

# Karruku: Caste, Gender, and Society

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**Abstract:** The idea of intersectionality is discussed in the current study, with an emphasis on Caste and gender inequality in the Dalit life narrative. While globalisation brought with it progress and wealth, it also widened the divide between the rich and the poor. Inequalities based on gender and caste are firmly ingrained in Indian society, and the country's rapid economic boom has allowed certain oligarchs to play power games by denying minority access to basic human rights. To better understand the systems, institutions, and experiences, one must investigate the intersectionality of gender and caste via the lens of cultural conflict in Dalit literature. According to the study's findings, caste-based discrimination places extra difficulties in the way of Dalit women's access to protection on top of the ongoing issues related to gender marginalisation, poverty, and children. The suffering that members of society's lowest strata endured as a result of the hegemonic construction of society gave rise to the formation of Dalit literature. Women writers have emerged to express their feelings, sorrows, embarrassments, and oppression in all facets of their lives. This chapter focuses on how Paraiyar caste women are degraded at the lowest levels of society based on their race, class, and creed in Bama's *Karukku*. Discrimination on the basis of caste and gender is the major issue in the works of Bama. *Karukku* is her life narrative (memoir) which was translated by Lakshmi Holstorm in 2000 and won the Crossword Award for translation in 2001.

Index terms: gender, caste, intersectionality, cultural conflict, Dalit literature, .

## Introduction

The Indian Constitution has given Dalit women social mobility and protection. The level of upper class is oppressing Dalit women. Dalit women inhabit a marooned area inside the framework of Indian democracy due to their political and social existence. In terms of business, politics, and social makeup, Indian society today is undergoing significant change. Let's critically analyse Indian society from caste and gender viewpoints to better comprehend it. The caste system in India forms the foundation of the social order. The Brahmins (elites, or priestly class), Kshatriyas (the ruling class), Vaishyas (the lower caste), Sudras (the middle caste), and Dalits (the caste who serves all the other castes) make up the majority of the caste system (and who are ex-untouchables).

"Caste is an enclosed class," asserted Ambedkar. There are also labourers and a division of labour in India. In the Indian setting, caste and gender thus also interact. Caste and gender were never a topic that the mainstream Indian feminist movement concentrated on; instead, they gave a lot of attention to gender and class. In order to counter the mainstream feminists, the women from the Dalit community, who refer to themselves as Dalit feminists, assert that Dalit women are subjected to triple oppression based on caste, gender, and class. Since their survival and dignity are ruthlessly threatened, caste is a hard reality for Dalits. Caste-

based customs and professions serve as the foundation of the caste ideology. Social movements in the 19th and 20th centuries gave rise to a discourse on caste and gender.

The fundamental argument put forward by Dalit feminists is that Dalit women are in a different category from women of other castes and communities. However, the women's movement in India has not addressed the problem of Dalit women as a fundamental caste-based Indian reality. Many social reformers from South, West, and East India engaged in discussions about issues affecting women, such as Sati, the marriageable age, education, and other issues. In the same vein, social reformers like Babasaheb Ambedkar, Ayyankali, Shahu Maharaja, Periyar E. V. Ramasamy Naicker, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, and others tackled caste and gender debate persuasively. In the 20th century, the majority of Dalit women took part in the Ambedkariate movement. The women's movement after India's independence brought up issues like dowry, rape, employment, pay, reproductive rights, and so on. Thus, the two main focuses of the women's movement were class and gender. The National Federation of Dalit Women was founded in 1995.

The confluence of class and patriarchy was prioritised by dominating women's movements, but not the connections between caste and women. Dalit feminists contend that caste, class, and gender all contribute to the triple oppression of Dalit women. They have also purposefully drawn attention to two problems: the "external" and "interior" aspects of patriarchy. On the outside, they contended that it lessened the applicability and actuality of their difficulties at a theoretical and political level when non-Dalit women discussed the common position of Dalit women's representation. Dalit women challenged the complex nature of their exploitation, which included their society, and railed against Dalit patriarchy in both the public and private arenas. The persistent evasion of Dalit women's questions by Dalit male leaders throughout the post-Ambedkerian era has strengthened the Dalit community. One of the core tenets of Dalit feminist theoretical tradition is the Triple form of oppression. It is asserted that Dalit women are oppressed by Dalit men, Dalit women, and non-Dalit males, which causes both internal and external patriarchy and hastens Dalit women's exploitation. One of the basic tenets is that there is some type of oppression.

In India, caste mentality predominates. Caste is a notion; it is a condition of mind, according to Ambedkar. Caste cannot be eliminated without also eliminating a physical barrier. It denotes a hypothetical alteration. His well-known theory of caste as a "notion of mind" is being re-created in modern times in fresh ways. As was previously mentioned, despite the noise around Indian modernity, the caste-based Indian psyche

is rudimentary. It is recognised as a horrifying sadistic expression that blends torture, public humiliation, and gang rape. As a result, rumour is used to manipulate and govern a Dalit woman's sexuality.

## Literature Survey

When a Dalit woman wrote her memoirs in 1992 after leaving the convent, the Tamil publishing business considered her words offensive. Thus, in 1992, Bama Faustina discreetly published *Karukku*, a seminal work that combines history, sociology, and the power of memory. *Karukku* disregarded convention in a number of ways. It is a daring and moving account of living outside of mainstream Indian thinking and function and the first autobiography written by a Dalit woman writer. It is also a classic of subaltern literature. It depicts the conflict between the self and the community and revolves on the central issue of caste oppression within the Catholic Church. It also illustrates Bama's life as a process of self-reflection and healing from social and institutional betrayal. The Dalit writing was brought into sharp focus by the English translation, which was initially published in 2000 and acknowledged as a new alphabet of experience. This second edition has a Postscript in which Bama recounts the moment she decided to abandon her chosen profession, as well as a special note titled "Ten Years Later."

The suffering that members of society's lowest strata endured due to the hegemonic construction of society gave rise to the formation of Dalit literature. In a caste-based society, they have been fighting for their lives. In response to the prolonged suffering of the oppressed, a few members of this split section of society have expressed their sentiments. Because of the harsh realities of life and their encounters, they raised their voices in opposition to their slavery, revolted against tyrannical forces, and sought a decent place. Women writers have emerged to express their feelings, sorrows, embarrassments, and oppression in all facets of their lives. They have done this by taking inspiration from male writers who depict the lives of the oppressed and the incredible reception they receive from intellectuals for their higher spirits. This chapter focuses on how Paraiyar caste women are degraded at the lowest levels of society based on their race, class, and creed in Bama's *Karukku*, which she explains in detail.

One of the primary characteristics of the twenty-first century is the upsurge of the subaltern from the periphery to the centre. Postcolonialism has led to the emergence of the subaltern voice, which has, in turn, provided an ardent depiction of their heightened suffering, which has motivated them to revolt for their

liberation. It is a demonstration against mistreatment based on a person's position, religion, race, or occupation. It shows disapproval of racial discrimination in the West and hierarchical rule in India.

In particular, regarding the tragic situation of Dalit women in Indian society, this chapter examines the prejudice, alienation, separation, and penance of Dalits from mainstream traditions of life. The sorrows and woes of the "browbeaten class" are chronicled in Dalit literature. Social supremacy is the core of Dalit literature and its literary revolution. It examines marginalised and colonised people. It concentrates on marginalised and subjugated people. The Dalit academic period comprised works by Rettaimalai Srinivasan, B.R. Ambedkar, M.K. Gandhi, and other authors, intellectuals, political leaders, and reform movements.

Bama started her writing career in 1992 with the release of *Karukku*, a semi-autobiographical story for which she was recognised with the Crossword Award as a writer of the oppressed classes. With her knowledge and experience of the dreadful existence of her "Paraiyar" group, Bama attempts to convey enduring concerns like class, religion, and sexual identity in all of her stories. Her works, particularly her short stories, provide a glimpse into the life of the underclass. The brutal treatment of the Paraiyars, the lowest form of caste, is expressed by Bama. Her work has represented all oppressed people and their struggle to end the injustices forced upon them.

Bama recalls some of the traumatic events in her own life that shaped her personality and contributed to who she is now. She said in the prologue of her book *Karukku* that all Dalits who have been denied their fundamental rights must serve as God's word, cutting to the very heart, in an attempt to transform this condition of affairs because of the excruciating and heartbreaking pain she had experienced since she was a child. "The primary drivers that formed this book are many," she said, "events that unfolded during several stages of my life, cutting me like "Karukku" (a palmyra leaf with a rough edge) and making me bleed... (p. xiii).

She has been successful in attaining a unique identity. She has also given her community a name and given a voice to the voiceless. This is not just the tale of Bama but the story of the upper classes' uprising and power. Bama has faithfully reproduced the voices of the Paraiyar community, giving her caste a sense of self-worth and respect. She tries to define not only herself but also other people like her through her work. The way she writes about the downtrodden and oppressed makes it clear that her writing has created new social-economic personas for self-governing thought and action.

The identity struggle she went through amid a pivotal moment in her life is the primary source of creative tension in Bama's *Karukku*. *Karukku* follows Bama's transformation from an ordinary rural girl to a Dalit woman dedicated to fighting for the cause of the Dalit community, originating from the dilemma that arose from the unjust treatment she suffered because of her paraiyar heritage. The fundamental source of creative tension in Bama's *Karukku* comes from her fight with identity during a crucial period in her life. Following Bama's journey from an average country child to a Dalit lady committed to fighting for the Dalit community, *Karukku* explores the conflict stemming from the unfair treatment she endured due to her paraiyar lineage. In Holmstrom's opinion, this crisis displays the various facets of her identity as a "Woman, Christian, and Dalit," However, it is evident that the criteria above are insufficient to explain the multiple shades of identity possessed by the narrator in *Karukku*.

Bama is a Dalit woman who has worked as a teacher and served as a Kanyastree (Christian nun) in the past. Her gender, caste, and religious affiliation further highlight how she identifies as a Dalit and how marginalised she is in society. From this vantage point, she investigates the various forms of dominance that exist in Dalits, particularly in the existence of Tamil Nadu's Paraiyar women. Bama aims to examine ways of empowering her people while writing about and from the perspective of the marginalised.

A notable turning point in Tamil Dalit literature is the confessional, conversational style of writing used by Bama in *Karukku*. It departs from the limited, always well-edited language of literary discourse, which removes itself from marginalised issues. Bama uses the terminology and spoken vernacular of the oppressed in her literary works to underline the philosophical leanings that control the current state of identification, self-articulation, and academic discourse. In her own words, she expresses the realities of the oppressed. As a Dalit woman herself, Bama writes her novels about Dalit women. By doing this, she clarifies that writing for Dalit women, or writing from the margins, is a political act.

Bama has risen to prominence in the academic community due to her work as a teacher and, more importantly, as a Dalit writer and activist who corresponds to the community's first generation of students. She emphasises the importance of education in promoting social empowerment. She develops a strong philosophical kinship with feminism as a Dalit activist writer. Dalits and women are both disadvantaged populations that were born into these groupings. In her active narration of the Dalit experience, Bama emphasises the similarities between the two groups and employs feminist representational tactics, rewriting

and historicising the tyranny of the Dalits. She frequently emphasises in her writings that Dalits must help themselves by highlighting their differences from the ruling castes as a form of self-affirmation. She also deliberately uses the Dalits' terminology while writing about them, rejecting the need to adhere to traditional views of shape, manner, creative standards, and correct speech and grammatical patterns.

In her portrayal of Dalit women, Bama generally depicts them as labourers who find employment at a young age and continue to labour through youth, adulthood, middle-aged, and old age—almost until their dying breath. Bama's portrayal of a Dalit woman's lifespan reflects the community's battle for marginalisation and attaining a suitable means of existence. In her fiction, she uses a thorough depiction of Dalit women's struggles, victories, and ambitions to illustrate the Dalit battle for financial, cultural, and governmental emancipation. *Karukku* received a ton of praise from both readers and critics.

The story of Bama is primarily about how she was misled by the ideals of freedom and self-respect. The tale of the nuns and the church's disloyalty is the most enthralling. *Karukku* chronicles her coming to terms with her identity as a Dalit and the spiritual growth of a young Catholic girl. The Tamil word “*Karukku*”, which means an embryo or seed, also denotes newness and freshness. Bama calls attention to the sign in her foreword. She quotes the New Testament book of Hebrews, which states that "the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword" (1). *Karukku* focuses on three crucial issues that severely harm Bama's life: alienation, class, and faith.

To empower herself and her tribe in the face of this shortened endurance, Bama begins to look for alternatives. Her older brother demonstrates the precise route and informs her that true equality can only be achieved via education. According to Bama's older brother,

"We are never treated with honour, decency, or dignity since we are born into the Paraiyar jati. All of that is taken away from us. But if we work hard and advance, we may do away with these humiliations. Carefully study, and learn everything you can. People will approach you and cling to you if you are always ahead of the curve in your lessons—effort and learning" (15).

## Conclusion

It is essential to examine how much gender makes casteist persecution worse. To what extent is it justified to categorise Dalit women as a separate group within the Dalit community? Would such a view address the root of class and sexual injustice among Dalits? These issues must be handled in an examination of Bama's works. The chapter also explores the influence of type on gender discrimination. For instance, child labour is unregulated in India, where girls are especially helpless against different sorts of poverty, especially Dalit girls, who are exploited. In considering the existence of Dalit women, it is essential to consider whether gender issues take precedence over caste or whether caste defines gender relations.

Freedom is not a gift. One must battle to get freedom. One must bring the past into the present to seek but not give up, even on the most challenging paths. New homes must be rebuilt after the course is exposed. The intensity of suffering mellows to complete understanding as consciousness envelops the community. The land provides both sustenance and spiritual strength to a farmer. By reiterating the notion that in egalitarianism, everyone is a leader, Bama instils hope in the waning minds of her people. Everyone can be a leader. Everyone is aware of their responsibility. Everybody takes part in the game under her direction, which never falters and is a continual process. Bama instils self-assurance in her people. She observes a striking shift in Dalit women's attitudes as well.

Bama leads a movement for the Dalit people's social recognition and distinctiveness despite overwhelming hurdles. She switches from a poignant to an emotional disposition. When she displays powerful and courageous traits of both sexes, she experiences bliss. A new civilisation emerges when people are mentally harmonious. They acquire a human perspective, respect for societal norms, and civic awareness. A kinship is created due to the evolution of a shared rule of conduct. Out of a miserable state of affairs, a world is produced or created, and the need for identity emerges.

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