eISSN 2583-6986
IDEALISTIC JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH IN PROGRESSIVE SPECTRUMS (IJARPS)
A Monthly, Open Access, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) International Journal
Volume 04, Issue 06, June 2025

Double-Edged Truths: Subaltern Resistance, Dalit Identity, and Gender Politics in Bama's *Karukku*

Dr Fatima Ashana[1]
[1]Assistant Professor, Dept of English, VSSD College, Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh

Received: 29 June 2025 Accepted & Reviewed: 29 June 2025, Published: 30 June 2025

Abstract

Bama's Karukku is a landmark Tamil Dalit feminist autobiography that powerfully articulates the lived realities of caste, gender, and religious oppression. This paper critically analyzes Karukku as a testimonial narrative, revealing how it functions as a counter-discourse to hegemonic historiography and mainstream religious morality. Bama's use of language, symbolism, and personal experiences as a Dalit Christian woman provides a unique entry point into understanding subaltern consciousness. Through thematic analysis and literary critique, this study underscores how Karukku challenges structural inequities and fosters collective empowerment by turning personal trauma into resistance.

Keywords: Caste, Gender, Dalits, Subaltarn, Religious oppression, Inequalities, Feminism, intersectionality,

Introduction

Dalit literature emerged as a vehicle of protest and assertion in post-independence India, drawing from the lived realities of communities historically subjected to marginalization. As a genre rooted in "Dalit consciousness," it provides an alternative epistemology to canonical narratives. Bama's Karukku (1992), widely recognized as the first Tamil Dalit woman's autobiography, broke new ground by articulating the dual marginalization of caste and gender within religious structures. The text offers a visceral account of systemic injustice while also serving as a medium of healing and resistance. In contrast to nationalist autobiographies that often celebrate progress and unity, Karukku lays bare the hypocrisy of institutions and offers a fragmented, raw portrayal of subaltern life. As such, it serves as both testimony and indictment—amplifying voices long suppressed by mainstream discourse. The term 'Dalit,' meaning 'broken' or 'oppressed,' captures the historical marginalization of communities relegated to the lowest rung of the caste hierarchy. Rooted in scriptures like the Rigveda, caste became institutionalized across religious and political domains. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's interventions in the 20th century sparked a consciousness among Dalits, advocating for education and social mobility. He, widely revered as the father of the Dalit movement, was instrumental in challenging the entrenched caste hierarchies of Indian society. His tireless efforts aimed at securing dignity, equality, and a rightful place for Dalits in a deeply caste-ridden social order. Ambedkar strongly advocated for the annihilation of caste and the dismantling of regressive ideologies that perpetuated social injustice. He emphasized that equality before God and the law was a fundamental human right and urged his followers to "educate, agitate, and organize."(Ambedkar,17) In one of his powerful addresses, he asserted, "Have faith in you. With justice on our side, I don't see how we can lose our battle. For us, the fight is not for money or power. It is a fight for freedom."(Ambedkar,17)

In the post-independence era, Ambedkar's vision inspired the emergence of Dalit literature—a significant literary phenomenon that gave voice to the lived experiences of the oppressed. Dalit writing articulates the deep-seated pain, social exclusion, and systemic discrimination faced by marginalized communities. This literature does not merely recount suffering; it serves as a tool for social transformation by challenging caste-based oppression and advocating for the empowerment of the downtrodden. The Dalit

eISSN 2583-6986
IDEALISTIC JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH IN PROGRESSIVE SPECTRUMS (IJARPS)
A Monthly, Open Access, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) International Journal
Volume 04, Issue 06, June 2025

literary tradition is marked by a sharp critique of the socio-religious structures that sustain inequality. It aims to disrupt the hegemonic narratives and provide a platform for asserting identity, resistance, and liberation. Pioneering figures in this literary movement include Mahasweta Devi, Namdeo Dhasal, Daya Pawar, Urmila Pawar, Shantabai Kamble, Nirav Patel, Imayam, Abhimani, Marku, Kanwal Bharati, Perumal Murugan, Mangal Rathod, Palamalai, Bama, Sudhakar, among others. Their contributions not only reflect the socio-political consciousness of Dalit communities but also reshape the contours of Indian literature by foregrounding subaltern perspectives. Bama's Karukku reveals how caste persists in everyday life, even within Christianity. Her family converted in hopes of escaping caste-based indignities, but they remained landless laborers, excluded from social spaces and denied dignity. The author's experiences demonstrate how conversion failed to dismantle systemic exclusion. One of the most searing moments in Karukku comes from Bama's childhood: watching an elderly Dalit man carry food to an upper-caste man using a string to avoid direct contact. This incident, initially amusing to her, later unfolds as a symbol of internalized oppression. Her brother's explanation prompts her to see the deep injustice that had previously gone unspoken. She writes, "When I heard this, I didn't want to laugh any more, and I felt terribly sad. How did it come about that we were so downtrodden, we who are also human beings?" (Karukku, p. 25).

These small, daily humiliations accumulate and form a consciousness of alienation. The village geography—where schools, temples, and markets are segregated by caste—reinforces this exclusion. For Bama, growing up meant realizing that her existence was defined and limited by societal norms she had not chosen. In the foreword to her book, she recounts her own astringent experiences of the "palpitations and poignant pains" that marked her childhood. She writes like this, To change this situation, all those Dalits who have been deprived of their basic rights must act as the Word of God, penetrating the heart. Instead of being beaten up and blunted more and more, they unite, think about their rights and fight for them. She continued "The driving forces that shaped this book are many: the events that took place during several phases of my life bite me like a ' (a palm leaf with a rough edge) and make me bleed.(Karukku,p. 54). In her autobiography, Bama recalls that when she was in the third grade, she heard people openly talking about untouchability. Before that, she says, "I already saw, felt, experienced and was humiliated by all that is" (Karukku, p.23). Early on, Bama established the presence and persistence of deep prejudice against her community. This is heavily highlighted in the geographical description of her homeland in which certain areas are distinguished by status and then reserved for upper and lower communities. She writes,

I do not know how it happened that the upper caste communities and the lower caste communities were thus divided into different parts of the village. The post office, the panchayat board, the milk depot, the big shops, the churches, the schools - all these were standing in their respective streets. (Karukku, p 18). Thus, it becomes clear how her experiences of prejudice and consequent humiliation were shaped in the exercise of such hegemony. Bama uses both "I" and "we" narratives in her autobiography. What she then achieves is an individualization as well as universalization of Dalit as well as Dalit women's suffering. In the legend of Bama, it is made clear that the upper caste community of the Naikers could not touch the lower castes or the Paraiyars. If they did that, they would be polluted. This is further elaborated by an example when Bama saw an elderly man in her street carrying a package with the help of strings attached to the parcel without actually touching it. It was being taken to a man from the Naiker community. Initially, she has a good laugh at the man's antics, but upon narrating the incident to her brother, who tells her the underlying complexities, she becomes angry to the point of rebellion. "When I heard this, I didn't want to laugh any more, and I felt very sad," she writes:

eISSN 2583-6986
IDEALISTIC JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH IN PROGRESSIVE SPECTRUMS (IJARPS)
A Monthly, Open Access, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) International Journal
Volume 04, Issue 06, June 2025

I was feeling so agitated and angry that I wanted to go straight and touch those poor promise. Why should we bring snacks and hand them to this man, bowing and shrugging reverently, who just sits there and stuffs them in her mouth. I got angry thinking about it. How did it happen that these people thought so much of themselves? Because he scraped four coins at once, does that mean he should lose all human emotion? What did they mean when they called us "alien"? Was the name so obscene? But we are also human. Our people should never do these beautiful things for these people. We should work in their fields, take our wages home and leave it at that. (Karruku,p.25)

Bama's choice to write in colloquial Tamil disrupts elite literary traditions and affirms the validity of Dalit expression. The informal, first-person voice and conversational tone invite the reader into an intimate space. Her metaphors—particularly the double-edged palm leaf (karukku)—are both culturally rooted and symbolically rich, reflecting the pain and sharpness of her lived experience.

Her style mirrors the fluidity and fragmentation of memory. As a testimonial text, Karukku functions less as a chronological account and more as a collection of emotional and political insights. This aligns with the Latin American genre of testimonio, where the narrator speaks for a larger collective through personal experience.

The unique contribution of Karukku lies in its exploration of intersectionality. As a Dalit Christian woman, Bama experiences layered forms of oppression—by upper-caste society, patriarchal norms, and religious institutions. Her entry into the convent was driven by a desire to escape societal boundaries, but she quickly encountered discrimination from fellow nuns who viewed Dalits as inferior.

Bama describes how Dalit novices were made to do menial work and were denied the respect accorded to others. The church hierarchy, which should have modeled equality, replicated casteist practices in subtle and overt ways. Her disillusionment led to her eventual decision to leave the convent and reclaim agency. She writes:

I really thought I could live as a nun and find peace. But I came to understand that even here, caste has deep roots. (Karukku, p. 90).

Dalit Women's Lived Experience and Double Marginalization. Bama foregrounds the everyday struggles of Dalit women through stories of her mother and grandmother. These women toiled in the fields of Naiker landlords, drank water poured from a distance, and bowed to even the youngest upper-caste children. They endured both economic exploitation and symbolic humiliation. Bama feels that women are more abused for every situation and that male power leads to disasters. The issue of Dalit women in Indian culture is horrific as they are abused on the basis of class, influence and position. Women had begun to test the nexus, abuse and injustice inflicted upon them and must try to save a women's place for themselves. Elaine Showalter in The Theory of Gynocriticism (1986) says:

The construction of women is a dual-voiced thing that embodies the social, educational and social custom of both the cover and the common in general, and to the extent that most women advocate. Scholars, equally women are making, this dangerous legacy we are rabbits; each step towards self-thinking about the perfect; each record of female imaginative practice is of indistinguishable significance to our own sly indistinct history and original custom. (Elaine Showalter 263-4)

eISSN 2583-6986
IDEALISTIC JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH IN PROGRESSIVE SPECTRUMS (IJARPS)
A Monthly, Open Access, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) International Journal
Volume 04, Issue 06, June 2025

Bama articulates the particular vulnerability of Dalit women who face caste discrimination outside and patriarchal control within. Unlike upper-caste feminist narratives that focus on personal freedom, Bama's feminism is communitarian. Her fight is not only for individual emancipation but for collective dignity.

A major theme in Karukku is the transformative power of education. Bama's brother encourages her to study, telling her that academic achievement can help dismantle stereotypes. Motivated by this, she excels in her studies and eventually becomes a teacher. She views education not merely as a personal milestone but as a tool for community empowerment.

However, her journey in educational spaces is fraught with challenges. Prejudice, isolation, and low expectations confront her at every level. Despite these, she persists, and her teaching becomes an act of resistance. By educating Dalit children, she breaks the cycle of inherited subjugation.

Amidst the suffering, Karukku also celebrates the vibrancy of Dalit life. Bama describes festivals, songs, street plays, and rituals that sustain the community's spirit. Though they are denied access to dominant institutions, Dalits create their own cultural spaces where identity and resistance coalesce.

Even in religious celebrations like Christmas and Easter, the segregation continues. Dalit Christians organize parallel festivities because they are excluded from mainstream Church events. Yet, these parallel practices are rich in meaning and solidarity, revealing the community's ability to thrive in adversity.

Bama's narrative marks a significant break from silence—a deliberate decision to name, remember, and protest. Her storytelling becomes an act of defiance against structures that demand obedience and invisibility. As she notes,"This is not just my story—it is the story of my community" (Karukku, p. 11).

Through this act of remembering, Bama reclaims the agency that had been denied to her and her people. The personal becomes political, and memory becomes resistance. Her choice to speak as a Dalit Christian woman is revolutionary in a context where each of these identities invites marginalization.

Bama's critique of the Church is both personal and structural. She believed that Christianity, with its teachings of equality and compassion, could offer a sanctuary from caste. Yet, she found the same prejudices embedded in Christian institutions. Dalit Christians were viewed as inferior, assigned degrading tasks, and excluded from leadership roles. Thus Karukku reserves itself to be a confirmation in the form of various journals. Dalit Christian women experience the ill-effects of a crisis of character, being restricted to their less-than-oblivious deals, isolating themselves inside and outside the places of friendship. Writers like Bama took to her pen and her experiences, particularly of their circumstances in their families and affiliations, those women-related issues were aptly highlighted in Dalit framing. When a Dalit woman writes, she writes both as an individual and as a spokesperson of her community. A Dalit has not only a personal life of her own but she also gets incorporated in the swamping swirl of the community. The latter is termed as "Dalit Consciousness" which "refers to the consciousness of their own slavery, an understanding of their experiences of exclusion, subjugation, dispossession and oppression down the ages" (Limbale, Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations 71).

Despite this, Bama doesn't abandon faith. Instead, she reclaims it—stripped of institutional hypocrisy—as a source of inner strength and compassion. Her theology emphasizes a Christ who suffers with the oppressed and stands against injustice. In this way, she reconstructs a liberative spirituality grounded in lived reality.

Unlike traditional autobiographies centered on individual achievements, Karukku functions as a collective memoir. It is less about Bama the individual and more about Bama the community witness. Her experiences reflect those of countless others, making her narrative a shared archive of pain and endurance.

eISSN 2583-6986
IDEALISTIC JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH IN PROGRESSIVE SPECTRUMS (IJARPS)
A Monthly, Open Access, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) International Journal
Volume 04, Issue 06, June 2025

Scholars like Sharmila Rege have noted that Dalit women's autobiographies serve 'as testimonios, where the narrator assumes the role of representative.' In Karukku, Bama's "I" becomes as "we"—a voice for the voiceless, a chronicler of communal history.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" emphasizes the need for marginalized voices to speak in their own terms rather than through elite frameworks. She writes, "The subaltern cannot speak... the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow." (Spivak, 1988). Bama's voice, emerging from this shadow, becomes an intervention into precisely that erasure.

In another passage, Spivak states, "One must nevertheless insist that the subaltern woman is not only not heard... she is not even seen." (Spivak, 1988). Karukku disrupts this invisibility by insisting on presence, voice, and agency.

Resistance through Literary Form Formally, Karukku defies literary conventions. Its fragmented structure, repetition, and unpolished prose reflect the disjointedness of subaltern life. The text refuses neat resolutions, mirroring the ongoing nature of struggle. This stylistic choice aligns with what Gayatri Spivak describes as the need for the subaltern to speak in ways that resist assimilation.

By presenting reality as fractured and unsettled, Bama insists on truth over aesthetic. Her work demands not admiration but action—a challenge to readers to recognize their complicity and join the fight for justice.

Karukku is a pioneering work that reshaped Indian literature by centering the experiences of Dalit Christian women. It challenges religious, social, and literary structures that silence marginalized voices. Bama's journey—from oppressed child to resisting writer—offers a model of courage and transformation.

Her story is one of sharp edges—of being cut and cutting back. The double-edged leaf becomes a symbol not only of pain but also of strength. In reclaiming her voice, Bama paves the way for others to do the same. Her narrative turns memory into a weapon, identity into pride, and silence into song.

References:-

Ambedkar, B.R. Annihilation of Caste .Verso Book. 2011
Bama. Karukku. Trans. Lakshmi Holmström. Chennai: Macmillan, 1992.
Limbale, Sharan Kumar. Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations. Trans. Alok Mukherjee. Orient Longman, 2007.
Nayar, Pramod K. "Bama's Karukku: Dalit Autobiography as Testimonio." SAGE Journals, vol. 41, no. 2, 2006.
Rege, Sharmila. Writing Caste, Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonios. Zubaan, 2006.
Showalter, Elaine. The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory. Pantheon, 1985.
Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture. Ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. University of Illinois Press, 1988.