

# Suppressed Voices of Dalits: An Analysis of “Karukku” by Bama

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## ABSTRACT

*This research paper explores the profound narrative of suppressed and marginalized voices within the Dalit community through an in-depth analysis of Bama's famous autobiography, “Karukku.” Drawing from the author's personal experiences as a Dalit woman, the paper delves into the socio-cultural context, language and narrative techniques employed by Bama to bring to light the silenced experiences of the marginalized community. Through a meticulous analysis of the autobiography, the paper dissects key themes such as Dalit experiences, social discrimination, and identity. Language and narrative techniques are scrutinized to discern how Bama employs them to articulate and amplify suppressed voices, inviting readers to empathize with the struggles and aspirations of the Dalit community. The study aims to contribute to the understanding of Dalit literature and the impact of “Karukku” in challenging societal norms and fostering awareness about the struggles faced by Dalit people.*

**Keywords :** *Dalit Literature , Caste , Discrimination , Marginalization , Struggle*

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## INTRODUCTION

In India, there's a long-standing issue where a group of people, the Dalits, have been treated unfairly. They've been pushed to the side-lines, neglected by the people, facing discrimination for a really long time. But in the world of books, there are some people making sure that their stories are heard – One of them is Bama, a Tamil female writer who herself is a part of the Dalit community. One of her important works is “Karukku,” a book in which she talks about the struggles and the challenges faced by Dalits. The book unveils the silenced narratives within the Dalit experience.

The term Dalit means ‘oppressed’, ‘broken’ or ‘crushed’ to the extent of losing original identity. However, this name has been adopted by the people otherwise referred to as ‘Untouchables’, and has come to symbolize for them a movement for change and for the eradication of the centuries-old oppression under the caste system. Caste-based prejudice and social exclusion have relegated Dalits to the margins of society, denying them basic rights and amplifying their struggle for identity and dignity. Dalit people have been exploited for many years at every level by upper caste people. Though the constitution of India provides equal rights to all castes, yet the lower caste people are deprived of their rights. The struggle for the rights of Dalits gained momentum during the colonial era and continued post-independence. Leaders like B.R. Ambedkar, himself a Dalit, played a pivotal role in advocating for the rights of Dalits and were instrumental in drafting the Indian Constitution, which outlawed untouchability and sought to promote social justice. Even after the legal reforms and affirmative action policies, Dalits still face challenges such as caste-based discrimination, violence, and unequal access to resources.

“Karukku” by Bama delves into the silenced experiences of Dalits, particularly a Dalit Christian perspective, providing a poignant analysis of caste-based oppression. The book sheds light on the struggles faced by Dalits, addressing societal norms and religious biases, fostering a critical discussion on social justice and marginalized voices. Bama's Karukku, an autobiography, depicts that Dalits are reduced to sub-human beings. Even though, they convert themselves into Christianity which has no caste system, do not get any relief. She herself faced the hypocrisy of the upper caste society which makes her autobiography more real and powerful.

This research paper holds profound significance in unravelling marginalized narratives. By scrutinizing socio-economic disparities, it investigates the problems which Dalit people have to face in education sector,

employment, and healthcare. Exploring cultural dimensions, it delves into the intricacies of Dalit identity shaped by traditions and historical contexts. Through a literary lens, the analysis aims to discern how “Karukku” serves as a powerful and effective tool for social justice, challenging stereotypes and fostering empathy.

Furthermore, the study addresses intersectionality, understanding and recognizing the nuanced impact of gender, caste, and economic factors on the Dalit experience. Beyond a literary exercise, it also advocates for inclusivity, striving to influence broader conversations on social reform. “Karukku” becomes a vehicle for dismantling prejudices, contributing to a more equitable society that embraces diversity. In essence, the study transcends the pages of a book, becoming a catalyst for societal awareness, understanding, and transformative advocacy.

## **DALIT LITERATURE**

Dalit literature is one of the most significant literary trends that emerged from the destitute untouchables of post-independence India. Dalit identity is the culmination of a centuries-long battle of the so-called ‘untouchables’ to be accepted by society as a whole. The term was Initially used by Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, two towering figures in Dalit history. We may learn a lot about our surroundings by listening to the voices of those who have been marginalised or attacked. Knowledge gathered through marginalised literature and subaltern will help the world combat the ignorance that engulfs the lives of these people and the bias that is a result of that ignorance. Inner self-experiences have been buried in quiet for a long time, frequently with religious and societal consent, and condemned to the limitations of non-literary expression. The most current trend is to completely reject their reality.

Activists began using the name “Dalit,” which encompasses all oppressed people. This widening extends the term’s meaning beyond Hinduism to include Dalits who have converted To Buddhism, and in the future, Muslims and Christians as well. There are many different ways to categorise Dalits, including “members of scheduled caste and tribe, neo-Buddhists, The working people, landless and impoverished peasants and women,” according to a Manifesto released in 1973 by the Maharashtra Dalit Panther Movement. Until the 1990s, when Dr. Ambedkar’s birth centennial was marked, the Tamil Nadu movement had a slow start As a quick introduction, it is impossible to cover all Dalit texts or to examine all the topics involved; it is vital to recognise that some of the concerns and aspirations of this movement are comparable to one another.

Dalit literature is different in its values, role and nature from other categories of literature as it is written from the Dalit consciousness or the Dalit’s point of view. Other literature may be fictional and written for entertainment purpose but Dalit Literature is never written for entertainment rather it presents the real and live picture of rigid caste-system and oppression of downtrodden people by upper caste people.

## **BAMA AS A DALIT WOMAN WRITER**

Bama, also known as Bama Faustina Soosairaj, is a Tamil writer and a prominent voice in Dalit literature. Born in Tamil Nadu, India, she is known for her powerful and thought-provoking writings that focus on the experiences of Dalit women. Bama’s works often address issues of caste discrimination, social inequality, and the struggles faced by marginalized communities. Her notable works include “Karukku,” an autobiographical narrative, and “Sangati,” a collection of short stories. Bama’s writings contribute significantly to the discourse on social justice and caste dynamics in Indian society. Bama’s literature is celebrated for its raw and unapologetic exploration of societal issues, giving a voice to the marginalized.

## **AN OVERVIEW OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WORK “KARUKKU”**

The title “Karukku,” meaning “palmyra grove,” carries symbolic significance, representing a refuge for the marginalized. Bama uses her narrative to unravel the intricate intersections of caste and religion, shedding light on the pervasive discrimination faced by Dalits within the Christian community.

In her searing memoir and candid autobiography Karukku, Dalit Christian writer Bama describes how as a young girl she was amused to see an old person from her community carrying a packet of vadai by it’s string. What if the string broke and the vadai fell down, she said while narrating the scene to her elder brother. It was then that she found out that while carrying food for an upper caste person, a Dalit would have to ensure that he didn’t touch the packet even by mistake. She was mortified to hear that, but gradually came to realise that Dalits like herself were treated very differently by those of other castes.

She narrates how on public buses, she was often asked where she lived, and when the street name revealed her caste, she was ordered to vacate her seat after the person sitting next to her. When she refused, the other person would often stand up herself, but would not remain seated next to her. She talks of how her mother often advised her to lie about her caste since it was unlikely she would be found out, but Bama refused. She was rebelling on behalf of the community- for her it was an act of protest against injustice.

The narrative unfolds with a stark portrayal of untouchability, social exclusion, and economic disparities experienced by Dalits. Bama fearlessly exposes the paradoxes within the Church, where the very institution meant to embody equality becomes a perpetuator of caste-based hierarchies. Bama reflects on the internalized oppression within her community, delving into how individuals were conditioned to accept their lower social status. The narrative captures the emotional and psychological toll of living under the shadow of discrimination, giving readers a poignant glimpse into the everyday struggles faced by Dalits.

Bama's story is that of her betrayal by the promise of freedom and dignity as an Indian. The more dominant account is the story of her betrayal in the convent and the church. Karukku tells a child's life of spiritual journey as a catholic and realization of her identity as a Dalit. Even in that spiritual life, religious festivals that became part of yearly cycle of crops and seasons, formed her life. Later on, she described the religious and social life, which detained Dalits as untouchables. In her Life Bama had bitter experiences. We can see and observe her feelings and expressions about Karukku when she herself reveals in the preface of the book:

The driving forces that shaped this book are many: events which 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. (Karukku XXIII)

The book becomes a platform for the marginalized to voice their experiences, challenging societal norms and calling for a reevaluation of deeply entrenched prejudices. This unique work of Bama stands as a testament to resilience, a call for social justice, and an exploration of the complexities of identity. Offering a unique perspective that transcends the confines of one's personal narrative to become a universal exploration of the human quest for dignity and equality.

This autobiographical work serves as a powerful critique of the broader caste system, challenging not only Hindu practices but also shedding light on the deeply ingrained prejudices within Christianity. Bama's Narrative is a courageous exploration of her identity and the intersecting dynamics of caste and religion. Through her vivid storytelling, "Karukku" becomes a profound social commentary, unravelling the complexities of discrimination, cultural clashes, and societal structures. The memoir's impact extends beyond personal storytelling; it has become a seminal work in Dalit literature, sparking discussions on caste, identity, and systemic injustices in India. Bama's legacy lies in her ability to bridge the personal and the societal, using her experiences to illuminate the broader struggles faced by Dalits, irrespective of religious affiliations.

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