning transmit or contain self-representation and political will. So, one needs to ask how the classroom can actively transform the subaltern non-subject into a historicized political species? The students from Dalit households need to be taught to “read” the word and the world with ethical suspicion. For this the classroom must refuse to see knowledge as an instrumentalized capital which is meant for the bourgeois student-consumer. However, an even more crucial question to pose is how transformative pedagogy can reconstitute the theoretical content of learning? How can students be transformed into becoming active producers of meaning? The first thing is to make them recognize the classroom as a pleomorphic semantic space invested with cultural significations such as caste, gender, class, language, etc. The teacher’s own caste and gender delimits his/her role in the consumption, production and dissemination of knowledge. A critical pedagogy will make the Dalit student aware of the difference ascribed to him/her rather than neutralize such identity determinants. Difference which till now was visible to the Dalit student as a personalized and unalterable experience of everyday humiliation, is now made visible as a historical, constructed and alterable phenomenon that exists outside the orbit of his/her privative comprehension. Difference is thus made a *gestalt* from which the subaltern is critically estranged.

Secondly, critical pedagogy can help initiate a dialogue between long established discourses such as scriptural hegemony, theocracy, official histories and non-established discourses such as folklore and orality. By doing so, it enlists those alternative and subordinate modes of knowledge production. The next step can be the reconstruction of lost Dalit history, the recuperation of subordinated narratives to create an alternative archaeology of knowledge. The Dalit students, rather than uncritically “consume” elitist and nationalist narratives, can be given the

opportunity to recount their own hi(stories), thus re-making and re-structuring conventional archives. Critical pedagogy thus becomes a tool of subaltern historiography; history is no longer seen as bounded and monolithic. So, true critical pedagogy is an instrument for forging disciplinary intersectionality and textualizing one's cultural contexts. Thus, pedagogy of ethical dissent and cultural contestation situates the learning subject in a relational frame, allowing him/her to draw connections between religious conversion and subordination, orthodoxy and discrimination, and historical injustice and remedial reservation.

Freire denounced the "Banking" model of education and its retrograde, instrumental, consumerist nature. Critical pedagogy attempts to de-essentialize knowledge as an inflexible repository, as pre-eminent and as fully formed. It alerts the student to the fluidity, indeterminism and multiplicity of epistemes. When students who have read the autobiographical writings of Sister Nivedita, Cornelia Sorabji or Pandita Ramabai in a gender studies paper are exposed to Bama's *Karukku* or Urmila Pawar's *The Weaves of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* (2009), they learn to see the homogeneity of categories such as women's life-writing or Third World feminism to be suspect. They detect an epistemological conflict between "women's writing" and "subaltern women's writing". They become alert to the ideological politics of institutional canon formations. *Karukku* as a daring innovation in the genre of life-writing, as a scathing attack on the hypocrisy of church and as a quest for self-identity outside of institutional structures becomes a deviant text, which disrupts regularized categories of cultural representation, theosophical learning, feminist writing and Dalit autobiography. It does not conform to the isomorphism of any of these genres, and thus offers critical pedagogy an opportunity to perform a contextualized, epistemologically dissident, politically engaged, ideologically informed, hermeneutically suspicious and historicized reading.

Pedagogy is inherently coalitional. Thus, the classroom becomes what Habermas (2011), calls a "public sphere", a discursive space where either dominant ideological practices are perpetrated or a counter-pedagogical practice is constituted. The other thing which makes the classroom a public sphere is its social stratification and heterogeneous composition. Who is the "object" of the pedagogical encounter between the actively meaning producing teacher and the passively consuming student? The student is not an indivisible, homogeneous, individualistic, androcentric, literate, upper-caste monolith. Thus both, the teacher and the student get discursively embedded in the politics of class, gender and caste. Knowledge and official curriculum are always-already infiltrated by dominant relations of power thus transforming the classroom to a knowledge industry. Bama is shrewd enough to identify the ideological dimension of the

convent, by recognizing how it positions the socially backward pupils within a “democratic” and “liberal” space of enlightenment. The convent classroom not only demolishes the democratic project, but programmatically institutionalizes the marginalization of subaltern students by adopting an elitist methodology and language of instruction, material markers of class such as uniforms and bags, and a market-driven competence-measuring evaluation system which prioritizes rote learning and memorization. Thus teaching Bama's *Karukku* critically in a conservative Jesuit classroom becomes an act of double dissent.

Reading *Karukku* against the grain as a feminist autobiography/ethnography can also necessarily retrieve the invisible genealogy of Dalit women, thus re-creating the forgotten history of Bama's Dalit community and ancestors. Bama writes about a small girl called Medenda Floater who couldn't swim; of a woman called Midday-Masala who ground spices at noon; Kaaman who was called Jack of all trades, and others. She observes that “you could write a whole book about each of them”, thus offering readers a glimpse into the unwritten biographies of Dalit Christians. Reading *Karukku* as an excavation of the historical, social, epistemological, cultural and ethnographic roles of Dalit Christians in India challenges traditional historical research. This reading of history from within, along with the historicization of her personal narrative makes visible strategic connections between the genealogical exploration of Dalit women's histories and the social exploration of Dalit life. Such a restructured teaching technique traverses multiple circuits of social, historical, anthropological and religious orders. Thus, this multiplicitous and multi-generic pedagogy truly becomes radical. It locates the teacher and student in an altering power dynamics by allowing the Dalit student to recover meanings that are “absent” and “invisible” to a non-Dalit teacher. The student psychoanalyses the Dalit autobiography to recover meanings located in the textual substratum or sub-textual unconscious. Like Macherey's reading of Jules Verne in *Theory of Literary Production*, such a reading contradicts the dominant production of textual meaning in the classroom; it has the potential to counter the teacher's reading of Bama's autobiography. The Dalit student attaches his/her personal meanings to *Karukku* just as Bama intended it; in fact only then can pedagogy accomplish what Freire calls ‘conscientization’.

The educational as opposed to instrumental model of pedagogy is geared towards possibilities of hope, democracy and freedom. A conscientized classroom makes the class and caste tensions which operate outside the classroom visible inside, thus offering an ideological critique of the reality witnessed, experienced and produced in cultural contexts. Therefore, rather than carrying out ideological indoctrination, an alternative vision of the reality is taught. The discursive tools of radicalization and struggle against caste oppression are not “given” but “made”

through the pedagogical encounter. A conscientized classroom ceases to be an insular space, as it takes knowledge-making outside the teaching machine. It makes the student aware of his/her situatedness within a community of oppressed, because only through a collaborationist and coalitional model can pedagogy of revolution be created.

One of the reasons I have located *Karukku* at the centre of my critical analysis of radical pedagogy and alternative reading strategies to address the shortcomings of Indian education is because it has been widely used as a “representative” text in universities. Such pedagogical practices have canonized it, robbed it of its bristling ideological power, and enshrined certain acceptable and obvious meanings while delegitimizing others. Radical pedagogy must attempt to interrogate these “textual deficiencies”. The Non-Dalit teacher must allow himself/herself to be taught by letting the Dalit student use his/her lived experience to explore the text. A teacher who surrenders institutionalized authority and allows himself/herself to be taught, makes visible the historically over-determined, culturally monopolizing, socially constructed and ideologically compromised nature of the classroom. Such a teacher learns to see curriculum not as an inflexible dead weight, but as a lived entity by making interconnections between curriculum and social practices, epistemologies and social applications, ethical procedures and developmental goals. A teacher who resists a product-oriented teaching methodology meant for quantifiable market gains such as improved academic credentials and result-oriented accreditation of the institution, re-humanizes pedagogical practices.

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