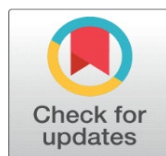
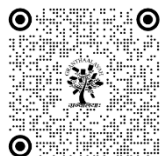


RECONSTRUCTING THE RIGHTS OF HUMAN BEINGS: A TRAUMA AND TESTIMONY IN BAMA'S KARUKKU

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DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.iMIHCSET.2023.5639](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.iMIHCSET.2023.5639)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses Bama's *Karukku*, a pioneering work in Dalit literature, offering a deeply personal yet politically charged account of caste discrimination. The autobiography examines two key dimensions of oppression: the discrimination she witnessed in her village and the discrimination she endured within the Catholic Christian congregation. Through poignant storytelling, Bama exposes the systematic exclusion of Dalits from economic exploitation in the Naicker-dominated villages to prejudices entrenched within religious institutions. Her narratives not only shed light on the physical and psychological torment endured by Dalits but also critique the power dynamics that perpetuate such injustices. While caste-based discrimination remains pervasive—manifesting in education, employment, and social mobility—Bama's resistance emerges as a central theme. She challenges caste hierarchy, questions the hypocrisy of dominant groups, and advocates for education as the ultimate tool for empowerment. Her literary activism has transformed *Karukku* into a landmark in Dalit literature, inspiring discussions on social justice, equality, and caste abolition.

Keywords: Dalit, Trauma, subaltern, *Karukku*

1. INTRODUCTION

India cannot fully enjoy its independence unless it is liberated from the enduring influence of Varnashrama Dharma, a system deeply embedded in the minds of the people for centuries. This ingrained ideology perpetuates oppression, as the spiritual beliefs of the majority often reinforce systemic marginalisation.

This paper examines the trauma and testimony of writer Bama, focusing on her efforts to reclaim human rights in her seminal work, *Karukku*. Initially published in Tamil in 1992, *Karukku* is widely recognised as the first Dalit autobiography in Tamil literature. The English translation by Lakshmi Holmström, released in 2001, earned the prestigious Crossword Book Award for Indian language fiction.

Karukku has gained significant prominence within the Dalit community, offering a powerful account of the suffering endured by the marginalised and paving the way for broader acknowledgement of the exploitation and humiliation inflicted by the upper castes.

2. TRAUMA AND TESTIMONY

Karukku has been a groundbreaking and sensational work, as it addresses the pervasive caste issues among Roman Catholic Christians in Tamil Nadu. The novel has sparked widespread discussion and analysis, drawing attention from both researchers and general literary readers due to its controversial and thought-provoking themes.

At its core, Bama's Karukku is deeply concerned with the discrimination and suffering experienced by the Dalit community in Puthupatti, a village in Virudhunagar District. Through her narration, Bama vividly illustrates the physical and psychological torment endured by the oppressed. Despite some Dalits in the village attaining respectable positions, they continue to face systemic segregation and mistreatment. Her voice powerfully condemns the hierarchical structures that classify individuals based on caste, gender, and religion.

The novel passionately urges society to dismantle the caste system in the interest of human advancement. Caste consciousness is often perceived as a false imposed ideology stemming from Hindu Varnashrama Dharma, which traces its origins to myths and epics shaped by the dominant classes. Given the historically marginalised status of Dalit literature in India, Dalits have long been objectified and relegated to menial labour. Bama's writings serve as a protest against the religious history that has systematically excluded Dalits from social and economic progress.

As a Dalit woman from Tamil Nadu, Bama recounts her ancestors' attempts to escape communal oppression through conversion to Christianity. However, even after embracing a new faith, her family continued to face caste-based discrimination, as caste divisions persisted within Tamil Nadu's Christian community. At this juncture, the novel highlights a stark reality—Dalits cannot rid themselves of caste oppression merely by changing their religion, name, or cultural identity. The Dalit identity, as imposed by the caste Hindus, remains unchanged and unrecognised within dominant societal structures. Bama writes the following lines as:

Dalits have been enslaved for generation upon generation and are told again and again of their degradation; they have come to believe that they are degraded, lacking honour and self-worth, and untouchable; they have reached a stage where they, themselves, voluntarily, hold themselves apart. This is the worst injustice. This is what even babies are told, how they are instructed. The consequence of all this is that there is no way for Dalits to find freedom or redemption. (29)

Karukku highlights two distinct instances of caste discrimination that Bama experienced firsthand. The first testimony recounts the caste-based oppression she witnessed in her village, while the second details the discrimination she endured within the Catholic Christian congregation.

In her village, the Naickers occupy a dominant position, controlling the majority of land and wealth. As the most influential group, they refuse to acknowledge Dalits as equals or even as fully human. Bama, as a young girl, first becomes aware of this discrimination in a seemingly mundane moment on the street—when she sees a man carrying a packet of Bajji. This moment serves as a pivotal realisation for Bama, exposing the deep-rooted social hierarchy that dictates interactions between caste groups. Through such experiences, Karukku sheds light on the systemic oppression and exclusion faced by Dalits, both within secular society and within religious institutions that perpetuate caste-based discrimination. She writes:

A big man carrying a small packet in the fashion I guessed there was something like vadai or green Banana Bhaji in the packet. He came along, holding out the packet by its string without touching it. The elder went straight up to Naicker, bowed low and extended the pocket towards him, cupping the hand that held the string with the other hand (15)

As a young girl, Bama witnesses a striking incident that exposes the caste hierarchy entrenched in her village. She recounts the event comically to her brother, describing the exaggerated gestures of an elderly man as he approaches the Naicker household. However, her brother's explanation prompts Bama to reflect deeply on the caste system, realising that the Naickers, as an upper-caste group, refuse to interact with Dalits, whom they consider untouchable physically. He further explains that if a Naicker were to touch a person from the lower caste, they would perceive themselves as polluted.

Bama also narrates the distressing experiences of her grandmother, who suffers persistent mistreatment at the hands of the Naicker community. Through these reflections, Karukku powerfully critiques caste-based oppression, illustrating how even seemingly mundane interactions are shaped by deeply ingrained social hierarchies.

Even tiny children born the other day would call her name and order her about because they belong to the Naicker caste.

Even the way they were given their drinking water the Naicker women would pour out the water from the height of four feet while Paatti and others perceived and dark with cupped hands held to their mouths After she had finished all her filthy charges Paatti placed the vessel that she had brought with her by the side of the drain the Naicker lady came out with her leftovers, leaned out from a distance and tipped them into patti's vessel and went away her vessel it seemed must not touch patti's it would be polluted (16)

Despite Bama's grandmother's obedience, she is not respected by the Naickers. This is because the upper-caste Naickers believe their pots and bodies will be polluted if they come into contact with the untouchables. Every Dalit in the village is expected to work at the Naicker households or fields, where they are subjected to exploitation with meagre wages. Dalits perform labour-intensive tasks, including digging wells, carrying stones, collecting firewood, and household chores, functioning essentially as bonded labourers under the absolute control of the Naicker families.

Although the Naickers rely on Dalit labour for their fields, wealth, and prosperity, they maintain discriminatory attitudes, refusing to acknowledge the dignity of the workers. Naicker women even employ Dalit women to carry luggage yet remain extremely cautious to avoid physical contact. Bama's grandmother endured such discrimination, which the writer vehemently condemns. Bama highlights the hypocrisy of the dominant caste, expressing her outrage at caste-based oppression, stating: "it was shameful to see," "it was disquieting to watch," "it was ugly to see"(21) —powerful words that capture the inhumane treatment Dalits suffer under the upper castes.

In Karukku, Bama raises critical arguments about caste hypocrisy. She questions: if an untouchable works in the fields of the Naicker, does the field become polluted? If the same Naicker enters the field or enjoys the harvest cultivated by untouchables, is he not polluted? This form of power politics serves as an ideology imposed by the Naicker community to justify the subjugation of Dalits.

Bama further recounts instances of violence inflicted on Dalits by caste Hindus as a method of oppression. She narrates an incident where Chaaliyar boys viciously attacked a North Street youth, describing: "Yet [Chaaliyar] boys stabbed with the spear with which they struck his thigh—pierced it right through and came out the other side. It seems that there was blood everywhere" (Karukku 30). Harassment, beatings, stabbings, and systematic ill-treatment have become an inescapable reality for Dalits, who are dehumanised and abandoned in society without sympathy or mercy.

In the second phase of the novel, Bama witnesses and personally experiences caste discrimination within a Christian congregation. Even priests—supposed messengers of God—harbour prejudices against Dalits. She recalls a deeply distressing moment when a priest accuses her, stating: "After all, you are from Cheri. You might have done it. You must have done it." (Karukku 19). This preconceived bias against Dalits in Christian institutions serves as a painful revelation for Bama, exposing the continued exclusion even in spaces meant for spiritual refuge.

Ultimately, Karukku demonstrates that untouchability permeates every sphere of society—on streets, in fields, in schools, on buses, in colleges, in churches, and even in cemeteries. The upper castes refuse to sit beside the Cheri people, reinforcing their deep-rooted exclusion. As Bama pursues higher education, she longs for transformation, seeking a place where equality prevails. However, caste identity continues to dictate social interactions—when she applies for work, the first question posed to her is: "What caste do you belong to?" This stark reality highlights how caste supersedes educational qualifications, shaping an individual's character and perceived worth.

Despite her struggles, Bama finds hope in teaching and seeing Dalit students in her class. Though she faces discrimination, she remains proud to educate and empower Dalit youth, preparing them to challenge societal oppression. She affirms: "I enjoyed standing up to the authorities and teaching with some skill and success" (Karukku 23).

Through education and resistance, Bama envisions a path to dismantling caste-based oppression. Inspired by her brother's guidance, she initially believed that becoming a nun would grant her the authority to serve Dalit and impoverished children. However, her experiences in the convent shatter that illusion, revealing that the material world is far more just than the spiritual realm. The disillusionment reinforces her resolve—to actively challenge oppression and break societal barriers.

Where others silently endure discrimination, Bama is fearless in resistance, boldly confronting caste hierarchy. Her hostility toward oppression is evident as she declares: "I grew hot with anger; I lost my temper and challenged them head-on. I dared to speak up" (Karukku 22). These painful memories of caste oppression become the driving force behind her social activism and literary career.

Bama's first significant achievement was winning first prize for securing high marks in her S.S.L.C. exam. Another victory came when she stood up to her principal, refusing to be denied participation in family functions. She believes that education is the most powerful tool in resisting oppression, using her intellect and talents to break caste barriers. Each success reminds her of her brother's words, reinforcing her determination to persevere.

3. CONCLUSION

Bama's Karukku serves as a compelling literary protest against the pervasive caste discrimination entrenched in social, economic, and religious spheres. Forsaking spiritual life, she left the convent, finding herself without solace—nailed, crucified, and erased by the hands of oppression. However, in fulfilling her responsibility, she resurrects from caste-based discrimination, emerging like a phoenix—empowered, defiant, and spreading her wings against the rigid societal structures that sought to define her. Her poignant declaration, "Even after death, caste difference does not disappear," reflects the lasting impact of systemic exclusion, a reality that continues into the 21st century.

For countless individuals, the caste system imposes both physical and psychological constraints, rendering them voiceless, socially paralysed, and marginalised. Women, in particular, face compounded discrimination, enduring sexual, mental, and physical subjugation. In this climate of oppression, Bama stands as a beacon for countless disenfranchised women subjected to both caste and gender-based prejudice. Her resistance reflects the essence of Buddha's prophecy: "Not by birth does one become an outcaste" (Paswan 281).

Through education and defiance, Bama refuses to conform to societal expectations, instead challenging institutionalised oppression and asserting her identity with unwavering determination. Her work amplifies marginalised voices, urging readers to critically examine social hierarchies and the power dynamics that sustain caste discrimination. The struggles and triumphs captured in Karukku transcend personal suffering, symbolising the broader Dalit resistance against historical and systemic marginalisation. Ultimately, Bama's journey reaffirms the transformative potential of education—a catalyst for social change, a tool to dismantle barriers, resist discrimination, and redefine identity in a society deeply entrenched in caste consciousness.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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