

# Bama's contribution to the Dalit literature movement

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**“Oppression, ruled and still being ruled by patriarchy, government, caste and religion, Dalit women are forced to break all the strictures of the society in order to live” (Preface, Sangati)**

**Abstract:** Bama, a prominent figure in Dalit literature, has played a transformative role in articulating the struggles and experiences of marginalized communities in India. Her works, notably "Karukku" and "Sangati," challenge societal norms and shed light on the harsh realities faced by Dalits, particularly women. Through her evocative storytelling and unflinching honesty, Bama exposes the inter sectionality of caste, gender, and class, illustrating how these factors shape the lived experiences of her characters. Bama's narratives often draw from her own life, providing a raw and authentic voice that resonates with readers. She employs a simple yet powerful language, making her literature accessible while retaining its emotional depth. By highlighting the importance of identity and cultural heritage, Bama not only preserves Dalit oral traditions but also empowers her community to reclaim their narratives. Moreover, her works serve as a crucial critique of the systemic injustices entrenched in Indian society, advocating for social change and solidarity among marginalized groups. Bama's contribution extends beyond literature; she has inspired a new generation of writers to engage with Dalit issues, fostering a rich and diverse literary landscape. Her legacy lies in her ability to provoke thought and encourage dialogue around caste-based discrimination, making her a vital voice in the ongoing struggle for equality and justice.

**Keywords:** Bama, Dalit literature, caste, gender, identity, marginalization, social justice, empowerment.

## INTRODUCTION

Dalit literature is a revolution against the exploitation and humiliation of Dalits. Equality, justice and freedom are the basis of Dalit literature. Dalits have been deprived of these. The touch of a Dalit, the shadow of a Dalit and the voice of a Dalit are considered impure. After independence, Dalits realized their self-respect and equality, this was possible only due to the movement of Dr. Ambedkar. The real hero of this literature is a common man. He revolts against inhuman oppression and wins his

struggle for self-respect. This is the real beauty of this literature. The emergence of political leaders from the Dalit community and their recognition happened only with the emergence of Dalit literature. The word Dalit means suppressed, broken and exploited. This is not a new word. It was used in Hindi in 1930 as “Dalit Varg”.

Born in 1958, writer Bama, also known as Bama Faustina Soosairaj, is a Tamil Dalit feminist, committed educator and novelist. She gained fame with her autobiographical novel *Karukku* (1992), which describes the joys and sorrows experienced by Dalit Christian women in Tamil Nadu. She then wrote two more novels, *Sangathi* (1994) and *Vanam* (2002), as well as two short story collections: *Kusumbukkaran* (1996) and *Oru Tattvum Erumayam* (2003). She has also written twenty short stories. She holds a privileged doctorate degree, winning the Crossword Prize for her semi-fictional autobiography in 2000. She is a woman with a versatile personality and a strong belief in facing any kind of oppression. This novel is an important autobiography of Dalits and a landmark work of Bama. It depicts the anguish and anger of Dalit women towards double oppression. Dalit women who come from the downtrodden sections of the society are exploited and oppressed not only by their men but also by men and women from higher castes. As a result, they have become one of the most exploited and marginalized groups in the society. Holmstrom has appreciated in the introduction to *Sangathi* that Bama was already creating Dalit feminism, redefining woman from the socio-political perspective of Dalits, examining caste and gender oppression simultaneously and *Sangathi* occupies a unique position in contributing to both the Dalit movement and the women's movement. In *Sangathi*, Bama has described incidents of Dalit women who managed to overcome their pitiable condition through their determination and self-esteem. In *Sangathi* she wrote about "the lives of three generations of women – grandmother, mother and daughter. The main purpose of writing *Sangathi* is to bring out the resilience of Dalit women with which

they try to live their lives to the fullest amidst their daily misery and suffering."

Bama follows Christianity and visits Catholic churches since her childhood. She is influenced by Christian scriptures that teach about love and an intimate relationship with God. She decides to become a nun and serve God. After joining the nunnery she finds out that there is a separate training center for Dalit Catholics and she has to go there. The way Dalits are treated based on their caste makes her feel that she has taken a wrong decision. She gives up her desire to become a nun. From this part of Bama's life we can clearly understand that caste discrimination happens even at religious places. Those whom Dalits consider highly spiritual disappoint and insult them without any reason.

Jaydeep Sarangi in his 2018 introduction to "Dalit Voice," writes that Dalit literature is a culture-specific upheaval in India giving importance to Dalit realization, aesthetics and resistance. Dalit literature in the colonial and post-colonial periods came to prominence with the publication of Jyotirao Phule's *Gulamgiri* in 1873, which depicted the plight of untouchables in India. Since then, many writers have contributed to the Dalit literature movement, each offering their unique perspectives on the Dalit experience. The most well-known Dalit writers include Mahasweta Devi, Arjun Dangle, Sachi Routray, Rabi Singh, Basudev Sunani, Bama, Abhimani, Poomani, Imayam, Marku, Mangal Rathod, Nirav Patel, Perumal Murugan, Palamalai, Sudhakar, and D. Gopi. Sharankumar Limbale, a prominent Dalit writer, described Dalit literature as "a sublime image of suffering" that artistically portrays the miseries, tribulations, slavery, humiliation, ridicule, and poverty suffered by Dalits.

Some of the Dalit Panthers of India like Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra, Dalit Mahasabha in Andhra Pradesh, Dalit Sangharsh Samiti in Karnataka and Arundhati in Tamil Nadu were formed in response to the atrocities of the mainstream. They demand equal share in opportunities and reservation. Most of the activists are also good writers. Bama is a representative novelist of Dalit feminism. Caste and gender are two important identity construction mechanisms that form the Dalit feminist perspective.

*Sanghati*: was written in Tamil, then translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom. The word *Sanghati* means events. Its narrative has an autobiographical

element, but it is the story of an entire community, not of an individual. The condition of Dalits was very bad, as they were not allowed to enter temples and schools for education. Dalits have the lowest status in the Indian social hierarchy. Looking at everything, Bama expressed the problems of caste and gender both outside and inside the community. According to Bama "All women in the world are second-class citizens. The problem is serious for Dalit women. They are not even considered respectable human beings.

Women's ways and how they are treated: Bama focuses on protesting against all kinds of oppression and suffering faced by Dalit women in the first part of the discourse. But the later part of the discourse moves away from a state of depression and despair. Instead, it presents a positive identity for Dalit women by focusing on their inner strength and spirit. The author explains the importance of education to the Dalit community. She gives the example of Pechiamma from the Chakkili community who has studied up to class five. Very few girls from that community go to school.

Bama compares Dalit and non-Dalit women. According to her, the condition of Dalits is better than that of upper class women, who are forced to live in the most vulnerable conditions. Bama is proud that her women have economic independence from their men, they work hard in the fields, raise their children. Upper class women do not find any way to express their feelings. They remain confined to the four walls of their house. But Dalit women are victims of caste oppression in the morning and gender oppression at night.

Bama's novel "*Karukku*" presents a poignant portrayal of caste-based discrimination and oppression faced by Dalit women in rural areas. It describes every aspect of Dalit women's lives. The novel highlights the caste discrimination endured by the Dalit community, which prominently includes denial of access to education, healthcare and economic opportunities. Bama's narrative also covers the internalization of caste-based rigidities among Dalit women, rejecting social prejudices that internalize self-hatred and shame. Through a journey of awareness and self-esteem, the "*Karukku*" movement emphasizes on reclaiming self-esteem.

Exploring Gender Violence in Dalit Communities  
Another powerful story written by Bama,

“Vanamam” delves deeply into the topic of gender violence in Dalit communities. Through characterization and emotional portrayals, Bama highlights the prevalence of domestic abuse, sexual violence and exploitation suffered by Dalit women at the hands of family members, community leaders and dominant caste groups. The novel confronts the taboos associated with discussions of gender violence in Dalit communities, challenging the silence and complicity that perpetuate cycles of abuse and oppression. Bama’s story dispels stereotypes and misconceptions about Dalit women’s experiences of violence, highlighting the intersectional nature of oppression and the need for collective action to combat gender-based violence.

Bama narrative style has not reinforced any ideologies but allows the readers to realize her interpretation.

**Autobiographical Elements:** Bama’s narrative intertwines her personal experiences with the collective suffering of her community. By sharing her life story, she brings to light the pervasive nature of caste discrimination and its impact on individual lives. \*Karukku\* stands out for its blending of autobiography and social critique, offering a vivid and personal perspective on the broader issues of caste oppression.

**Literary Techniques:** Bama employs vivid imagery and symbolism to depict the harsh realities of Dalit life. Her use of Tamil idioms and colloquial expressions adds authenticity to her narrative, bridging the gap between the written word and oral tradition. The fragmented structure of \*Karukku\*, resembling the jagged edges of a “karukku” (a saw-edged leaf), symbolizes the broken lives of Dalits and the sharp divisions within Indian society.

**Narrative Voice:** The first-person narrative in \*Karukku\* lends a powerful immediacy to Bama’s account. Her voice is both personal and representative, capturing the pain, anger, and resilience of Dalit women. This perspective challenges readers to confront the realities of caste oppression and consider their roles in perpetuating or combating such injustices. Bama’s candid and emotive storytelling immerses the reader in her lived experiences, making the narrative a compelling call for empathy and action.

Themes of Oppression

**Caste Discrimination:** Bama provides numerous examples of caste-based oppression, from the everyday humiliations faced by Dalits to systemic exclusions in education and employment. These accounts highlight the pervasive and insidious nature of caste discrimination. For instance, Bama describes how Dalit children were segregated in schools and how Dalit laborers were exploited and demeaned in rural Tamil Nadu.

- **Gender Inequality:** Dalit women, at the intersection of caste and gender, endure a double burden of discrimination. Bama’s narrative sheds light on the specific challenges faced by Dalit women, including domestic violence, sexual exploitation, and limited access to healthcare and education. She details her own struggles and those of other Dalit women, illustrating how patriarchy compounds caste-based oppression.

- **Religious Hypocrisy:** Bama critiques the Catholic Church for its complicity in maintaining caste hierarchies. Despite its teachings on equality and compassion, the Church often upholds social divisions, marginalizing Dalit Christians within the religious community. Bama’s disillusionment with the Church’s failure to practice what it preaches forms a central theme in \*Karukku\*, highlighting the deep-seated contradictions within religious institutions.

Themes of Resistance

- **Personal Resistance:** Bama’s life is a testament to personal resistance. Her determination to pursue education and her decision to write about her experiences are acts of defiance against the oppressive structures of caste and patriarchy. Her narrative is filled with instances where she and others stand up against injustices, from questioning discriminatory practices to advocating for Dalit rights.

- **Collective Resistance:** \*Karukku\* also highlights instances of community solidarity, where Dalits come together to support each other and challenge discriminatory practices. These moments of collective action demonstrate the potential for grassroots movements to effect change. Bama describes how community efforts in her village led to small but significant victories against systemic oppression.

- **Empowerment through Education:** Education emerges as a crucial theme in \*Karukku\*. For Bama, education is not only a means of personal advancement but also a tool for social transformation. Her narrative underscores the importance of accessible education in empowering marginalized communities. Bama's own journey through the educational system, despite its challenges, exemplifies the transformative power of knowledge and learning.

#### Impact and Legacy

- **Influence on Dalit Literature :** Karukku has had a profound impact on Dalit literature, inspiring other writers to share their stories and challenge dominant narratives. It has helped establish Dalit literature as a significant and influential genre within Indian literature. This section explores the works of other Dalit writers who have been influenced by Bama and how \*Karukku\* has contributed to a burgeoning literary movement.

- **Social and Cultural Impact:** The book has played a vital role in raising awareness about caste issues, both within India and internationally. By providing a platform for Dalit voices, \*Karukku\* has contributed to broader discussions on social justice and human rights. Bama's narrative has resonated with marginalized communities worldwide, drawing parallels with other forms of social and racial discrimination.

- **Critical Reception:** Karukku has been the subject of extensive academic analysis, with critics praising its literary merit and its powerful social message. While some have critiqued its perceived pessimism, most acknowledge its importance in highlighting the lived experiences of Dalits. This section reviews key critical responses to \*Karukku\*, examining its place in academic and literary discourse.

The Solution offered by Bama: Bama Says in her book Sangati "we must be strong. We must show by our own resolute lives that we believe ardently in our independence. I told myself that we must never allow our minds to be worn out, damaged, and broken in the belief that this is our fate, just as we work hard so long as there is strength in our bodies, so too, we must strengthen our hearts and minds in order to survive."

#### ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION AND SOCIAL INJUSTICE

Bama's stories poignantly highlight the economic exploitation experienced by Dalit communities in India, highlighting their struggles within a deeply entrenched caste system. Through her inspiring storytelling, she captures the harsh realities of poverty, marginalization, and systemic discrimination faced by Dalits. Bama's characters often struggle with socio-economic challenges, highlighting how historical injustices perpetuate their disenfranchisement. The narratives are not only a reflection of personal suffering, but also a critique of social structures that maintain inequality.

Bama uses her experiences and observations to craft stories that resonate with authenticity, amplifying the voices of those who are often silenced. Her works emphasize the need for social justice and equality, urging readers to confront the pervasive injustices faced by marginalized communities. By highlighting the intersection of caste and economic exploitation, Bama's works become a powerful tool for advocacy and awareness.

#### ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION AND ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE

Bama's narratives serve as a crucial lens through which to understand the intersection of environmental degradation and ecological justice, particularly for rural Dalit communities. She highlights how these communities are disproportionately affected by environmental injustices, including land dispossession and pollution, which exacerbate their socio-economic struggles. By intertwining ecological concerns with issues of caste and class, Bama calls for a holistic approach to justice that acknowledges the rights of marginalized communities to both land and a healthy environment. Her work advocates for sustainable practices that empower Dalits and ensure their voices are integral to discussions on ecological justice.

Here is how environmental degradation and ecological justice are intertwined with social struggles in Bama's work:

#### Rural Livelihoods and Environmental Exploitation:

Bama's stories often revolve around rural life, where agricultural practices and dependence on natural resources are the mainstay of livelihood. However, these communities often face environmental exploitation. In novels such as "Sangati", Bama depicts the struggles of rural communities grappling

with environmental degradation due to unsustainable agricultural practices, lack of access to clean water, and exploitation by dominant castes.

Industrialization and urbanization:

The impact of industrialization and urbanization on rural communities is another theme that indirectly addresses environmental degradation in Bama's stories. Rapid urbanization and industrial development often result in land grabbing, displacement, and pollution, further marginalizing already vulnerable populations. Bama's characters may face the consequences of pollution from nearby industries, highlighting the broad-scale environmental justice concerns that arise from uncontrolled industrial development.

Erosion of traditional knowledge and practices:

Bama's novels often depict the erosion of traditional ecological knowledge and practices among marginalized communities. As modernization encroaches upon rural areas, traditional farming methods, knowledge of medicinal plants, and sustainable resource management practices are either sidelined or forgotten. This loss of ecological knowledge not only undermines the resilience of these communities but also exacerbates environmental degradation. Bama may subtly critique the imposition of Western-centric development models that disregard indigenous knowledge systems and contribute to ecological imbalances.

Caste and environmental injustice:

Bama's stories also highlight the interrelationship of caste and environmental injustice. Dalit communities are often pushed onto environmentally unsafe lands and face discrimination in accessing resources and environmental amenities. Furthermore, caste-based occupations such as manual scavenging increase their vulnerability to environmental hazards. Bama may indirectly illustrate how caste dynamics perpetuate environmental injustice by showing how marginalized communities bear the brunt of ecological degradation while being systematically excluded from decision-making processes.

Water scarcity and access to resources:

Access to clean water and other natural resources is a recurring theme in Bama stories, reflecting broader

environmental justice issues. Dalit communities, in particular, often face discrimination and exclusion from water sources, agricultural land, and forest resources due to caste-based prejudices. Bama can reflect how unequal access to resources perpetuates cycles of poverty and vulnerability, highlighting the need for equitable distribution and sustainable management of natural resources.

Interconnections with health and well-being: Environmental degradation directly affects the health and well-being of marginalized communities in Bama's stories. Pollution from industries, contaminated water sources, and exposure to pesticides pose serious health risks, causing respiratory diseases, skin diseases, and reproductive health issues. Bama can explore how environmental injustice exacerbates existing health inequities, further marginalizing already vulnerable populations and requiring a holistic approach to address both social and environmental determinants of health.

## EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT

Education in Bama's narratives serves as a powerful tool for empowerment while also exposing systemic discrimination faced by Dalit communities. Through her portrayal of educational struggles and triumphs, Bama underscores the necessity of inclusive and equitable education as essential for achieving social justice and transforming marginalized lives.

Empowerment through knowledge:

Bama emphasizes education as a crucial tool for Dalit communities to break the cycle of poverty and oppression. Characters who receive education often experience a sense of institutionalization, which allows them to challenge social norms and imagine better futures.

Barriers to access:

Despite its potential, Bama's stories highlight the systemic barriers that prevent Dalits from accessing quality education. Discrimination, economic barriers, and social stigma pose significant barriers, illustrating how educational institutions can reinforce existing hierarchies.

Caste-based discrimination in schools:

Bama highlights the prevalence of caste-based discrimination within educational strata. Dalit students often face bullying and exclusion from peers

and teachers, illustrating how schools can perpetuate social inequalities rather than serve as equal spaces.

#### Transformative potential:

The stories depict moments where education leads to individual transformation and collective awareness among Dalit characters. By acquiring knowledge, they not only uplift themselves but also organize their communities to demand justice and equality.

#### Critique of traditional education systems:

Bama is critical of traditional education systems that often ignore Dalit histories and cultures. Her work advocates for an inclusive curriculum that recognizes and values the experiences of marginalized communities, thereby promoting a more equitable educational landscape.

#### Challenges and Obstacles:

Despite its transformative potential, education in Bama's stories is fraught with challenges and obstacles, especially for Dalit women. Structural inequalities in access to quality education, caste-based discrimination in educational institutions, and social prejudices often hinder the educational aspirations of marginalized individuals. Bama vividly portrays these obstacles in her novels, highlighting the systemic injustices that maintain educational inequality. However, through the resilience and determination of her characters, Bama also offers hope and inspiration, emphasizing the importance of collective struggle in overcoming these obstacles.

### CONCLUSION

Bama's contribution to Dalit literature is profound and transformative, as she brings forth the experiences of marginalised communities through her poignant stories. By addressing themes of caste-based discrimination, economic exploitation and the search for identity, she amplifies the voices of Dalits, challenging social norms and injustice. Her authentic storytelling not only promotes awareness but also instills activism and resilience among readers. Bama's works serve as an important catalyst for change, advocating for social justice and empowerment, ultimately cementing her status as a key figure in the Dalit literature movement and a beacon for future generations.

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