



## BAMA'S KARUKKU: A CHRONICLE OF RESILIENCE AND INDOMITABLE SPIRIT

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### Abstract

*Dalit literature has evolved, shifting from confirmation to more active confrontation. As social and literary landscapes have changed, these shifts have been deeply interconnected and highly noticeable. Dalit Literature shines a light on the heartfelt experiences of those oppressed within the Indian caste system. Historically, Dalits have faced centuries of hardship and discrimination from the upper segments of Indian society, and their stories continue to resonate today. Marginalization remains a complex challenge in modern society, capturing the attention of both national and global communities. Dalit women, who have been the subjects of dual marginalization, could break the boundaries through social and literary movements augmented by Dalit women writers. Many Dalit women writers have highlighted the plight of Dalit women, their agony, discrimination based on class, caste, and gender. The trauma which is expressed by one of the leading women writers Bama is very acute, sharp, and concerning. This research paper focuses on Bama's Karukku, an autobiographical account of a Dalit girl who faces discrimination at social and cultural spheres.*

### Keywords

*Dual Jeopardy, Marginalization, Confrontation, Dalit Consciousness , etc.*

### Full Article

“I do not think anyone other than a Dalit can expose all the brutalities of upper-class society and the insults imposed upon Dalits. Writing about Dalits should always be done remembering the respectability that has been denied to us, and we so rightly deserve” (Bama, 1993)

Dalit literature is dedicated to freeing people from oppression and building a more inclusive society. While it tackles complex questions, its core focus is on promoting the ideals of freedom, unity, equality, fraternity, and strong character. Dalit writers recognized this need through their personal journeys of self-improvement. Along the way, they found a clear and unified stream of thought, moral values, and sacred symbols that could connect their ideas without distorting their truths. This forms the strong foundation and influence behind the entire movement. Starting in Maharashtra, Dalit writing has since spread to other regions, including Gujarat, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh. Dalit literature is often appreciated not just for its storytelling but also for its illumination of important social, political, and economic issues. While the works of Dalit writers are deeply rooted in their social and cultural contexts, it is important to see their political themes as a strength that adds depth rather than detracts from their literary value.

Dalit women's stories, especially in regional languages, have often been overlooked in mainstream literary circles. Although the Dalit literary movement has gained more attention over time, many of these powerful works remain difficult for non-native speakers to access due to a



lack of English translations. When translations are available, they sometimes fail to fully capture the rich cultural, social, and linguistic nuances of the original stories. This can make it harder to fully appreciate the diverse experiences of Dalit women across different parts of India. Their narratives are incredibly important—they offer deep insights into their daily lives, challenges, and dreams, highlighting the dual struggles they face because of their caste and gender. However, it is crucial to note that Dalit women had been victims of double oppression: being a Dalit and being a woman. The pains, agonies, and crippled psyche of Dalit women, especially, have been authentically presented by Dalit women writers.

These women writers beautifully share their genuine experiences through autobiography, a heartfelt way to express themselves. Their autobiographies are more than personal stories; they are meaningful comments on the socio-political realities, vividly illustrating the intertwined challenges of caste and gender in Indian society. By exploring these narratives, this study hopes to shed light on the rich socio-cultural and historical details that are sometimes overlooked or hidden within broader Dalit literary discussions.

Among many other influential women writers, Bama stands as torchbearer who, through her literary output, challenged the discrimination based on caste, gender, and class. Her works serve as a stimulus for the entire Dalit community, not only for Dalit women. She talks about universal morality, gender issues, discrimination, and the subjugation of Dalit women in particular and women in general. Bama's *Karukku* has played a vital role in shedding light on the experiences of Dalit women, her works challenge upper-caste literary traditions and mainstream feminism, which often overlook caste issues. She shows us that survival itself can be a powerful act of resistance, expressed through memory, anger, humor, and resilience.

Bama asserts that “the Indian society is known for its rigid customs and traditions. This cultural legacy portrays women as powerless, inferior, and insignificant. Indian women were silent sufferers for many decades, trapped in domestic violence by their fathers, husbands, and brothers. Women's marginalization in India is due to the ideology of the patriarchal society in the name of culture, traditions, religious beliefs, and superstitions.” (Bama, 1998). Indian culture has traditionally placed a special value on sons, which has often led to less attention and opportunities for girls. This imbalance, rooted in gender discrimination, shows up in unfair treatment, long-standing stereotypes of women, and social isolation, all of which can affect a woman's sense of self and her role within marriage. These issues are deeply woven into the social, political, economic, geographical, and cultural fabric of life, impacting the past, present, and future.

Published in 1992, Bama's *Karukku* became an inspiring milestone in Dalit women's literature. Originally written in Tamil, the novel was translated into English in 2000 by Lakshmi Holmstrom. *Karukku* is a heartfelt autobiographical work that vividly captures the experiences of caste-based discrimination and the struggles Dalit women face in rural Tamil Nadu. Through the compelling story of its protagonist, Bama sheds light on the pervasive reach of the caste hierarchy and its influence on every aspect of Dalit women's lives. The novel powerfully exposes systemic discrimination, including the denial of education, healthcare, and economic opportunities.

The title of the book, *Karukku*, holds a special symbolic meaning for the author. It refers to the jagged edges of a palmyra leaf stalk, which can be seen as a metaphor for a double-edged sword. This imagery resonates on a deeper level, especially in Tamil, where the word ‘karu’ means ‘seed’ or ‘embryo,’ symbolizing new beginnings and freshness. The title of Bama's autobiography also carries another significant meaning. The person using it to thatch his house's roof experiences wounds from the sharp, pointed palm leaf that heal over time but leave scars or other marks of the damage. Similarly, Dalit individuals may or may not overcome the insults, humiliations, and social injustices they endured during their formative years, even if they later gain recognition or fame. The stain of their past humiliation will always remain. Until they die,



they carry this heavy burden with them. The term 'Karukku' also has a third metaphorical meaning. Another Tamil word for 'karukku' is 'seed', 'embryo', or 'birth'. Bama likely suggests that being born as a Dalit was the catalyst for her to witness the social injustices carried out in India under the guise of caste discrimination. Being a Dalit by birth allows one to see India from an authentic perspective, free of pretension or exaggeration, with an honest view of its true nature.

Bama, in her autobiography *Karukku*, shares moving stories of the many challenges Dalit women in rural areas face due to their lower social status. She describes how women from her Paraya caste experience exploitation by men from both upper and lower castes, as well as by upper caste women in Tamil Nadu. Bama recalls a poignant story about her grandmother, who worked for the Naicker family, an upper-caste household, and was called by the children by the family's name, which made her feel invisible yet marked by their pride and sense of superiority. This story highlights the deep-seated caste prejudices that still influence everyday life, with upper caste children proudly and sometimes dismissively addressing lower caste women by their names. Bama also gently recounts how the women of the Naicker family treated her grandmother unkindly. Bama beautifully captures these moments, shedding light on the ongoing struggles Dalit women face.

The Naicker women would pour the water from a height of four feet, while Paatti and the others received it and drank it with cupped hands held to their mouths. I always felt terrible when I watched this. My other Paatti was the same. As soon as dawn broke, she would go to the Naicker houses, sweep out the cowshed, collect the dung and dirt, then bring home the leftover rice and curry from the previous evening (Bama, 1992: 14).

Despite working tirelessly within the Naicker family, Bama's grandmothers did not receive the respect or kindness they deserved because of their lower caste status. Women from the Naicker community, being of a higher caste, often do not treat lower caste women as equals. Caste divisions continue to create rifts among women, which is why there is still little unity among women in India today. Sadly, many upper-caste women have not yet joined or supported the Dalit women's movement. Dalit women still face harsh and unjust treatment simply because of their caste and gender. They often rely on male family members for their livelihood and safety.

Women in India have long been viewed through traditional lenses, with expectations that they serve upper caste communities, especially within the Shudra class of the Chaturvarna system. Even after seventy-five years of independence, the situation for Dalit women has not improved significantly. Sadly, they still endure suffering and mistreatment across the country. Incidents of violence and atrocities, including acts of rape against Dalit women, continue to be disturbingly frequent. This highlights the critical need to empower Dalit women and work wholeheartedly to eliminate caste and gender inequalities, moving towards a society that is fair and inclusive for all.

Bama explores the caste structure in her village, focusing mainly on caste, as introduced at the start. Her descriptions of the landscape are beautiful, even if brief, because her main focus is on the intricate caste divisions within the village. These castes are separated geographically, creating clear boundaries. Many Dalits often work in the homes of upper-caste Nair families as bonded laborer. In her heartfelt autobiography, Bama shares the everyday realities faced by Dalit women, showcasing their work both within their families and in the wider community. She gently highlights how society, including the government, the church, and families, often accept violence against women as normal. Bama reveals how Dalit women in *Karukku* endure violence not just from higher castes but also from their own families, even as they spend long hours working in the



fields owned by upper caste landowners. From childhood to old age, a Dalit woman's life is filled with hard work. Sadly, even during playtime, Dalit girls are often seen as less than human and are expected to serve others. Bama vividly describes the games children in a Dalit village play- she recalls how Dalit girls pretend to be farm laborer, while the boys imagine themselves as higher caste landlords or Naickers.

The novel shows Bama and her family turning to Christianity in response to their severe poverty and social challenges. However, instead of improving their social status, her religious change sometimes puts her in tricky situations. Even after converting, Dalit Christians still face bias from the more privileged groups. Early Dalits in India often chose to become Christians mainly because it offered a chance to escape the harshness, discrimination, and loss of dignity from the caste system. Christianity seemed to promote equality and provide access to education, social power, and better jobs, especially through missionaries. Unlike the limitations of caste, Christianity gave them a sense of dignity and a feeling of brotherhood and equality. For many, converting was a powerful act- a way to escape centuries of unfair treatment, temple exclusion, and being called 'unclean'. Plus, missionaries often built schools, hospitals, and even gave land to communities- resources that many Dalits could not easily access- and encouraged education and a hopeful attitude, emphasizing values like obedience, cleanliness, and self-respect.

### Conclusion:

In *Karukku*, Bama shares her heartfelt thoughts on the Church and her community's struggles, blending these reflections with her personal story of life in a Dalit village. As a Dalit, she experiences additional marginalization because of her gender and faith, making her perspective even richer. She writes openly about what it is like to be a Dalit woman in her community, inspiring other women to share their voices too. While her identity as a woman and a feminist can sometimes overshadow her Dalit background, her gender also adds depth to her Dalit story. *Karukku* is a truly pioneering work that sheds light on many layers of Dalit exploitation, especially focusing on the Paraiyars in Tamil Nadu, both within their communities and through their interactions with the Church. Conversely, even upper-caste converts tend to carry their caste biases into their new spiritual paths.

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