



## Interaction of Caste and Gender in Bama's *Karukku* from an Intersectional Perspective

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### Abstract

*Bama's autobiography "Karukku" raises a powerful and universal voice against all forms of oppression that exist in the caste-ridden patriarchal Indian society. In the novel, Bama narrates her experience as a marginalised Dalit woman who gains enough courage and mental strength to invert the structures of domination prevalent in Indian society. While exposing the hypocrisy of the high-caste people, she reinstates the marginalised Dalit women and asserts the distinctive voice of Dalit women who speak differently from the savarna women. The present paper is an attempt to examine how the interaction of caste and gender function simultaneously in the subordination of Dalit women in Bama's "Karukku." By drawing upon the framework of Dalit Feminism, the study explores how Bama's novel transcends the 'victim' trope by positioning her life story as a place of social and political resistance. It argues that Bama's use of local Tamil dialect and her criticism of religious and social institutions that serve as vital tools for reclaiming organization in a setting of systemic exclusion. The paper explores the novel's reliance on subaltern orality and folklore and argues that Bama's use of dialect and communal memory transforms the memoir into a political 'testimonio.' Finally, the study concludes that the novel "Karukku" serves as a linguistic and cultural manifesto that reclaims the Dalit woman's body and voice from the margin of Indian literature to its center to acclaim liberty.*

**Keywords:** Dalit, Caste, Savarna, Gender, Autobiography.

***"No cultural liberation without women's liberation." -- James Ngugi***

Bama's autobiography *Karukku*, a landmark in the history of Dalit literature, raises a powerful and universal voice against all forms of oppression that exist in the caste-ridden patriarchal Indian society. In the novel, Bama narrates her experience as a marginalised Dalit woman who gains enough courage and mental strength to invert the structures of domination prevalent in Indian society. For Bama, writing is a political act, a weapon with which she can dismantle the hegemony of pervading casteism and gender discrimination of Indian society. The novel was written to heal the inward wound of Bama as a Dalit Christian woman. With the help of her personal story of childhood and her growth as a woman who resists patriarchy and caste system, Bama translates the history of her community who have encountered both denigration of self and culture as Dalits in Indian society: "It talks about their style of living, their hard work, their culture, their belief system, their entertainment, their spirituality, their love, their fight, their struggles, their pain and agony, their joys and sorrows, their tears and dreams" (Bama, "Dalit Feminist" 4). Though criticised and rejected by many for the use of Tamil people's language- language used and spoken by Tamil Dalits- and for the portrayal of



real people with real names who were still living, the novel becomes a success which could relieve the pains of those who are wounded. In the novel, Bama not only counters caste discrimination but also subverts patriarchy restoring the human dignity of Dalit women.

The life narrative of Bama as a woman brings out the harsh realities of the Dalit woman whose life is crushed by violence, cruelties and inhuman repressive measures. To give mental strength to rise up and assert the human dignity of Dalit women, Bama resurrects her life exposing the hypocrisy of caste Hindus and the Christians. While exposing the hypocrisy of the high-caste people, she reinstates the marginalised Dalit women and asserts the distinctive voice of Dalit women who speak differently from the savarna women. In the “Author’s Preface to the First Edition” of *Karukku*, Bama points out the driving forces that shaped her autobiographical novel:

The driving force that shaped this book are many: events that occurred during many stages of my life, cutting me like karukku and making me bleed; unjust social structures that plunged me into ignorance and left me trapped and suffocating; my own desperate urge to break, throw away, and destroy these bonds; and when the chains were shattered into fragments, the blood that was split-all these taken together. (XXIV)

The subjection of Dalit women to patriarchal domination within their own communities and the absence of Dalit women’s voice in mainstream literature are the immediate consequences of the multiple marginalisation of Dalit women by the pervading Brahmanical patriarchy of Indian society. Despite Dalit women’s effort to liberate themselves from the traditional bondage and subordination, they remain trapped in the century-old tradition. In this regard, Sunaina Arya points out the complex interplay of caste and gender:

The dalit women who are at the bottom of caste hierarchy suffered doubly-not only denial of rights (economic and educational) and individual freedom as ‘untouchables’, but also as ‘lower’ caste women. This vertical structure of caste and the horizontal strata of patriarchy render Dalit women fall lowest in the class hierarchy. Thus, they face intersectional violence which goes bypasses in the contemporary mainstream writings of savarna feminists. (XI)

Dalit women questions the homogeneity of experiences while expressing the demand for a reformulation of feminist politics in India. They even challenge the basic category ‘woman’, which denotes the high-caste savarna women as exclusive and partisan. The main reason for the invisibility of the experience of Dalit women is because of “masculinization of dalithood and savarnization of womanhood, leading to a classical exclusion of dalit womanhood” (Rege, “A dalit” 47). In an interview, Bama opines that there is need for a separate term “Dalit feminism” because “the term ‘feminism’ in India is not enough to encompass the liberative perspectives, aspirations, values, convictions and dreams of Dalit women” as Indian feminism does not include the annihilation of caste in its agenda of emancipation and empowerment of women and is not committed to the task of restoring the self-esteem and self-respect of Dalit women (Bama, “Dalit Feminist” 5).

In patriarchal Indian society, the struggle and the problems faced by Dalit women are entirely different from that of non-Dalit women or the high caste Hindu women. The unequal treatment meted out to the Dalit women is justified and legitimised by religion. In such an upper-caste male-dominated society, the oppression of Dalit women are manifold. The 2009 declaration of the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) clearly highlights the three primary types of oppression of Dalit women: “We are concerned that dalit women in India suffer from three oppressions: gender, as a result of patriarchy; class, being from the poorest



and most marginalized communities; and caste, coming from the lowest caste, the ‘untouchables’”. The declaration encapsulates the view that the oppression of Dalit women is multi-dimensional and that there is intersection of gender, class and caste in this oppression. So, the emancipatory agenda of Dalit feminism shall have to be sensitive to these issues and stress the complex interplay of caste and gender in structuring hierarchies in society. In order to study how systemic oppression of caste and gender function simultaneously in Dalit women’s lives, Dalit feminists adapt the theory of Intersectionality. Intersectionality is a term coined by Black feminist, Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989 in her article, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics”. In her article, Crenshaw emphasises the necessity to take intersectionality into account to fully explore the multidimensionality of Black women’s experience and address the particular manner in which Black women’s voices are erased. She also highlights the need to rethink and recast the single-praxis framework of feminist theory and antiracist policy which fails to embrace the experience and concerns of Black women: “feminism must include an analysis of race if it hopes to express the aspirations of non-white women” (Crenshaw 166).

Based on Crenshaw’s Intersectionality theory, Indian political scientist, Gopal Guru analyses the intersectional identity of Dalit women and explains how caste and gender intersect in the subordination of Dalit women in the Indian context. In his article “Dalit women talk differently” (1995), he observes that since non-Dalit women talk on behalf of Dalit women, the feminist theory developed by non-dalit women is unauthentic and fails to capture Dalit women’s reality. Hence, Dalit women need to talk “differently on the basis of external factors (non-dalit forces homogenising the issue of dalit women) and internal factors (the patriarchal domination within the dalits) (Guru 2548). This phenomenon of “talking differently” automatically becomes valid and foregrounds the identity of Dalit women. Feminist scholar and sociologist, Sharmila Rege in her article, “Dalit women talk differently: A critique of “difference” and towards a dalit feminist standpoint position” (1998), further highlights the complex interplay of different axes of inequality in the oppression of Dalit women. In the context of Dalit feminism, she argues:

What we need-instead is a shift of focus from ‘difference’ and multiple voices to the social relations which convert difference into oppression. This requires the working out of the cultural and material dimensions of the interactions and interphases between the different heirarchies of class, gender, race and so on. In other words this means transforming difference’ into a standpoint. (Rege, “Dalit Women” 40-41)

So, rather than viewing Dalit feminist text only from a literary perspective, it should be viewed from a sociological perspective. The autonomy of the Dalit literary text has to be re-examined taking into consideration the social factors involved in the oppression of the Dalits.

In the novel, to depict the authentic caste and gender based oppression of Dalit women, Bama recreates incidents and situation from her life which evoke the sense of humiliation, exploitation, pollution and untouchability. With authenticity, she explores the work, value, difficulties, challenges of women and also gives a valuable insight into Dalit women’s feelings and desires. While doing so, she produces a powerful critique of patriarchy and casteism. Bama’s spirit of resilience and rebellion can be seen from an early age. Her fight against the dominating and oppressive forces of caste system is revealed through her personal experiences of caste-based discrimination experienced in the public transport. While returning home for holidays from her boarding school, Bama narrates how and why she refused to give her seat to the Naicker woman in the bus:



When I went home for holidays, if there was a Naicker woman sitting next to me in the bus, she'd immediately ask me which place I was going to, what street. As soon as I said, the Cheri, she'd get up and move off to another seat. Or she'd tell me to move somewhere. As if I would go! I'd settle into my seat even more firmly. They'd prefer then to get up and stand all the way rather than sit next to me or to any other woman from Cheri. They'd be polluted, apparently. (Bama 20)

Another incident which brings out the rebellion in Bama as a Dalit woman is her experience in the college. Bama questions the college authority when the Principal and the Warden refuse to grant leave to attend her younger brother and sister's First Communion at home insisting that "there cannot be different rules for different caste, only the same rules for everyone" (Bama 22).

By narrating her mother's story of daily toils, Bama depicts the plight of Dalit women who work hard and suffered bodily pain: "In those days, my mother too used to go collecting firewood, leaned it against the wall, and then began vomiting vast globs of blood. But it was only by toiling like this, without taking any account of their bodies as human flesh and blood, that people of my community could even survive" (Bama 52). As a child Bama could not understand properly the exploitation of Dalits by the landowning high-caste people. Dalit girl's plight is also the same: "In the face of such poverty, the girl children cannot see the sense in schooling, and stay at home, collecting firewood, looking after the house, caring for babies, and doing household chores" (Bama 79). What is evident is the fact that Dalit girls are deprived of education and basic human rights. Because of their poverty, Dalit parents cannot afford education and good life for their children, especially girls. So, right from their childhood, Dalit women face multiple discrimination. At work places also, the exploitation of Dalit women takes place. Women always get lower wages than men. As a child, Bama wonders why different wages for the same work for men and women: "Even if they did the same work, men received one wage, women another. They always paid men more. I could never understand why" (Bama 54-55). Such incidents indicate the different context Dalit women live and the necessity to analyse Dalit feminist text from a different standpoint which considers caste and gender as key signifiers. The daily struggle of Dalit women also brings out the indomitable spirit and courage of Dalit women who can break through all kinds of situations without breaking themselves.

Bama decides to become a nun after completing her graduation and B.Ed. To her dismay, her decision to be a nun to educate and uplift the social condition of the downtrodden and humiliated Dalit children turns out to be an illusion. After entering the religious order, Bama thinks that she has arrived at a place which is free of caste. However, she soon realises that the dominating and oppressive forces of casteism prevails everywhere and at every level-education, employment, religion, marriage. Wherever they go, Dalits experience the pain of caste discrimination which divides and degrades human beings. The discrimination of Dalit women in the convent reaches the climax when the religious order takes the decision to transfer Bama from Madras. Bama's decision to leave the convent could have been averted if there were no changes in the decision of her transfer. After having a distressing time, her experience in Jammu again hastens her decision to leave the convent. On November 8, 1992, Bama leaves the convent to live a meaningful life. After leaving the convent, as a Dalit woman, Bama has to endure the hardships of being alone in the outside world. For nearly eight years, she was hiding away from reality and leading "a counterfeit existence" (Bama 120). In order to be able to stand on her own, she tries to find a new job. After facing the written test and the interview successfully for the post of a teacher in a school, Bama was



rejected because of her identity, the identity of a Dalit woman: “In any case, I didn’t get that job. Why? Because I am a Dalit. It was a school that is governed and run by the Nadar. It seems they only appoint Nadar women. I don’t know why, in that case, they make such a fuss about the interview, and invite us all to apply?” (Bama 118-119). This incident exposes the abuse of power by the dominant class and the duplicity of the high caste people who dominate and exploit Dalit women. It also brings out the perception of high caste people who think Dalits incapable of becoming efficient person and unfit for many prestigious jobs. Further, it is an authentic representation of the problems faced by Dalit women which emanate from their status as Dalits. At this stage, Bama is strong enough to resist and defy the dominating structures of Indian society-caste and patriarchy. She decides to remain single and educate the marginalised women and children. Bama’s recuperative effort reveals her deep concern for her community and her dream of an egalitarian society. She dares to speak up for herself as a Dalit woman and also encourages her fellow Dalits to raise their voice and proclaim that Dalit identity is praiseworthy and excellent:

We who are asleep must open our eyes and look about us. We must not accept the injustice of our enslavement by telling ourselves it is our fate, as if we have no true feelings; we must dare to stand up for change. We must crush all these institutions that use caste to bully us into submission, and demonstrate that among human beings there are none who are high or low. Those who have found their happiness by exploiting us are not going to let us go easily. It is we who have to place them where they belong and bring about a changed and just society where all are equal. (Bama 28)

Karukku emerges as a symbol of strength to those marginalised people whose identities have been denigrated and erased. With her life narrative, Bama faithfully records the agony and sufferings of the marginalised and the hypocrisy of the dominant class. While exposing the hypocrisy of the high-caste people, she reinstates the marginalised Dalit women and asserts the distinctive voice of Dalit women who speak differently from the savarna women. The triumph of Karukku enables Bama to provide an alternative perspective on caste system, highlighting the importance to understand the different social contexts Dalits and the upper-castes live. By contesting the traditional concepts and representation of Dalit women, she reconstructs the history of Dalit women and gives confidence to the Dalits that caste system and patriarchy are not givens but social constructs.

### Notes

- [1] Savarna: It is an inclusive term for those who fall within the four main castes, namely Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra.
- [2] Brahmanical Patriarchy: The Concept of Brahminical Patriarchy was elaborated by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in his paper “Caste in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development” (1916), while writing a critique of the marriage system of endogamy (the system of marriage within a particular group or caste). According to Ambedkar, Brahminical Patriarchy is responsible for upholding the twin evil systems of Indian society-casteism and sexism. This theoretical concept is used by Dalit feminists to understand and analyse Indian society.
- [3] Naicker: It is a dominant landowning caste found in Tamil Nadu and Kerala.
- [4] Parayar: It is a caste group found in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Until recent times, it is classified as a depressed community. In 2017, Parayars were listed as a scheduled caste in Tamil Nadu.
- [5] Nadar: It is a Tamil caste name. Nadars are toddy tappers and shopkeepers. Now they are



classified as Other Backward Class both by Government of India and Tamil Nadu government.

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