

Dalit Subaltern Consciousness in Bama's Karukku

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Abstract:

Dalit literature has become one of the most powerful and meaningful movements in Indian writing. It represents the voices of those communities that were oppressed and silenced for centuries under the caste system. Among Dalit writers, Bama is one of the most significant figures. Her autobiographical work *Karukku* presents the lived experiences of a Dalit Christian woman who struggles against caste discrimination, social humiliation, and religious hypocrisy. This paper studies the idea of Dalit subaltern consciousness in *Karukku*. Subaltern consciousness refers to the awareness, expression, and resistance of marginalized communities against injustice. Through simple but powerful storytelling, Bama exposes the realities of caste oppression and develops a strong sense of identity and resistance. The paper argues that *Karukku* is not only a personal narrative but also a collective voice of Dalit assertion. It highlights the transformation from silence to speech and from oppression to empowerment. Bama's work proves that the subaltern can speak and can reshape history through writing.

Keywords: Subaltern Consciousness, Caste Discrimination, Dalit Identity, Marginality, Resistance.

Introduction:

Indian society has been deeply influenced by the caste system for many centuries. This system divided people into different social groups based on birth and occupation. Those placed at the lowest level were considered "untouchables" and were denied basic human dignity. They were forced to do menial jobs and were excluded from education, temples, and social equality.

Dalit literature emerged as a response to this long history of oppression. Unlike earlier literature that often ignored or misrepresented marginalized communities, Dalit literature speaks from personal experience. It challenges social injustice and demands equality. One of the most important works in Dalit literature is *Karukku* by Bama. First published in Tamil in 1992 and later translated into English by Lakshmi Holmström, *Karukku* is an autobiographical narrative. The title refers to the sharp-edged leaves of the palmyra tree, symbolizing both pain and strength. The book describes Bama's childhood, her experiences of caste discrimination, her education, her time in the convent, and her eventual awakening to Dalit identity.

This paper examines how Bama expresses Dalit subaltern consciousness in *Karukku*. It analyses how she moves from ignorance to awareness and from silence to speech. It also explores how caste, religion, gender, and language contribute to her understanding of oppression and resistance.

Understanding Subaltern Consciousness:

The concept of the “subaltern” became widely discussed after the works of Antonio Gramsci and later through the Subaltern Studies Group in India. Gramsci used the term to describe groups that are excluded from political power (Gramsci 52). In the Indian context, the term came to refer to peasants, workers, women, and particularly Dalits who were marginalized in society.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak raised an important question in her famous essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” She argued that marginalized people are often spoken about by others but rarely given the opportunity to speak for themselves (Spivak 271). This idea highlights the importance of Dalit autobiographies like *Karukku*, where the subaltern speaks in her own voice.

Subaltern consciousness is not only about suffering; it is about awareness of injustice and the courage to resist it. It involves understanding one’s oppressed position and asserting dignity and rights. In *Karukku*, Bama’s narrative shows this transformation clearly.

Childhood Experiences:

In the beginning of *Karukku*, Bama describes her childhood in a Dalit Christian community. As a young girl, she enjoys playing and does not immediately understand the meaning of caste. However, certain incidents slowly awaken her awareness.

One famous incident involves a Dalit man carrying food for an upper-caste landlord without touching it directly. When Bama laughs at this unusual behaviour, her brother explains that the man belongs to a lower caste and must not pollute the food (Bama 14).

This explanation shocks her. She begins to understand that her community is considered inferior. This moment is important because it marks the beginning of her subaltern consciousness. She realizes that discrimination is not natural but socially created. This awareness brings anger and confusion but also plants the seed of resistance.

Education as Empowerment: Education plays a significant role in Bama’s awakening. Her brother advises her to study hard so that she can overcome caste discrimination. He tells her that education is the only way to challenge oppression.

Through education, Bama gains confidence and critical thinking skills. She begins to question why Dalits are treated as inferior despite their hard work and honesty. She recognises that the caste system is unjust and illogical. Education becomes a tool of empowerment. It helps her understand caste discrimination. She begins to resist it intellectually and emotionally.

Caste Discrimination:

One of the most striking aspects of *Karukku* is Bama’s exposure of caste discrimination within Christianity. Christianity teaches equality and love, but Bama observes that caste divisions continue even in the church. She describes how Dalit Christians are treated differently from upper-caste Christians. Even in schools and convents, Dalit children are often humiliated and discouraged.

This hypocrisy deeply hurts Bama. She joined the convent hoping to serve God and help the poor. However, she experiences discrimination within religious institutions as well. Her disappointment leads to a crisis of faith. This experience strengthens her subaltern consciousness. She realises that oppression is not limited to one sphere of society but exists everywhere.

Crisis of Faith:

Bama's decision to join the convent reflects her spiritual devotion and desire to serve humanity. However, life in the convent exposes her to further discrimination and injustice. She observes that the nuns often treat poor and Dalit students unfairly. They show favouritism towards upper-caste children. Bama feels that the institution does not practise the values it preaches.

Gradually, she becomes disillusioned. She feels that remaining silent would mean accepting injustice. Her decision to leave the convent is a powerful act of resistance. Leaving the convent is not easy. It involves social stigma and uncertainty. However, it also represents liberation. It shows her refusal to compromise her dignity.

Dalit Women and Double Marginalization:

As a Dalit woman, Bama faces double oppression- caste and gender. Dalit women are marginalized both by upper castes and by patriarchy within their own communities. In *Karukku*, Bama describes how Dalit women work tirelessly in fields and households and still receive little respect. They face violence, poverty, and discrimination.

By highlighting these experiences, Bama expands subaltern consciousness to include gender. She gives voice to Dalit women who are doubly silenced. Her narrative shows that liberation must address both caste and gender injustice.

Language as Resistance:

Bama's use of language is itself an act of resistance. She writes in simple, direct style and includes local expressions. This challenges the dominance of elite literary language. Traditional literature often used formal language that excluded marginalised voices. Bama's choice of everyday language makes her narrative authentic and accessible. Through language, she reclaims her identity. She writes not to impress but to express truth. This honesty strengthens the power of her voice.

Resistance through Writing:

Writing becomes Bama's most powerful form of resistance. Through *Karukku*, she documents experiences that were ignored by mainstream literature.

Her narrative challenges dominant histories that exclude Dalit voices. She reclaims space in literary tradition. This act of writing answers Spivak's question. The subaltern not only speaks but writes, resists, and reshapes discourse.

Hope and Future Vision:

Despite pain and anger, *Karukku* ends with hope. Bama believes change is possible through awareness, education, and unity. She encourages Dalits to develop self-respect and fight injustice peacefully but firmly. Her message is not of hatred but of dignity.

Conclusion:

Karukku is a powerful expression of Dalit subaltern consciousness. Through her life story, Bama exposes caste discrimination, religious hypocrisy, and gender inequality. At the same time, she asserts pride, dignity, and resistance. Her journey from ignorance to awareness and from silence to speech reflects the essence of subaltern consciousness. The text is not only autobiographical but also political and social. Bama proves that the subaltern can speak and that her voice carries strength and truth. *Karukku* remains an important text in Indian English literature and Dalit studies.

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