

## AN ANALYSIS OF NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES IN BAMA'S KARUKKU

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### KEYWORDS

Dalit Literature, Autobiographical Narrative, Caste Oppression, Bama, Karukku.

### ABSTRACT

The fragmented structure, oral storytelling customs, and the interaction between individual and collective narratives are the main topics of this study's analysis of the narrative strategies used in Bama's Karukku. The examination looks at how these methods give Dalit literature validity while upending traditional literary structures. The problem identification, literature evaluation, methodology, analysis, and conclusion are all part of the research's structured approach. By closely examining Karukku, this study demonstrates how Bama's distinctive storytelling approach amplifies the impact of her socio-political critique, ultimately adding to the larger conversation about religious discrimination, gender injustice, and caste oppression.

### Introduction

Dalit literature became an important component of the social reformation movement, especially in the 20th century when democratic movements calling for equal human rights were spurred by post-modernism and post-colonialism. Social reformers like Jyotiba Phule and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar led this campaign, which opposed the caste system that had long oppressed Dalits. Due to its strong regional language roots, Dalit literature provides a forum for underrepresented perspectives and frequently expands its readership through translation (Suresh, 2020).

Poetry, short tales, novels, drama, and especially autobiographies—which have become increasingly popular as a vehicle for resistance and self-expression—are all included in this genre. Prominent poets like Namdeo Dhasal, Daya Pawar, and Narayan Surve have highlighted Dalit struggles in their works. The terrible realities of caste-based prejudice and societal marginalization are portrayed by Om Prakash Valmiki, Sharankumar Limbale's Akkarmashi, and Narendra Jadhav's Outcaste (Suresh, 2020).

Autobiographies written by Dalit women have also become potent narratives that oppose gender and caste injustice. Authors such as Urmila Pawar, Shantabai Kamble, and Bama have chronicled their experiences of abuse, humiliation, and resistance, providing valuable perspectives on the challenges faced by Dalit women. These pieces serve as historical and societal commentary that promotes equality and justice in addition to highlighting personal hardship. Particularly, autobiographies written by Dalit women reconstruct individual and social histories, revealing ingrained injustices in Indian society and igniting a hope for a more equitable and inclusive future (Suresh, 2020).

Bama, a Tamil Dalit woman writer, chronicles her personal experiences of caste and gender discrimination in her landmark autobiographical novel Karukku (1992). In a metaphorical

sense, the title *Karukku* means "palmyra leaves with serrated edges," signifying both hardship and defiance. The narrative style of the text is non-linear, combining introspective thoughts with more general sociopolitical analysis. Bama exposes the pervasive caste prejudice in the Catholic Church and society by sharing her early years in a Tamil Dalit Christian community. She describes instances of Dalits, especially women, experiencing economic hardship, social marginalization, and humiliation. Her life is transformed by education, which provides her with a route to self-awareness and confidence. She encounters caste-based discrimination in the convent despite becoming a nun, which ultimately causes her to lose faith in institutionalized faith. She decides to return to her village and devote herself to activism and writing, rejecting both caste and religious institutions. *Karukku* is a groundbreaking piece of Dalit feminist writing because it allows Bama to both regain her identity and give voice to the struggles of Dalit women. The book positions itself as a crucial contribution in Indian autobiographical and subaltern literature by questioning both caste and patriarchal systems (Newton & Kumari, 2022).

Bama's *Karukku* is a compelling autobiographical narrative that illuminates the challenges faced by the Dalit community, combining themes of religious identity, gender oppression, caste prejudice, and the fight for social justice. Through her story, Bama questions established societal norms and presents a very personal yet universal viewpoint on resistance and marginalization.

In spite of describing the pervasive caste prejudice in Indian society, Bama's *Karukku* (1992), a ground-breaking Tamil Dalit autobiography, offers a potent critique of gender inequality, religious institutions, and structural marginalization. *Karukku*, which translates to "palmyra leaves with serrated edges," is a powerful metaphor for the harsh, agonizing realities of Dalit life. Bama reconstructs her identity through a nonlinear, fractured narrative that combines individual pain with group resistance. Her writings are a vital contribution to Dalit feminist theory and postcolonial literature, as well as a monument to the tenacity of the Dalit community.

### **Themes and Critical Exploration**

#### ➤ **The Palmyra Grove as a Symbol of Dalit Identity**

The palmyra forest in *Karukku* is a powerful metaphor that captures the Dalits' tenacity, social exclusion, and historical injustice. It represents the community's tenacity and ambitions while also signifying the pervasive persecution against them. The Dalits persevere in the face of hardship, just as the palmyra tree endures severe circumstances. The text's potent sociopolitical message is reinforced by this visual, which deepens the reader's comprehension of Dalit lived experiences.

#### ➤ **Caste and Christianity: A Double Oppression**

The prejudice Dalits experience in Christian institutions is among *Karukku*'s most startling discoveries. Even inside their new religion, Dalits were ostracized, despite the fact that many of them converted to Christianity in order to avoid Hindu caste systems. By separating Dalit converts and restricting their social mobility, Bama reveals how upper-caste Christians uphold their rule. She criticizes the Church's hypocrisy in promoting equality while maintaining caste-based discrimination. Her own experiences in the convent serve as an example of how religious organizations reinforce structural inequities rather than serving as havens.

#### ➤ **Gender Oppression and Dalit Feminism**

A groundbreaking piece of Dalit feminist writing, Bama's *Karukku* emphasizes the interconnectedness of gender oppression, caste, and class. Dalit women face a particular kind of marginalization that is frequently disregarded by mainstream feminist groups. Dalit women endure exploitation on several levels, in contrast to upper-caste women who could encounter

prejudice based on gender but yet enjoy caste privilege. Bama reveals how Dalit women's labor is abused, their voices are muffled, and their bodies are subjected to sexual violence based on caste through her unvarnished account. She demands that the struggles of Dalit women be acknowledged in larger feminist debates.

➤ **Education as a Tool for Liberation**

In Karukku, education becomes a major topic, signifying resistance and hope. Bama claims that education has the capacity to empower Dalits and sees it as a way to escape oppression based on caste. But she also draws attention to the structural obstacles that keep Dalit pupils from receiving high-quality education. She experiences discrimination at work despite her academic accomplishments, highlighting the enduring caste prejudices in the workplace. The story of Bama is a call to action for more educational possibilities for Dalits as well as a critique of these systemic injustices.

➤ **Religious Identity and Cultural Struggles**

The Dalit Christian identity of Bama gives Karukku an additional level of complication. The inconsistencies between caste prejudice and religion are made clear by her experiences in the convent. She is first attracted to religious life because she thinks it would provide equality and meaning, but she is disappointed when she sees how casteism is embedded in Christian organizations. Her dedication to social justice is strengthened by this insight, which highlights the necessity for Dalits to recover their dignity independent of their religious ties.

➤ **The Value of Hard Physical Labor**

Bama challenges social norms that devalue manual labor by elevating Dalit labor throughout Karukku. She criticizes the higher castes' exploitation of Dalit labor while denying its importance. She challenges the prevailing stereotypes that portray Dalits as inferior by emphasizing their economic accomplishments. In her works, she urges Indian society to reevaluate work and dignity.

➤ **Social Justice and Activism**

Bama's writings are a plea for social reform as much as a literary undertaking. Karukku is a crucial literature for activism since it has sparked conversations about gender inequity, caste-based oppression, and religious marginalization. Bama raises awareness and promotes resistance to social injustices by chronicling individual and group suffering. The book urges readers to face the facts of caste prejudice and strive for a just society, acting as both a manifesto and a testimonial.

➤ **Nonlinear Narrative Structure and Linguistic Style**

Karukku, in contrast to traditional autobiographies, has a disjointed, thematic structure that reflects the intricacy of identity and memory. Bama reinforces the profundity of her insights by revisiting significant events in her life from many perspectives. She gives voice to a historically marginalized community by utilizing oral storytelling and folk language, which further undermines elite literary aesthetics. This linguistic decision democratizes Tamil literature and makes it more inclusive while simultaneously reaffirming Dalit identity.

**Significance and Socio-Political Impact**

➤ **Literary Recognition and Dalit Representation**

The release of Karukku, which provided an unvarnished portrayal of caste persecution from the viewpoint of a Dalit woman, signalled a sea change in Dalit literature. Dalit narratives gained international acclaim after winning the Crossword Book Award in 2001, which opened the door for additional Dalit women writers to tell their stories.

➤ **Critique of Institutionalized Oppression**

Bama's research illuminates the ways in which casteism endures in workplaces, places of worship, and educational institutions. Even organizations that profess to support moral and ethical principles are implicated in maintaining caste hierarchies, as her criticism of the Church reveals.

➤ **Inspiring Social Movements and Feminist Discourse**

Karukku has had a significant influence on feminist discourse and Dalit struggle. It challenges the caste-blindness of mainstream feminism and emphasizes the importance of include Dalit women's voices in feminist movements. Conversations about social justice and intersectionality are still sparked by the text.

➤ **Reclaiming Dalit Identity and Resistance**

Bama's story is a protest against the prevailing caste myths that aim to obliterate Dalit history. She affirms Dalits' agency in determining their own fates by capturing persecution and resiliency. Her art highlights the value of unity in the struggle against caste prejudice and reaffirms that resistance is both individual and group-based.

In India, Dalit literature has become a potent vehicle for self-assertion and resistance. A seminal work in this category is Bama's 1992 book *Karukku*. This essay looks at how Bama's storytelling techniques strengthen the effect of her autobiographical narrative and add to the broader conversation about gender, caste, and religion. The urge to convey the lived experiences of underprivileged populations has been the driving force behind the rise of Dalit writing. In contrast to Dalit literature, which prioritizes authenticity over beauty, frequently questions established forms in popular literature. In this sense, *Karukku* is a notable pioneering text. It is an essential classic for researching Dalit feminist literature since it blends individual story with collective memory.

**Literature Review**

The study of Dalit literature has gained prominence in recent years, with scholars analyzing its thematic concerns, stylistic innovations, and socio-political impact. Researchers have highlighted the role of autobiography in Dalit literature as a means of asserting identity and agency. Previous studies on *Karukku* have examined its language, structure, and ideological underpinnings. This paper builds on these discussions by focusing specifically on the narrative techniques Bama employs to challenge dominant literary conventions.

According to Amil, 2023, *Karukku* by Bama is a powerful autobiographical work that exposes the deep-rooted caste discrimination and social exclusion faced by Dalit Christians in Tamil Nadu. The title *Karukku*, meaning "palmyra grove," holds symbolic significance, representing both the suffering and resilience of the marginalized. Bama's narrative highlights the contradictions within Christianity, a religion that maintains caste-based hierarchies while preaching equality. Amil talks about how Bama first became aware of caste inequality as a child after seeing a Dalit man serving an upper-caste person while holding a packet of vadaai by its string to prevent direct touch. As she experiences exclusion in public places, including being asked to leave her seat on buses after disclosing her caste identification, this understanding becomes more acute. Bama decides to defy social pressures, such as her mother's counsel to hide her caste, and transforms her refusal into a larger act of protest against structural injustice. The memoir criticizes the psychological effects of untouchability, economic problems, and systemic prejudice. The Church and convents, which Bama once believed would offer dignity, Amil emphasizes, and liberty, but ultimately reinforced caste divisions, are also criticized by *Karukku*. The religious observances and holidays that formerly shaped her spiritual growth now act as reminders of injustice and exclusion. *Karukku* is a foundational piece of Dalit literature that confronts ingrained caste prejudices and advances social justice, per Amil's viewpoint. By combining individual and collective reality, Bama's art serves as a critical social commentary that goes beyond personal suffering. Amil claims that *Karukku* is still regarded as a significant literary work because it gives Dalit voices more prominence and promotes equality, dignity, and identity for marginalized communities.

Shubhra (2018) looks at how prominent Dalit woman author Bama Faustina Soosairaj describes the hardships faced by Dalit Christian women in her autobiographical book *Karukku*, which exposes caste-based prejudice in Tamil Nadu. *Karukku* provides a firsthand experience

of the injustices that occur when underprivileged groups are denied equal access to resources due to social exclusion.

According to Holmstrom (2018), Bama's wish to transcend her identity coexists with her quest for it. Caste, which was formerly a system of occupational stratification, has evolved into a strict hierarchy that denies Dalits socioeconomic rights. Dalit Christians are particularly discriminated against.

According to scholars such as Thakur (2018) and Thorat (2012), Dalit inferiority is perpetuated by dominant groups through socioeconomic hurdles and prejudices. Through experiences with untouchability, limited access to resources, and segregated communities, Karukku reveals systemic injustice. Bama's childhood revelation Her view of caste inequality—exemplified by a Dalit man avoiding physical contact while working for an upper-caste Naicker—fuels both her resistance and her support for reform. Karukku, a foundational piece of Dalit literature, highlights the resilience of marginalized communities while fusing personal and collective experiences, challenging casteist discourse, and advocating for a more inclusive and egalitarian society.

Dalit writing, according to academics like Gopal Guru (2011), acts as a counternarrative to mainstream Indian literature, which frequently ignores Dalit voices. Other research highlights how Dalit narratives are shaped by oral tradition and memory. This essay provides a new study of Karukku's narrative techniques while synthesizing these viewpoints.

## **Research Methodology**

A qualitative textual analysis approach is used in this study. Postcolonial criticism, feminist viewpoints, and narrative theory are used to analyze the main text, Karukku. Secondary sources, including as academic publications, journals, and critical studies on Dalit literature, provide support for the interpretation. The approach entails closely examining the text to pinpoint important narrative devices and their meanings. This study places Karukku into the larger context of postcolonial and subaltern studies by using an interdisciplinary method. It also examines how Bama's writings relate to caste and gender issues using feminist literary critique.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

### **Fragmented Structure and Non-linear Narrative**

The fragmented form challenges conventional autobiographical writing, reflecting the instability and struggles inherent in Dalit existence. By eschewing linearity, Bama resists the traditional storytelling framework that privileges coherence and unity, instead foregrounding discontinuity, allowing readers to experience the disruptions that define Dalit life. Additionally, by presenting episodic memories rather than a chronological life story, Karukku creates a sense of immediacy and emotional intensity that mirrors the disjointed and painful experiences of Dalit life.

### **Oral Storytelling Tradition**

Dalit people' oral traditions are incorporated into Bama. Karukku preserves the oral traditions of oppressed communities by emulating spoken rather than written storytelling through its conversational tone, direct addresses to readers, and usage of folklore. This strategy makes her story more authentic and guarantees that her community will continue to be able to access it. The significance of collective memory in Dalit writing is further highlighted by the employment of oral storytelling techniques. Through the use of folk songs, proverbs, and anecdotes, Bama places her own story in a larger sociocultural context.

### **Use of Tamil Vernacular and Code-switching**

Bama regularly alternates between Tamil and English, adding regional dialects, proverbs, and informal phrases. This method highlights how Dalit voices are marginalized in popular literature and questions the supremacy of standardized literary language. The story is made more realistic and its Dalit roots are strengthened by the use of colloquial language. In Karukku, language is essential since it expresses both resistance and subjugation. Bama challenges linguistic hierarchies by fusing Tamil and English, so claiming the legitimacy of her own speech patterns and cultural expressions.

### **First-person Narration and Subjectivity**

This technique also reinforces the autobiographical nature of Karukku. In contrast to traditional autobiographies that emphasize individual achievement, Bama's narrative foregrounds collective struggles, making her personal story a microcosm of the Dalit experience. Bama uses a first-person narrative that blurs the line between personal and collective experiences, making the reader an active participant in her journey as her subjective voice embodies the pain and resilience of the Dalit community.

### **Religious Symbolism and Biblical Allegories**

In Karukku, religious symbolism is essential. Faith may be both a source of comfort and oppression, as the title itself suggests. Biblical allusions question the Church's role in upholding caste oppression and reflect Bama's struggles. The text's recurring theme of suffering and redemption is based on Christian imagery.

The relationship between Christianity and Bama is complicated. She first finds solace in religious doctrine, but she eventually loses faith in the Church's support of caste discrimination. Her story gains depth from this internal struggle, which draws attention to the inconsistencies found in religious organizations.

### **Interweaving of Personal and Political Themes**

Bama's Karukku skilfully blends political and personal issues, combining her own experiences as a Dalit Christian woman with more general sociopolitical criticisms of oppression based on gender, caste, and religion. Her autobiographical story exposes the structural injustice ingrained in Indian society in addition to narrating personal hardships. She highlights the pervasive caste-based injustices in both secular and religious institutions with vivid memories of her early years, schooling, and her time as a nun. As Bama's quest for self-awareness turns into an act of resistance, opposing prevailing myths and promoting social justice, the personal becomes political. Karukku thus functions as a potent political statement as well as a personal testimony.

### **Conclusion**

Bama's Karukku is a revolutionary political manifesto that challenges the caste, gender, and religious institutions of India. Through her candor and narrative, she exposes the terrible realities of Dalit life, laying the groundwork for resistance and independence. Karukku is a seminal masterpiece of Dalit literature that epitomizes the fight for equality and dignity. Through its innovative narrative techniques—such as fragmentation, oral storytelling, language hybridity, first-person narration, and religious symbolism—it subverts conventional literary frameworks and elevates Dalit voices. This essay highlights the importance of Karukku in redefining Indian literature and asserting the agency of marginalized groups. As Dalit literature advances, Bama's work remains an essential source of reference for future studies.

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