

Cultural Ambivalence and Dalit Narrative : An Reading of Bama's *Karukku*

P. Priyadharshini¹   & Dr N. Hemamalini²  

Abstract

This article explores Karukku, the groundbreaking autobiography by Dalit Christian writer Bama, through the lens of cultural ambivalence and Dalit identity. It critically examines how Bama navigates the intersection of caste, gender, and religion, portraying the double marginalization faced by Dalit women within both societal and religious structures. Through her poignant narration and unconventional stylistic choices, Bama challenges dominant literary and cultural norms, using Tamil as a tool of resistance and authenticity. The study highlights how Karukku serves not only as a personal narrative but also as a powerful socio-political critique that redefines Dalit literature. The article positions Bama's work as a pivotal contribution to cultural discourse, emphasizing the transformative role of literature in voicing the experiences of the oppressed.

Keywords : Cultural Ambivalence, Subaltern Voices, Autobiographical Narrative, Caste and Religion

Introduction

The emergence of Dalit literature as a significant stream in Indian writing has brought to the forefront the lived experiences of marginalized communities who

Submitted: 31.05.2025

Accepted: 18.06.2025

Published 30.06.2025

¹P. Priyadharshini, Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of English, Marudhar Kesari Jain College for Women (Autonomous), Vaniyambadi -635 751, Tamil Nadu, India.

²Dr N. Hemamalini, Head & Assistant Professor, Department of English, Marudhar Kesari Jain College for Women (Autonomous), Vaniyambadi -635 751, Tamil Nadu, India.

©2025 P. Priyadharshini & Dr N. Hemamalini. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction, provided the original author and source are credited.

have historically been silenced and excluded. One of the most groundbreaking and deeply introspective works within this domain is *Karukku* (1992) by Bama, a Tamil Dalit Christian woman. This autobiography offers a searing account of caste oppression, gender-based discrimination, and spiritual conflict through the lens of a Dalit woman's life. The title itself, *Karukku*, a Tamil word that connotes palmyra leaves with double-edged serrations, serves as a powerful metaphor for the sharp, painful experiences Bama recounts. Furthermore, the word signifies freshness and growth, reflecting the narrative's theme of resistance and rebirth. This paper explores the themes of cultural ambivalence and Dalit identity in *Karukku*, analyzing how Bama's narrative becomes a transformative space where marginalized voices confront caste, religion, and gender hierarchies.

Cultural Ambivalence and Identity Crisis

Bama's *Karukku* emerges from a moment of intense personal crisis, one that pushes her to confront her complex identities as a Dalit, a Christian, and a woman. Her departure from the convent marks the beginning of a reflective journey where she begins to reconcile these fractured identities. Cultural ambivalence, the tension between opposing cultural values and experiences, is a recurring theme throughout the text. The Christian faith, which Bama was brought up to revere as a symbol of moral truth and equality, becomes the very space that reinforces caste hierarchies and systemic discrimination. As Raj Gauthaman argues, "conversion to Christianity or Islam did not erase caste; it only created a new structure of internal exclusion" (54).

The author exposes the contradictions between Christian doctrine and practice, expressing disillusionment with institutional religion while maintaining a personal connection to Christ and the Virgin Mary. This duality represents the cultural ambivalence inherent in her spiritual journey: while the Church promises salvation and brotherhood, it fails to transcend the caste system, thus marginalizing Dalit Christians. This unresolved tension between faith and social identity is central to Bama's exploration of selfhood.

Bama's work goes beyond personal narrative; it becomes a potent form of social critique and a declaration of Dalit feminism. She challenges the intersectional oppression faced by Dalit women. According to Sharmila Rege, "Dalit women's writings do not merely present gender or caste as separate categories but present them in their lived simultaneity" (13). They are oppressed both by patriarchy within their own communities and caste-based violence from upper castes. Her autobiography vividly recounts instances of Dalit women being exploited by landlords and underpaid for their labor. Even within the domestic sphere, they are subjected to humiliation and physical abuse by their own menfolk, emphasizing the layers of subjugation.

By presenting her experiences in a series of thematic chapters, Bama constructs a fragmented yet cohesive narrative of survival and resistance. This structure, as Lakshmi Holmström notes in her translation, reflects the rippling effect

of memory: each recollection evokes a broader understanding of her life's trajectory. It is not a linear autobiography but rather a contemplative mosaic of lived realities.

Another striking feature of *Karukku* is Bama's revolutionary use of language. She writes in colloquial Tamil, the spoken idiom of her community, thereby subverting the elitist and Brahmanical norms of written Tamil literature. By refusing to conform to grammatical and syntactical conventions, Bama asserts her cultural authenticity and forces readers into a new interpretive mode. *Karukku* also engages with themes of cultural feminism. Cultural feminism values the differences between men and women and emphasizes traditionally 'feminine' traits such as empathy, care, and community. Bama subtly aligns with this framework by celebrating the resilience and nurturing power of Dalit women. She envisions a society where women are not merely passive victims but active agents of change. Her compassion towards the children she teaches and her dream of a just, inclusive Christian order reflects a feminist vision grounded in ethics of care and social justice.

By portraying women's labor and suffering not just as sources of pain but as acts of resistance, Bama reframes the narrative of victimhood into one of empowerment. The fact that Dalit women continued to nurture their families while enduring relentless exploitation highlights their strength and moral superiority in a deeply flawed society. A major concern of *Karukku* is the persistence of caste discrimination even after religious conversion. Bama critically observes how the social baggage of caste does not vanish upon conversion to Christianity. Rather, caste identities are often reinscribed within new religious frameworks. Upper-caste Christians retain their privileges, while Dalit Christians remain at the bottom of the social hierarchy. This observation reveals the structural limitations of both religion and the Indian legal system in delivering justice to Dalits. Bama's critique of the Church is not a rejection of faith itself but a call for reform. Her personal devotion to Christ coexists with her condemnation of the Church's duplicity. This nuanced position reflects a mature spiritual and political consciousness, which refuses to accept oppression in any form.

When *Karukku* was first published in 1992, it stirred controversy in Tamil literary circles. Many members of Bama's own community were angered by her candid revelations. Mini Chandran notes, "The backlash to *Karukku* was swift because it unsettled both literary and religious orthodoxy. Bama's refusal to speak euphemistically was seen as a breach of communal loyalty" (45). Despite initial resistance, the book went on to mark a new chapter in Tamil Dalit literature, giving voice to the voiceless and challenging deeply entrenched social norms. It was awarded the Crossword Award for Indian Language Fiction in 2000 for its English translation and continues to be celebrated as a landmark work.

Bama's subsequent works *Sangati* (1994), *Kusumbukkaran* (1996), *Vanmam* (2002), and *Kondattam* (2009) further solidify her role as a key figure in Dalit literature. These texts explore the everyday lives of Dalit communities and foreground the agency of Dalit women, challenging patriarchal norms from within.

In *Karukku*, Bama reveals the deep-seated cultural ambivalence that permeates the life of Dalit Christians, particularly the Paraiyars, who convert to Christianity with the hope of liberation from the rigid Hindu caste system. Her narrative captures the disillusionment of those who expected Christianity to be a sanctuary of equality, only to discover that caste had insidiously infiltrated this new religious space. The church, which should have embodied Christ's teachings of compassion, justice, and universal brotherhood, instead becomes another site of marginalization and caste-based oppression. This cultural dissonance between the egalitarian ideals of Christianity and its discriminatory institutional practices in India is at the heart of Bama's critique.

The experience of the Paraiyars is one of profound betrayal. Turning to Christianity as a refuge, they are devastated to find that even within the supposed spiritual fold, caste hierarchies persist. The cultural ambivalence here is stark: Christianity preaches the breaking of social barriers, yet in practice, it upholds the same casteist norms that plague Hindu society. In her observations, Bama notes how Dalits were relegated to menial roles within the Church, while upper-caste converts retained their privileged status. The promise of spiritual equality collapses under the weight of societal structures that the Church fails or refuses to dismantle.

Yet, even though I observed these nuns and their way of life, from time to time I was still seized with a wish to enter an order. I wanted to become a nun, but to be different; I felt a yearning to treat these children as all children ought to be treated, look after them rather than torment and exploit them. At the same time, I kept on telling myself obstinately that I ought not ever to enter a convent. I continued to cherish in my heart a certain love and devotion towards Jesus and Our lady. (*Karukku* 103,104)

Bama's *Karukku* does not merely chronicle these experiences but interrogates them through a lens of cultural resistance. Her call for Dalits to read the Bible independently and discover the true, liberatory teachings of Christ emerges as a radical act of reclaiming faith from the clutches of institutional distortion. She advocates a Christ who aligns not with oppressors cloaked in religious authority, but with the marginalized and voiceless. Anupama Rao explains, such a reinterpretation constitutes "a politics of faith rooted in embodied suffering, a faith of the flesh, not of the institution" (118). In doing so, she constructs a theology rooted in the lived realities of the oppressed, opposing the sanitized, hierarchical Christianity imposed by the upper castes. This interpretative shift from institutional dogma to personal spiritual agency is where Bama locates hope and resistance.

The cultural ambivalence that *Karukku* addresses is not only religious but deeply social. Dalit writing, especially in regional languages like Tamil, has become an important avenue for expressing this tension. Bama's autobiography is not an isolated work but part of a larger Dalit literary movement that emerged in the post-Ambedkar era. This movement empowered Dalits to document and critique their experiences with systemic injustice, challenging dominant cultural narratives. Unlike

mainstream autobiographies that often celebrate individual success, Dalit autobiographies, including *Karukku*, are marked by pain, anger, and defiance. They are testimonies of survival and resistance, shaped by collective memory rather than individual ambition.

Bama's narrative is significant because it reveals the complex intersections of caste, gender, and religion in Indian society. She writes not just as a Dalit, but as a Dalit Christian woman, a position marked by triple marginalization. Her account underscores how cultural practices, far from being neutral or benign, are deeply embedded in systems of power. This intersectionality is critical in understanding the cultural ambivalence that Bama confronts. The cultural norms she grows up with, including those reinforced by religious institutions, perpetuate her subordination. Yet, it is within these very structures that she begins to question, resist, and redefine her identity.

Bama recounts her experiences not as a 'free' Christian but as one whose religious identity is conditioned by caste. This dissonance between the theology she is taught and the discrimination she experiences creates a tension that fuels her critique. Her autobiography becomes a site where she deconstructs the notion of an undifferentiated Christian community. Though the Indian Christian community may appear homogenous to the outside world, Bama exposes the underlying fractures created by caste. She draws attention to how upper-caste converts, rather than shedding their prejudices, have preserved and institutionalized them within the Church. This perpetuates a model of religious practice that is casteist at its core.

One of the most radical aspects of *Karukku* is how it foregrounds cultural ambivalence as a space of both oppression and potential transformation. Bama does not entirely abandon Christianity; instead, she seeks to reclaim its essence. Her disappointment with institutionalized religion does not negate her faith but strengthens her resolve to find the true message of Christ. Her call to reinterpret religious texts and traditions from the standpoint of the oppressed is not just a personal act of faith but a political gesture. It challenges the cultural monopoly that upper castes have exercised over religious interpretation and practice.

The literary form of *Karukku* itself is a rebellion against cultural norms. Bama uses colloquial Tamil, breaking syntactic and grammatical conventions to reflect the spoken reality of her community. This stylistic choice reinforces the authenticity of her narrative and serves as a cultural assertion. By choosing to write in the language of the marginalized, she resists the linguistic elitism that often characterizes Indian literature. Her storytelling style is fragmented and non-linear, mimicking the way memory and trauma work. These narrative choices mirror the fractured, ambivalent identities of Dalit Christians navigating between faith and caste, belief and betrayal.

There was no love to be found in that convent, among these people who declared all the time that God is loving. There was no love for the poor and humble. They claimed that God's love is limitless, subject to no conditions. Yet inside the convent there were innumerable conditions how you should

be and who you were in order to deserve their love. When outsiders arrived, flaunting their wealth and Education, they were treated in quite a different way, and I am not sure there was any love at all in this case. (106)

The intersection of cultural feminism and Dalit identity is another crucial dimension of *Karukku*. Bama highlights how Dalit women face unique challenges not just from dominant society but within their own communities and families. Cultural feminism posits that women's values and experiences are distinct and should be celebrated, yet Bama shows how these values are constantly devalued in a patriarchal, casteist culture. Dalit women are often burdened with labor, denied education, and subjected to abuse, the realities that mainstream feminism often overlooks. Bama's voice disrupts this silence, insisting that any discussion of social justice must center on the experiences of Dalit women.

Furthermore, the story serves as a counter-narrative to dominant historical discourses. Traditional Indian historiography, shaped by upper-caste perspectives, often erases or sanitizes the experiences of Dalits. Bama's autobiography, like other Dalit writings, reclaims history from the margins. Her personal narrative becomes a historical document that records the cultural practices, social hierarchies, and everyday struggles of Dalit life. From a new historicist standpoint, texts like *Karukku* are invaluable in reconstructing the socio-political realities of India from the ground up.

The reception of *Karukku* itself reflects the cultural ambivalence it critiques. While the book was lauded for its literary and political significance, it also provoked anger within Bama's own community. Many felt that her candid depiction of Dalit life and critique of the Church brought unwelcome scrutiny. This reaction reveals the discomfort that often accompanies truth-telling, especially when it comes from the margins. Yet, *Karukku* endured and became a cornerstone of Dalit literature, marking a new era in Tamil writing.

Karukku is a powerful testament to the cultural ambivalence that shapes the identity of Dalit Christians in India. Through her personal story, Bama reveals the contradictions within religious and social institutions, exposing the persistence of caste despite conversion. Her work challenges readers to reconsider the relationship between culture, religion, and identity and urges the marginalized to reclaim their narratives. By articulating her journey in her own language and on her own terms, Bama asserts her identity and reimagines the possibilities of faith, resistance, and liberation.

Conclusion

Karukku is not just an autobiography; it is a manifesto of resistance, a document of cultural ambivalence, and a literary milestone in Dalit writing. Through her poignant reflections, Bama reveals the multilayered oppression experienced by Dalit Christian women in Tamil Nadu. Her narrative strategy, linguistic choices, and thematic concerns challenge dominant literary forms and socio-religious institutions

alike. *Karukku* gives voice to the subaltern and offers a new vision of spirituality, community, and justice. In articulating the inexpressible pain and persistent hope of the Dalit community, Bama has ensured that her story, and that of her people, will not be forgotten.

Works Cited

- Bama. *Karukku*. Translated by Lakshmi Holmström, Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Holmström, Lakshmi. "Introduction". *Karukku*, by Bama, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. vii-xvi.
- Chandran, Mini. "The Politics of Writing: Bama's *Karukku*." *Indian Literature*, vol. 56, no. 3, 2012, pp. 44-51. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/23348762.
- Gauthaman, Raj. *Dalit Cultural Critique*. Translated by S. Theodore Baskaran, Navayana, 2011.
- Rao, Anupama. *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*. University of California Press, 2009.
- Rege, Sharmila. *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonies*. Zubaan, 2006.
- Satyanarayana, K., and Susie Tharu, editors. *The Exercise of Freedom: An Introduction to Dalit Writing*. Navayana, 2013.