
Dalit Feminist Resistance and Identity in Bama's Works: A Critical Analysis of Caste, Gender, and Social Struggles

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Abstract

Examining the writings of eminent Dalit feminist writer Bama through the prism of caste, gender, and societal issues, this research article questions her. Through an analysis of *Karukku*, *Sangati*, and *Vanmam*, this study looks into how Bama writes about the real-life experiences of Dalit women, their fight against oppressive systems, and their search for identity and dignity. From a Dalit feminist perspective, the study emphasizes how Bama questions Brahminical patriarchy and the agency of Dalit women in their fight for equity. Emphasizing how Bama's stories serve both personal and group acts of resistance, the research also looks at the intersections of caste and gender. By use of linguistic and cultural expressions, her works challenge upper-caste literary traditions and offer a real voice for the hardships of Dalit women. By stressing the need for literature as a tool for social protest and empowerment for underprivileged populations, this study adds to the larger conversation of Dalit feminism.

Keywords: Dalit feminism, caste oppression, gender inequality, resistance, identity, Brahminical patriarchy, Bama, *Karukku*, *Sangati*, *Vanmam*, intersectionality, Dalit literature, feminist discourse, social justice.

Introduction

Examined in Bama's *Karukku*, Dalit feminism shows itself as a distinctive framework that combines caste and gender inequality and resists both at once. Unlike mainstream feminism, which mostly addresses gender inequalities, Dalit feminism acknowledges that the oppression of Dalit women is profoundly anchored in the caste order as well and not only based on gender. Using her autobiographical story, Tamil Dalit Christian writer Bama highlights the intersecting challenges Dalit women—who suffer systematic discrimination not just from top-caste society but also from their own underprivileged communities—face (Usmani, 2022). Dalit women's dual oppression results from both patriarchal subjection and caste-based exclusion, so different from the fight for justice faced by upper-caste women. Dalit feminism, according to scholars, differs from mainstream feminism in that it emphasizes caste-specific experiences and mobilizes resistance against caste patriarchy; therefore, it operates differently from the gender oppression faced by affluent women. Dominant feminist discourses may ignore the combined effects of caste and gender inequality, therefore erasing the experiences of Dalit women. In *Karukku*, Bama

speaks for these suppressed experiences by showing how Dalit women are oppressed in social structures, religion, and education, among other spheres. Malhotra (n.d.) emphasizes how *Karukku* provides both a personal and collective voice, therefore illustrating that Bama's story reflects the greater suffering of Dalit women rather than only her own. By means of her work, Bama reveals the systematic disparities that support social and economic marginalization, especially in educational settings where Dalit pupils may encounter extreme prejudice. As Tomar (2013) notes, this change from rejection to resistance illustrates the agency of Dalit women in recovering their identity via literature and other kinds of cultural expression. Dalit women authors like Bama question prevailing narratives and proclaim their own tales, therefore empowering and encouraging group resistance rather than allowing their historically subordinated situation. Recording these real-life events is itself a kind of protest against the casteist systems trying to silence Dalit voices. By including linguistic and cultural resistance in her works, Bama also questions the upper-caste story and makes a clear Dalit feminist discourse that is based on real-life experiences rather than abstract feminist ideas (Mondal, n.d.). Her linguistic choices, for example, challenge the authority of Sanskritized and upper-caste literary traditions by reflecting the oral traditions of Dalit people.

Karukku is a classic book in Dalit feminist writing and a potent monument to the agency and resiliency of Dalit women overall. By putting attention on the nexus of caste, gender, and religion, Bama's work not only challenges oppressive societal institutions but also encourages new forms of resistance that enable Dalit women to recover their identities and demand justice in a society that has long ignored them.

Dalit Feminism: A Theoretical Framework

Emphasizing the particular hardships experienced by Dalit women in India, Dalit feminism has become a vital concept challenging both caste and gender inequality. Unlike mainstream feminism, which primarily addresses gender inequalities, Dalit feminism emphasizes the intersection of caste and patriarchy, thereby addressing the unique experiences of Dalit women who face discrimination not only from upper-caste society but also within their own communities (Arya and Rathore, 2019). The need for this paradigm stems from the inability of both anti-caste movements and mainstream feminism to effectively include the views and issues of Dalit women. Arya (2020) criticizes Indian feminism for its upper-caste bias, contending that it sometimes overlooks the reality of caste-based discrimination, therefore supporting Brahmanical patriarchy rather than undermining it. By calling for an inclusive feminist movement that recognizes caste as a basic axis of oppression and by rejecting Brahmanical hierarchies, Dalit feminism sets itself apart (Pan, 2019). This viewpoint is especially necessary to understand the lived realities of Dalit women, who face systematic marginalization in various sectors such as education, work, and social involvement. Chakraborty (2003) emphasizes how caste-based patriarchy functions in many different contexts, frequently aggravating the oppression Dalit women, who are assigned to the lowest rungs of social and economic hierarchies, experience. Likewise, Banerjee and Ghosh (2019) underline how closely caste and gender shape the daily reality of underprivileged women; hence, it is essential to examine these

systems together rather than separately. Dalit feminism is unique in that its point of view practice emphasizes the voices of Dalit women in forming feminist conversation. Upper-caste feminism sometimes says that all women are oppressed, but Dalit feminism says that gender-based discrimination is different depending on caste, and the struggles of Dalit women are deeply rooted in historical and structural injustices (Menon, 2019). Sabharwal and Sonalkar (2015) contend further that as caste, class, and gender interact to produce several levels of subjection, Dalit women's experiences cannot be understood without considering their social and economic situation. The absence of Dalit voices from mainstream feminist debate has resulted in the necessity for a unique Dalit feminist movement challenging both patriarchal oppression inside Dalit communities and upper-caste supremacy (Chigateri, 2004).

Dalit feminist literature is a great weapon to question established narratives and provide alternative venues for underprivileged voices; therefore, it helps to articulate resistance. Saraswathi (2023) argues that Dalit women's writings reveal the double oppression they experience, offering firsthand reports of their battles against both caste-based and gender-based discrimination. Dalit feminist authors and activists help a larger movement aiming at justice, equality, and the demolition of repressive institutions by recording their experiences.

Caste and Gender in Bama's *Karukku*: A Narrative of Dalit Christian Experience

A classic autobiographical work, Bama's *Karukku* (1992) vividly depicts the hardships of a Dalit Christian lady negotiating India's repressive caste and gender systems. Bama, a Roman Catholic and a Tamil Dalit lady, experiences several levels of oppression that shape her identity. Because it shows how caste, gender, and religion all affect each other, *Karukku* is both a thoughtful and politically charged critique of systemic oppression (Reddy, 2018). In contrast to mainstream feminist literature, which sometimes only talks about gender differences, Dalit feminist stories like *Karukku* show how discrimination based on caste makes the lives of Dalit women even worse, separating their struggles from those of upper-caste women. By offering a first-hand narrative of how caste-based systems operate inside religious and societal organizations, Bama's autobiography reinforces prejudice at several levels. Her early encounters highlight how Dalit Christians, despite their religious connection, nonetheless suffer from caste biases both inside the church and in more general society. Choudhury (n.d.), who claims that *Karukku* and *Sangati* expose the systematic exclusion Dalit women experience in many spheres, investigates this idea as tales of subjection. Ideally serving as a haven from caste-based persecution, the church supports these discriminatory policies, therefore denying Dalit Christians equal status (Christopher, 2018). By use of her own memories, Bama exposes their involvement in preserving caste-based structures, therefore undermining the illusion of equality fostered by religious establishments.

Karukku also reflects the larger Dalit experience rather than only a personal narrative of pain. Dalit writing, as Saini (2016) contends, is fundamentally a kind of protest against caste, gender, and class exploitation. Through expressing the suffering and hardships of her neighborhood, Bama turns her autobiography into a location of opposition. By revealing the actual reality of Dalit women, who suffer every day under both casteist and patriarchal oppression, she questions the current social structure (Niranjana, n.d.). Bama's work therefore fits the larger Dalit feminist

movement, which advocates an integrated approach to gender justice by confronting caste as a basic axis of injustice.

Karukku revolves around the issue of double marginalization as Bama is persecuted not only as a Dalit but also as a woman living in a patriarchal culture. As they are often excluded from both mainstream feminist groups and caste-based resistance activities run by Dalit males, Angel Vinoliya and Deivasigamani (n.d.) stress how Dalit women endure a particular kind of oppression. This exclusion emphasizes the need for a unique Dalit feminist viewpoint able to solve the particular challenges of Dalit women. *Karukku* shows how Dalit women are denied agency and subjected to systematic abuse at several levels of society, therefore reflecting this viewpoint.

Moreover, rebuilding self-identity and uplifting underprivileged groups depends much on Dalit literature. Dalit autobiographical stories, Santhi (n.d.) emphasizes, are evidence of resilience and survival as well as records of sorrow. Bama's *Karukku* honors Dalit women's power and agency while simultaneously recording their suffering; therefore, it upholds this legacy. By means of her work, Bama questions accepted narratives that paint Dalits as docile victims rather than active agents of change who oppose injustice by means of education, community solidarity, and literature. *Karukku* is an innovative book in Dalit feminist literature overall, offering a strong critique of caste and gender inequality together with a call to social justice. In addition to highlighting Dalit women's intersectional challenges, Bama's work advances the more general conversation on caste and gender injustice in India. Bama claims the agency of Dalit women by recovering her identity and sharing her lived experiences, so *Karukku* is an essential book for the study of Dalit literature and feminist struggle.

Resistance and Assertion of Identity in Bama's Works

The assertion of identity by language, narrative, and group action runs often in Bama's works. Bama's writing, as a Dalit Christian woman, not only records personal and group hardships but also acts as a protest against gender-based and caste-based injustice. Especially in *Karukku* (1992) and *Sangati* (1994), her stories use language as a weapon of empowerment to help Dalit women to recover their voices and question established systems that have traditionally excluded them (Haider, 2015). Bama subverts the Brahmanical and patriarchal literary traditions that have traditionally excluded Dalit experiences from mainstream discourse by including aspects of oral tradition, dialect, and linguistic hybridity. In Dalit literature, especially Bama's writings, storytelling serves as both a tool for group resistance and a kind of witness. Edwards (2009) claims that by maintaining communal memory and encouraging creative resistance, storytelling has always been rather important in underprivileged groups. This viewpoint is especially pertinent to Dalit literature, in which stories function as community declarations of identity as well as personal statements. Bama's use of first-person narrative and testimonial writing in *Karukku* fits this custom as she describes her own experiences while also standing in for the hardships of a whole community (Choudhury, n.d.). By means of her narratives, she reveals the systematic discrimination Dalit women experience in religious institutions, educational institutions, and businesses, thereby illustrating how collective pain is turned into a

shared demand for justice. Furthermore, connected to Bama's works' declaration of identity is group action and resistance. Powell (2015) underlines that stories of marginalization and relocation may change from states of victimhood to active claims of identity. Likewise, Bama's stories show the resiliency and agency of Dalit women who oppose caste and gender inequalities through daily acts of rebellion, therefore transcending ordinary persecution. She emphasizes, in *Sangati*, for example, the collective power of Dalit women as they negotiate societal inequalities, therefore highlighting how solidarity and community resistance are essential for their survival and assertion of dignity (Niranjana, n.d.).

In Bama's work, especially, language plays a very important role in building identification. According to Billingslea-Brown (1999), African American women's art and literature fight repressive narratives and recover cultural legacy by using oral storytelling and folklore. In Dalit writing, too, the use of regional languages, everyday speech, and folk traditions upsets the snobbish control of Sanskritized and upper-caste literary phrases (Santhi, n.d.). As it affirms and legitimizes the language of the downtrodden while opposing the linguistic domination of the higher castes, Bama's intentional choice to write in Tamil rather than in English or Sanskritized Tamil is itself an act of resistance. Bama's assertion of identity also goes beyond literary expression to include a more general sociopolitical critique. Wood (2003) looks at how the need to express autonomy and a common feeling of oppression might motivate rebel group action. In the same vein, Bama's stories highlight the sociopolitical systems supporting structural change and show the means of maintaining Dalit discrimination. Her paintings aggressively demand resistance, knowledge, and empowerment as means of liberation rather than only record suffering (Christopher, 2018). Finally, by use of narrative, language, and group action, Bama's works reflect resistance and the assertion of identity across several channels. By highlighting the perspectives of Dalit women, she questions the prevailing narratives meant to eradicate or minimize their experiences. Her works guarantee that the voices of the underprivileged are heard and acknowledged in more general social and literary discussions; therefore, they go beyond mere accounts of injustice to become a potent act of opposition.

Conclusion

By providing a strong critique of caste and gender injustice and thereby elevating the voices of underprivileged Dalit women, Bama's literary works significantly help to shape Dalit feminist discourse. By means of her personal and fictitious stories—especially *Karukku*, *Sangati*, and *Vanmam*—Bama records the lived experiences of Dalit women, thereby emphasizing their challenges inside religious, social, and educational settings. Her paintings highlight the agency of Dalit women, showing them as active players in their own emancipation rather than as helpless victims, therefore exposing the brutal facts of caste-based injustice.

Bama questions Brahminical patriarchy and intra-Dalit hierarchies by combining themes of resistance and assertiveness of identity; therefore, she supports a more inclusive feminist movement that notes the intersections of caste and gender. Her use of language, narrative, and

collective memory functions as a weapon of empowerment, challenging accepted narratives and therefore confirming the lived realities of Dalit women. By means of her work, Dalit women's challenges are said to be distinct and call for an autonomous feminist framework transcending the constraints of mainstream feminism and anti-caste campaigns. This study emphasizes once more the need for Dalit feminism in comprehending the complicated reality of caste and gender inequality in India. Literary and political interventions, Bama's works encourage a conversation demanding systematic transformation, education, and solidarity among underprivileged populations. Her stories inspire fresh kinds of resistance and guarantee that the fight and victories of Dalit women will always be a vital component of the more general feminist and anti-caste campaigns. Dalit feminist literature is becoming more and more important; hence, it is imperative to investigate and highlight these stories so that a more inclusive and fair society recognizes and solves the particular difficulties Dalit women experience.

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