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# Analyzing Marginalized Communal Voices in Bama's Auto-narrative *"Karukku"*

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**Abstract**

An auto life narrative is considered a personal journey of an individual, but it is often not just about the person; rather, it is about a particular community of people and their shared experiences, whether they matter equally. The women follow patriarchal norms when it comes to family life. They are unable to express themselves freely due to numerous social and patriarchal restrictions. As a result, they are ultimately classified as others. "Karukku" highlights the intersections of caste, gender, and identity, which connects the theory of intersectionality by Crenshaw. The terrible circumstances of the Dalit woman are illustrated in the novel by Bama by using characters like her granny as a servant of the upper class, her mother, victimized Dalit students in convents, and others. She explores her own experience of oppression in relation to Dalit culture and patriarchy. The researcher in this paper tries to analyse an author's journey from her childhood to becoming a teacher and author, along with her community's struggle, which includes Periyar's males, women, and children. Additionally, the paper also connected the text with subaltern theory by Gayatri Spivak, Dalit feminist theory, and the context of 'internal colonization', 'habitus' by Pierre Bourdieu.

**Keywords:** Self and Others, Dalit women, Indian patriarchal Society, Caste and gender. Discrimination, church domination.

## Introduction

Tamil author Bama's translated text "Karukku" (1992) is an autobiographical narrative that serves both as a personal account and, more importantly, as a collective, communal voice of the suppressed Paraiyar Dalit Christian community by upper-caste Naickers of the village Puthupatti in Tamil Nadu. The text won the crossword prize for literature. It highlights common experiences of systemic oppression by emphasizing the community 'our people' above the individual 'my people'. In the interview with scholar Manoj Nair, she expressed:

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 could not build a monument, I could not build a sculpture. I wrote a book. And luckily it did not vanish into obscurity. My community thus found a place in the mainstream media (Nair 140).

Another research scholar, Pramod. K. Nayar, in his article entitled "Bama's *Karukku:* Dalit Autobiography as Testimonio" (2006), Nayar defines "Karukku" as a testimonio by saying, "The testimonio is the voice of one who witnesses for the sake of an 'other', who remains voiceless. That is, the speaking subaltern subject of the narrative gives voice to the lived experiences of herself and of those who are victims of social and linguistic-literary marginalization (Nayar 84)." Karukku" functions as both an autobiography and a testimonial narrative because, while it records Bama's personal life

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story as a Dalit Christian woman, it becomes an autobiographical narrative and also bearing witness to the collective oppression of the Dalit community, making it a testimonial text. Her individual experiences become a form of social testimony against caste discrimination and institutional hypocrisy, transforming private memory into political resistance.

Intensely, she addressed three things: caste, religion, and gender as a Dalit, a Christian, and a woman. Bama's writing starts her journey in the preface by using "I". Further, in the second and third paragraphs, the narration shifts to "There are other Dalit hearts like mine (Bama xxiii)." It seems she speaks for an entire community. In addition, she opens the first chapter of the text by using, "Our village is very beautiful (Bama 1)." She delivered the community's toils rather than her personal details in the opening chapter. Moreover, she described the communal character of Bondam- Maama, Kaaman, and Nallathangal, rather than only herself. In chapter four, she stressed the hard work of Dalits as agricultural or company labourers, including males, females, and children. Significantly, she never used her real name throughout the novel, instead using her pen name as 'Bama'. Given that every chapter of the autobiography covers the shared experience of Dalit Periyars, it implies that it is a collective narrative rather than the author's own personal journey. She mentions their festivals and rituals, local speeches, and slang represents her communal experiences. In the introduction of the text, freelancer Raj Gautam points out, "it is the function of Dalit writing to awaken in every reader a consciousness of the oppressed Dalit and to share in the Dalit experience as if it were their own. (***Karukku***, he says, is a singular example of a piece of writing which achieves this.) (Bama xix)."

The text illustrates language as a form of resistance, with the narrator employing colloquial Tamil and Dalit dialect not merely as stylistic choices, but as political acts. She deliberately avoids the use of 'pure' or 'elite' Tamil favored by upper-caste institutions, instead opting for everyday Dalit speech that encapsulates their anger, humour, suffering, solidarity, courage, and real-life issues, she reflects colloquial style by using storytelling, street talk, and collective memory while also reflecting classic language through portrayals of urban and rural Dalit experiences. She exposed caste cruelty through her marginalised literature. Through her writing being a weapon, the margins speak without permission as linguistic rebellion, which rejects both elite Tamils and standard literary form.

Internal colonization refers to a dominant group inside a country that treats another group like a colony, exploiting, controlling them, and keeping them socially, economically, and culturally inferior. Dominant people colonize Dalits within India by cultural domination, social segregation, psychological control, and denial of their voice. Dalits were internally colonized subjects as being labour, uneducated, poor, and silenced, etc. The upper caste was culturally dominated by language, food, and behavior. Naickers mentally colonized poor dalits to keep a distance to feel them shame, to bow and obey a caste. "Kurruku" can be read through the lenses of internal colonization theory as a narrative that exposes how society and religious institutions' marginalization at multiple levels includes caste oppression, religious discrimination, gender inequality, social and economic exploitation, and others. The untouchability concepts add to Bama's knowledge at a very early age in her childhood, as she writes, "When I was studying in the third class, I hadn't yet heard people speak openly of untouchability. But I had already seen, felt, experienced, and been humiliated by what it is (Bama 13)." She narrates her childhood experience in which she examines caste discrimination closely. Actually, the incident

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happened when she randomly saw a big man carrying a packet of Vadai and green banana bhajji, which he was holding by a string without touching the packet. Also, the Naicker man took the parcel without touching that man, the behaviour of both makes Bama curious, and she discussed with her educated brother about what actually happened. In return, Bama's brother said, "everybody believed that Naickers were upper caste, and therefore must not touch Parayas. If they did, they would be polluted (Bama 15)." He describes how an attendant at the library disregarded him because he was from a lower caste, but when he saw that Anna had an M.A. degree, the attendant altered his behavior and gave him a stool to sit on and called him "sir." Her brother was educated through facing a struggle and was also very supportive towards little Bama, who advised that:

Because we are born into the Paraya jati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that. But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities. So study with care, learn all you can. If you are always ahead in your lessons, people will come to you of their accordant attach themselves to you. Work hard and learn (Bama 18).

This advice from Annam shifted Bama's view on education, motivating her to lead a life that transcends the limitations imposed by caste.

Bama portrayed her Patti (Grandmother), named Rakamma, as a labourer of Naikers. Being a child, she remembers that Naiker's woman drops the leftovers into her Patti's vessel without touching it, and their children addressed her granny by using her personal name, like her master, although Patti called them 'Ayya' (masters). In the text, Bama recounts her mother's struggles, performing coolie work and pawning her earrings to pay for Bama's college fees. She describes an episode where Dalits collect groundnuts, highlighting their harsh condition of sharing half or a third of their findings with the landowners. Bama notes the discontent of the Naickers if the Dalits break the shells of the peanuts, illustrating the social dynamics and challenges faced by her community. She remarks, "The Naicker would be furious and swear at us, using every term of abuse he knew (Bama 51)." Often insults them by considering them 'polluted' and people who smell on their mouths.

Bama observes a game of Dalit children, which explains how caste prejudice is learned early in life, as she narrates,

There were a few games that we played most frequently. Two or three boys would play at being Naicker. The rest of us would call them 'Ayya, Ayya', and pretend to be their Pannaiyaal. These boys would act as if they had a lot of power over us. They'd call out to us, 'Yeppa', Yeppa', humiliate us, and make us do a lot of work. We'd pretend to work in the fields all day, and then collect our wages and go home (Bama 56).

Shiv Kumar, a research scholar in his article entitled, "Becoming Dalit Women's Voice: Engaging with Self-reflective Narrative in Bama's Karukku" (2023) relate the incidents with the concept of habitus, and he mentions,

Habitus focuses on the ways of acting, feeling, thinking, and being. Here their experiences are 'structured' by one's past experiences and present circumstances. It is 'structuring' which means that one's habitus helps to shape one's present and future practices. It is a 'structure' in that it is systematically ordered rather than random or unpatented. So both physical and social spaces give rise to practices as they are ideologically structured. Within this structured space, one experiences

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structured experiences based on one's caste identity as presented through Naicker woman's maintaining distance. Such incidents also refer to conditions where their childhood is stuffed with caste-based treatments. As a result, the period of childhood does not remain an innocent period of care-free living but it becomes a way of learning the ways of the society. The resultant outcome is that the childhood gets lost somewhere in the myriad caste experiences. The childhood period turn into a period of acculturation of caste identity. On the other hand, despite experiencing caste discrimination, due to their dependence, the lower caste people perform caste identity-related chores for the dominant caste by not raising their voice (Kumar 1165).

The above powerful statement by Kumar links Bama's individuality with the social concept of the normalization of caste in society connects the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus. Bama worked in the homes of Naikers during her eighth class for survival, feeling ashamed of the experience. In the interview with writer and critic Jaydeep Sarangi (2018), she expresses, "Not only in the neighbourhood but in all religious and educational institutions beginning from primary schools, in offices, in working places and almost in all walks of life I have seen a lot of injustices done in the name of caste. The dominating and oppressive forces paralyse people constantly and continuously (Sarangi 7)."

In school, she faced mistreatment from the headmaster, who scolded her and blamed her for an incident involving a coconut, where she was actually a victim. Following her suspension and a demand for an apology, she became 'an outsider.' She expressed, "When I entered the classroom, the entire class turned around to look at me, and I wanted to shrink into myself as I went and sat on my bench, still weeping. (Bama 19)." In a similar context, an author and feminist critic, Gayatri Spivak, addresses the 'subalterns' through the ultimate core of her essay entitled, "Can the subalterns speak?" (1988). She turns the subalterns, especially marginalised women, into subjects of study. On the other hand, Bama, an Indian author, focuses on caste oppression and the experiences of Dalit women. Both thinkers are concerned with marginalised people, and challenging hegemony also includes the point of how caste and gender intersect with postcolonial theory.

Dalit women are at the bottom of the social order and are severely marginalized because they are women, Dalits, and Christians. Caste, gender, and poverty are all strongly associated with vulnerability to sexual exploitation. A book entitled "Dalit Feminist Theory: A Reader" (2020) in which an author, Smita M. Patil, depicts, "Subjugation of Dalit women persists through the obnoxious linkages of caste, gender and class (Patil 214)". The text highlights Male power hegemony control over women. Only Dalit women were not allowed in cinemas, an example of their prison of freedom. Females were controlled and exploited by upper caste male power as landowners, by their men, by public humiliation and domestic violence, and by political individuals including police, and their atrocities, etc. Rather than girl children studying, they worked in companies, doing manual jobs like sticking matchbox labels and making firecrackers, etc. Sometimes worked as agricultural labourers to support their family, but they still paid less, as she mentions, "Even if they did the same work, men received one wage, women another. They always paid men more. I could never understand why (Bama 55)." A book by our constitutional father Ambedkar, entitled, "Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches Vol. 1" he criticizes on division of labour by saying "Caste System is not merely a division of labourers which is

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quite different from division of labour—it is an hierarchy in which the divisions of labourers are graded one above the other (Ambedkar 47).” Sadly, education for girls was rare in the village. They just married early or did labour work at farm or company as child labour. Bama’s narration expresses her inner pain and sympathy towards her community people. This directly connects the idea of intersectionality by Crenshaw by defining women’s multiple identities, such as Dalit, lower-class women, labour, and others, overlap and create a unique identity. Her mother, granny, and Dalit girl child are examples of identical intersectionality. The same book mentioned by Sunaina, Arya, and Aakash Singh Rathore above in which both illustrate, “in the Indian context, caste, gender and class would seem to constitute the crucial intersection for Dalit feminism. In both contexts, intersectionality operates as a tool to observe and address the patriarchal injustices faced by the most marginalised and vulnerable women of the world (Arya and Akash 171).”

Women are portrayed as active agents of survival rather than passive victims. Bama emphasizes that empowerment does not rely on empathy; women work tirelessly in both domestic and agricultural roles to provide for their families. Their resilience is characterized as a form of strength derived from survival. Instances of bravery are shown when women hide their husbands from the police, positioning themselves as saviors. Dalit feminism insists that Dalit women must speak for themselves, and “Karukku” is both an individual and collective narrative, which becomes the text of a political self-representation. Furthermore, education is depicted as a vital tool that fosters freedom, dignity, and self-governance. The narrator was intelligent and always got good marks in school. She believes education changes people and conditions. Also, she advises, “We are stripped of all that. But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities. So study with care, learn all you can. If you are always ahead in your lessons, people will come to you of their own accord and attach themselves to you (Bama 18).” The given statement suggests that an educational awakening leads to political consciousness.

Bama presents the Church and convent educational institutes as places that maintain casteism rather than deemed secure places of refuge, employing economic, class-based oppression along with spiritual pressure to maintain Dalits' subordination. The narration portrays a sympathetic view of Dalit children in a convent, highlighting the contrast between the nuns' professed dedication to child welfare and their actual treatment of these children. Rather than offering support, the nuns subject Dalit children to humiliation and compare them unfavourably with upper caste peers, relegating them to manual duties. The hostel warden would insult their eating habits by saying, “these people get nothing to eat at home; they come here and they grow fat,’ she would say publicly (Bama 20).” Bama was sensitive towards Dalit children, but in the end, the author couldn’t tolerate the atrocities, and she left the job. Convent norms mentally broke her.

Dalit Christians remain excluded both from the Hindu caste hierarchy and the Christian institution. Dalits face segregation in church, manual labour, a lack of leadership role and hypocrisy of institutional religion. The author portrays the church's supremacy over the poor Dalits, where they got lower-class jobs inside the church and high jobs available only for the upper caste. They were also controlled by the priest, so that they were compelled to follow the church’s norms; otherwise, God would punish them, as told by the priest. Additionally in festivals, they have to give money or fruits to the church,

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which is a kind of compulsion. Bama's resilience depicts how she breaks the silence and dares to question church authority, detached from the false morals, and converts suffering into political consciousness.

She never supports Sanskritization or hides their reality. She expresses, "but why should I pretend to these people that I'm from a different caste. All the same, the pain I felt was not a trifling one (Bama 20-21)." Research scholar Yash Deep Singh, in his critical article entitled, "Breaking all Fetters with the Sword of Education: Interpreting Bama's Karruku as a Lighthouse for Dalit Feminism," (2020), in which he articulates, "Bama's book is a gem in post-independence 'resistance literature' (Singh 65)."

**Conclusion**

"Karukku" is a realistic documentation of her lonely self-discovery, refusing to internalize inferiority. The communal voice is a central idea to the text. Both personal and communal crises drive her to transform shame into speech to raise awareness among Dalit subalterns, especially among Dalit's lower section - Dalit women's power, position, and status, and constitutional rights, also uplifts Dalit children through education. The paper explores the author's strength through various community experiences, including church, patriarchy, education, and the burdens of family and economic labor. It addresses women's subjugation, sexuality, and freedom, and emphasizes the importance of avoiding the notion of being 'other' from feminist perspectives. Additionally, it highlights the empowerment of individuals and communities by reframing Dalit identities as aware and educated rather than merely suffering individuals.

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