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**Wounds and Words: Subaltern Testimony and the Catholic Church in Bama's Autobiography**

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**Ajay Kumar Abraham**

M.A. English, B.Ed., KSET

Lecturer in English and Independent Researcher,,Kairalee Nikethan Composite PU  
College,Halasuru, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India.

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**Abstract:**

Bama's *Karukku* (1992) is one of the salient works in the field of Dalit literature, offering an unwavering account of life as a Dalit Catholic woman in Tamil Nadu. Faustina Mary Fathima Rani who writes by the pen name Bama, narrates her life through colloquial and oral-inflected Tamil, the text which unfolds as a personal experience gradually transforms into a collective testimony as it plunges itself into the discourse of Subaltern Studies. This paper examines *Karukku* as a work of subaltern resistance, with a particular focus on the Catholic Church's paradoxical role in Bama's narrative. While the Catholic Church globally and particularly in India, is a forerunner in providing education, moral teachings and urging for solidarity, it also clandestinely sustains ingrained caste hierarchies and reflects the discriminatory structure present in the wider society. Taking cues from the theoretical frameworks of Gaythri Spivak's subaltern voice, Ranajit Guha's historiography of the marginalized, and the Dalit liberation theology, this study argues that Bama's autobiography reveals the duality of religious institutions as both instruments of oppression and sites of potential redemption. Through close textual analysis, the paper highlights how Bama redefines faith as an act of protest and self-affirmation, using narrative as a weapon to cut through layers of silence imposed by both society and the Church. By portraying the lived realities of Dalit Christians, *Karukku* compels the Church to confront within the stigma of caste oppression.

**Keywords:** Subaltern Studies, Dalit Christianity, Catholic Church, Liberation Theology, Dalit Feminism

**Introduction**

Dalit literature represents the voices of individuals from communities historically marginalized under the caste system, particularly those classified as Scheduled Castes and

Scheduled Tribes in the Constitution of India. Emerging as a distinct and powerful genre in the postcolonial era, it serves not only as a creative expression but also as a political act of resistance. Through autobiographies, poetry, fiction, and essays, Dalit writers have transformed lived experiences of pain, humiliation, exclusion, and systemic oppression into literary testimony. In doing so, they challenge entrenched hierarchies, reclaim human dignity, and assert their rightful place in the social and cultural mainstream.

Hailed as the first Tamil Dalit autobiography, *Karukku* by Bama was translated into English by Lakshmi Holmström and published by Oxford University Press in 2000. The title *Karukku*, meaning “palmyra leaves,” symbolizes resilience and endurance. The book blends personal experiences with social, political, and religious critique. As a Dalit woman and former Catholic nun, Bama recounts the lived realities of Dalit Christians—a community doubly marginalized and oppressed by both society and the Church. It also exposes the contradictions within the Church, which proclaims equality on one hand while perpetuating discrimination on the other. Thus, this work stands as a subaltern testimony, revealing how the Catholic Church in India functions both as an instrument of oppression and, paradoxically, as a potential site of liberation.

This paper analyses *Karukku* through the lenses of Subaltern Studies, Dalit Feminism, and Liberation Theology, thereby illuminating the complex layers of oppression and the process of “othering” inflicted upon a community solely on the basis of caste. Bama’s narrative becomes especially relevant today, as it voices the double-fold suffering of a Dalit woman who struggles to assert an identity against both caste hierarchies and patriarchal structures.

The Holy Bible, in The Letter to the Hebrews (4:12), describes the Word of God as a double-edged sword, emphasizing its penetrating power to cut through layers of self-deception and to reveal the truth. This metaphor also signifies the dual role of the Word — as both judgment and salvation. However, as Bama recounts, the clergy and religious, who are called to be instruments of God’s Word, instead become “sanctified oppressors.” Rather than bringing judgment upon oppressors and salvation to the marginalized, they replicate and sanctify the very structures of exclusion and discrimination, thereby deepening the wounds of the Dalit Christian community.

#### **Bama’s *Karukku* as a testimonio and the Catholic Church**

Bama begins her narration with a picturesque description of her village, describing how it is surrounded by the beautiful mountains of the Western Ghats. She also vividly speaks about the castes in her village, ranging from the *Naickers* to the *Parayas*, representing the upper and lower castes respectively, while giving an account of everyday life in the village. Bama does not fail to mention the caste clashes that often take place between the upper and lower castes.

Bama's experience of caste-based discrimination becomes twofold as she faces insults and injustice both outside and within the Church. As a young girl, she recollects an incident in which she was unjustly accused of stealing a coconut from the church compound. Despite speaking the truth to the headmaster and the priest, she was once again blamed for an act she had not committed. What angered and pained her the most were the words of the priest, who remarked, "*After all, you are from the Cheri. You might have done it. You must have done it.*"

Bama's many childhood experiences within the purview of Catholicism reveal the deeply ingrained caste mentality among members of the clergy and religious whom she encountered as a child, teenager, and young adult. These members of the Church, which calls for unity and equality among all, instead of becoming abolishers of inequality, often emerge as agents who perpetuate it. When Bama joins a hostel run by Catholic nuns, she encounters similar discrimination. Some of the nuns, especially those from upper-caste backgrounds, humiliate the lower-caste children who reside in the hostel. Bama recalls how they were mocked for their eating habits, and even their physical appearance became a subject of criticism. In this regard, she quotes the Warden-Sister of the hostel:

"These people get nothing to eat at home; they come here and they grow fat... Look at the Cheri children—when they stay here, they eat their fill and look as round as potatoes. But look at the state they come back from home—just skin and bone."

Such remarks, uttered by nuns and directed at children from backward communities, not only demoralized the students but also disparaged their talents and undermined their very existence. Speaking of food, Om Prakash Valmiki in his book 'Joothan' shows that food is not merely nourishment but a site of caste control, where Dalit bodies, hunger, and dignity are constantly policed. The mocking of Dalit children's eating habits by nuns echoes the same logic of degradation Valmiki describes in Hindu social spaces.

After completing her education and stepping into the world of work, Bama realizes that caste discrimination does not end with academic achievement. Even in a Catholic school managed by nuns—an institution expected to embody values of equality and compassion—she encounters subtle yet unmistakable caste prejudice. The nuns question her about her caste background, specifically asking whether she belongs to the Nadar community. When Bama identifies herself as coming from the *Paraya* community, their facial expressions and body language visibly change, revealing an ingrained sense of discomfort and rejection toward those from marginalized castes. This encounter underscores the painful reality that caste hierarchies continue to operate within religious spaces that outwardly claim moral and spiritual inclusivity.

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Bama recalls that her village was often disturbed by conflicts between different castes. On one such occasion, a dispute over burial ground land between the Chaaliyar and Paraya communities escalated into open violence. In the aftermath, the police detained mostly members of the Paraya community and imprisoned them. Among those arrested was a strong and healthy man named Alphonse from the Paraya community, who died after being brutally assaulted in police custody, vomiting blood from the severity of the beating. When the imprisoned Paraya men were eventually released, the women of the community felt a sense of relief, and some proposed offering a solemn Mass as an expression of gratitude to God. However, one woman raised a sharp and unsettling question, asking why such a Mass should be offered at all. She pointedly wondered whether the priest had done anything to alleviate the suffering endured by their people. The women also recollected how the priest sat at ease in his bungalow, one leg slung over the other, smoking his cigarette happily when they desperately sought some financial help from him to get their men released from the jail.

After working for a short period, Bama resigns from her job and decides to join a religious order with the hope of becoming a nun. However, even within the convent, she is not free from caste discrimination. She realizes that the convent is largely dominated by Telugu upper-caste nuns, and many of her experiences there are shaped by her caste identity. The nuns often try indirect ways to find out Bama's caste. On one occasion, when she is directly asked about it, Bama openly says that she belongs to the *Paraya* community. This truth shocks many, and some even refuse to accept it. Life in the convent, which is attached to a school, becomes increasingly suffocating for her. She notices that most of the students come from wealthy upper-caste families. Almost every day, she hears people speak badly about Harijans or Dalits, unaware that she herself is a Dalit.

Years of facing discrimination, inequality, and exclusion deeply wound Bama. Gradually, she realizes that she can no longer continue her life as a religious. In the end, she leaves the convent, gives up her religious vocation, and chooses to live as a layperson. Bama repeatedly questions the double standards of the religious and the ecclesiastical authorities. She says:

“Why, even the nuns and priests, who claim that their hearts are set upon service to God, certainly discriminate according to caste. And in my heart, I have even grieved over the fact that I was born as I am.”

At one stage, immersed in suffering and deep pain, Bama harshly criticises priests and nuns who have made Dalit Christians instruments for their own gain and profit. She says that it is the upper-caste people who have occupied superior positions in the Church, while priests and religious belonging to the Dalit community are pushed to the margins even before they can try to establish themselves in any place or field. Because of this, she says, people

like her have chosen the path of renunciation, as they cannot live there without self-respect and dignity.

Bama narrates many other anecdotes from her memory about the bitter experiences she had to face simply because she was born into a lower-caste family. As a Catholic Christian, caste becomes a double-edged sword, cutting her on both sides—as a member of society at large and as a Catholic within the Church. She consciously portrays the oppressive role of some members of the Church, especially the clergy and the religious, showing how those who are supposed to bring equality and restore unity instead become agents of discrimination and exclusion.

### **Catholic Church as a force of Helaiing and Redemption**

Jesus revealed himself as the liberator and healer of the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed, and those socially labelled as sinners and outcasts. In his first appearance at the synagogue in his hometown, Jesus reads from the Prophet Isaiah, proclaiming a revolutionary call for justice and liberation for the poor. He promises liberty to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed. It is expected of Christians—as followers of Jesus Christ—to tread the path he showed: a path of love, equality, and brotherhood. Similarly, there are many ‘Good Samaritans’ Bama mentions in her testimonio who encouraged her, consoled her and even played an instrumental role in bringing out her book ‘*Karukku*’.

While one could sympathize with the wounds inflicted by caste and discrimination on Bama, she gains her consolation and encouragement from certain members of clergy and religious. As a student, she recalls that many nuns and teachers often encouraged her and were friendly towards her. All the more she remembers the names of a very few nuns who saw beyond her caste and genuinely nurtured her and wished her to be successful in life.

She narrates her saga of leaving the convent in Jammu and Kashmir. As she recollects the ordeals of her journey, she experiences many doubts and qualms about life after leaving the convent. What would she do for a living? How would she face her family, her community, and society at large? At this time, as she mentions, a few of her friends help her through her misery and the painful transition from the renunciation of religious life to that of a lay person. She also speaks of a kind nun who helped her reach the railway station to book a ticket home and who admonished her to remain vigilant against the machinations of other nuns who tried to force her to remain in the convent despite her mental agony. In the foreword to the book, she also mentions Fr. M. Jeyaraj, who greatly inspired and encouraged her.

### **Conclusion**

Bama’s autobiographical work *Karukku* offers a critical insight into the contrasting attitudes present among members of the Catholic Church, particularly the clergy and religious. Although priests and nuns profess the same Evangelical Counsels of Poverty,

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Chastity, and Obedience, the text reveals how their beliefs and practices often diverge in reality. Individuals entrusted with the mission of fostering unity, compassion, and equality in Christ are shown, at times, to embody values that contradict these ideals. Through the narration of her lived experiences, Bama exposes the internal contradictions within the Church, especially in its response to caste-based prejudice and social exclusion. The text thus foregrounds the persistent influence of caste consciousness within religious spaces that claim moral and spiritual universality.

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