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From Silence to Assertion: Caste and Gendered Identity in Bama's *Karukku*

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Abstract— *Bama Faustina Soosairaj's Karukku (1992), the first Dalit autobiographical narrative in Tamil literature, holds an irreplaceable place in South Asian feminist and postcolonial discourse. This article investigates the shaping and unshaping of caste and gendered identity via the lived experience of Karukku and considers the book as testimonial and literary intervention. In this paper, based on Dalit feminist theory, postcolonial studies and subaltern epistemology, it is argued that Bama's narrative enacts a triple consciousness that is the result of caste discrimination, gender subjugation and religious alienation simultaneously. Her journey from imposed silence to radical assertion is a paradigmatic example of Dalit women's writing as political praxis. The analysis moves through four interwoven concerns: the embodied experience of caste violence, the intersection of gender and untouchability, the role of Christianity as both oppressor and ambivalent refuge, and the formal strategies through which the text transforms personal memory into collective resistance.*

Keywords— ***Karukku, Bama, Dalit feminism, caste, autobiography, gendered identity, Tamil literature.***

One of the landmark events in modern Tamil and Dalit literature was the publication of a text called Karukku by Bama Faustina Soosairaj in 1992. The title, in itself, loaded with several meanings, is in Tamil and translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom: karukku is the serrated edge of a coconut palm leaf, meaning at once beauty and the power to wound, ornament and weapon. This double valence is not accidental; it signals the text's primary tension between the ornamental duties allotted to Dalit women by the caste-Hindu and colonial-Christian social structures, and the incisive power of a voice that will not be content to remain decorated and mute.

Karukku is officially classified as an autobiography, but Bama resists such tidy generic classification, and critics have labelled it a testimonio, a bildungsroman, a spiritual confession, and a political manifesto. What it is, however, is surely an act of naming: naming the village of Puthupatti, naming the bodily humiliations of untouchability, naming the God who failed Dalit Christians, naming, with remarkable precision, the structures through which caste and gender work together to produce the particular abjection of Dalit womanhood. G.N. On subaltern literature, Devy writes that this very naming is a kind of epistemological insurgency. To name one's state is to resist its naturalness, to insist on its constructedness, and hence, to indicate towards its possible destruction.

In this paper I argue that Karukku is not only a testament to suffering but a proactive construction of selfhood: a text in which the narrator moves from a state of imposed silence—brought about by the triple axes of caste, gender, and institutionalized religion—to what I refer to as radical assertion, a mode of being and speaking that rejects the terms of recognition offered by Brahminical, patriarchal, and colonial-ecclesiastical structures. I develop this argument in four thematic sections. The first section examines the embodied grammar of caste in the text; the

second section analyzes the compound oppression of caste and gender; the third section analyzes the ambivalent role of Christianity; and the fourth section analyzes the formal modes through which Bama converts private memory into collective testimony.

The incident that perhaps gets the most notice in Karukku is when young Bama sees an old Dalit man taking a packet of vadai – deep-fried lentil cakes – to an upper-caste landlord. He holds the packet by its string, arms spread, body tilted back, so that nothing of him touches the food. Bama first is amused by what she considers to be a ludicrous pose but is chastised by her elder brother Annan who says that this posture is not comedic but enforced. The meal must not be polluted by the touch of a Paraiyar. The scene initiates Bama into the semiotics of caste. The formal depiction of this introduction in the tale is worth attending to.

The episode is written in a purposefully plain prose, almost infantile in its syntax, reflecting the cognitive horizon of a young girl coming to terms, for the first time, with the logic of pollution. The importance of this formal choice is substantial. By introducing caste ideology through the incomprehension of a kid, Bama defamiliarizes it, exposing its irrationality at the bottom. The child's incapacity to grasp is not an act of naivete, but of sanity; it is the adult who has normalized the ludicrous who needs explaining. This is a storytelling strategy in keeping with what Gopal Guru calls the Dalit aesthetic – a manner of depicting social reality that does not naturalize the injustice that upper-caste discourse tends to reinforce even in its critiques.

The body is the principal site of caste inscription throughout the book. Dalit bodies carry indelible marks—the streets they are not allowed to tread, the wells they are not allowed to draw water from, the temples whose thresholds they are not allowed to enter. This spatial management of the body is what Bama calls elsewhere the "grammar of untouchability": a set of embodied rules that produce, via daily repetition, both the social inferiority of the Dalit subject and the purity of the upper-caste one. We can read this, drawing on Frantz Fanon's study of racialized embodiment in Black Skin, White Masks, as a sort of caste epidermal schema—a set of socially imposed meanings etched into the body so profoundly that they modify the subject's proprioceptive sense of self.

But Fanon's analysis of race is largely one of visual difference, whereas caste is subject to a more diffuse and far-reaching logic of infection. It is not enough to see the Dalit body from afar, the Dalit body must be stopped from touching upper-caste bodies, objects and locations. The outcome is a strange social geometry in which the Dalit person is at once hypervisible—marked, known, recognized—and radically excluded. Bama's story foregrounds the cruelty of this topology by portraying its impacts on the most intimate aspects of daily life: the cups prepared for Dalit clients at tea stalls, the separate seating in schools, the epithets casually hurled by upper-caste neighbours. These are not spectacular incidents of caste violence, but their everyday, normalized texture – which is what makes them so terrible in the aggregate.

If caste structures Bama's experience as a Dalit subject, gender structures her experience as a woman — and the two axes do not merely add together but compound each other in ways that constitute a distinct and irreducible type of oppression. Feminist scholars working within the Dalit tradition, most notably Sharmila Rege and Gopal Guru, have argued that mainstream Indian feminism's tendency to treat caste and gender as distinct and sequential concerns misses precisely this compounding: Dalit women experience a form of oppression that cannot be divided into its caste and gender components without losing its fundamental character.

Karukku is a very precise example of this compounding. The Dalit women of Puthupatti are oppressed by upper-caste systems, but they are also oppressed by men in their own society, and these two types of oppression are not only coextensive but mutually reinforcing. Part of the reason upper castes are able to maintain their supremacy is through the sexual exploitation of Dalit women, a trend Bama hints at but does not fully flesh out (a hesitation that is itself relevant given the shame politics surrounding sexual assault in her society). Dalit women's bodies are doubly available – to upper caste abuse because of caste inequality, and to domestic violence because of patriarchal institutions within the Dalit community itself. Dalit women handle the bulk of domestic work – cooking, cleaning, childcare – within the household, as well as work as agricultural labourers in upper-caste fields. Bama's narrative unswervingly follows the cycle of this double labour, and points out how the women return from the fields to start a second shift of household labour while the men relax. It is not written in terms of victimhood—indeed, one of the most striking features of the work is its refusal of passive suffering—but as evidence of a societal structure that wrings the greatest labour out of individuals at its intersection of caste and gender servitude.

Of equal importance is the issue of voice. Dalit women in Karukku are structurally subjects of speaking, not subjects speaking. Their own men talk about them (deciding things about their life); the upper-caste authorities talk about them (categorizing and disciplining them); the Church talks about them (defining their spiritual worth in terms defined by Brahminical-inflected ideals of purity). In this context,

Bama's act of writing is a bold act of taking possession of the right to speak—and to speak in her own name, in her own language, from her own embodied position. As the postcolonial critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has noted, the question of the subaltern's speech is not just a question of volume but of audibility: whether there are structures through which that speech can be heard to be meaningful.

Karukku is among other things an endeavour to build those structures -- by the very shape of the book, by its dissemination, and by the Tamil Literary Tradition which it violently expands. Also, the specific vulnerabilities of Dalit girlhood are explored. Bama's childhood is an ongoing negotiation of danger: the danger of roaming too close to upper-caste quarters, the danger of attracting the wrong type of attention from upper-caste men, the danger of being viewed as transgressing the invisible borders of one's allocated place. This navigation shapes the child's subjectivity in ways that are both damaging and formative, in that they are damaging because they produce an internalized surveillance, a constant self-monitoring that restricts freedom; they are formative because they also produce a sophisticated social knowledge, an early education in the workings of power that the adult narrator will turn to critical and political account.

Bama's community is part of a Catholic tradition that arrived in Tamil Nadu through Portuguese and then French missionaries. Karukku is in part a prolonged critique of the church's failure to live up to its proclaimed egalitarianism. The narrative's relationship with Christianity is one of its most complex and contested aspects: Bama is deeply formed by Christian faith, completes novitiate training as a nun, and ultimately leaves religious life, not because she rejects God, but because she cannot bring the hierarchies of the Church into alignment with the gospel of liberation she took seriously. Many Dalit groups in the past have welcomed conversion to Christianity as a possible way out of the caste system: the Christian teaching of the equality of souls before God presented, theoretically, a radical challenge to caste hierarchy. Yet in actuality Tamil Christianity faithfully recreated caste hierarchies. Bama points out segregated seats for Dalits and upper-caste Christians in churches, separate cemeteries and a priesthood largely from upper-caste backgrounds. The institutional Church did not deconstruct caste, but absorbed and sacralized it, cloaking Brahminical social order in Christian liturgical form.

This is the "double betrayal" of the Church as Bama characterizes it – a betrayal of Christ's doctrine first, and of the Dalit communities that converted in hope of freedom second. Bama enters the convent as a young woman with true devotion, only to discover that this betrayal is made personally legible there: upper-caste nuns are in positions of authority, Dalit novices do the most menial labor, and the language of sisterhood in Christ masks a social reality organized by caste precedence. This caste system is reinforced by the gendered aspect of convent life – the special demands on women's bodies, voices and actions in religious institutions. Bama is doubly punished, as Dalit and as woman.

But the book does not simply reject Christianity. Bama's faith is a multifaceted resource throughout the narrative. In liberation theology, notably the tradition of Latin American and Dalit theologians, she sees a Christianity purged of its Brahminical accretions and restored to its egalitarian essence. The idea of the preferential option for the poor—the theological argument that God has a preferential option for the marginalized—becomes for Bama a way of reframing her own identity not as stigmatized but as chosen. This is a small but essential inversion, for rather than seeking recognition from the mechanisms that have disenfranchised her, Bama seeks a greater recognition that delegitimizes those structures. The Jesus figure in Karukku itself is a reworking. Bama's Christ is not the Christ of colonial missions, associated with civilization and moral reform, but a suffering figure who shares the condition of the untouchable, who knows what it is like to be rendered impure by the touch of social hierarchy. This Dalit Christology – worked out more methodically in the writings of theologians like M.E. Prabhakar and A. P. Nirmal – enables Bama to keep a Christian identity and yet radically challenge the authority of the official church. It is an example of what Homi Bhabha would term a mimicry that undermines: it appropriates the religion of the coloniser but refuses its interpretation.

The importance of Karukku as literature resides not just in what it says, but in the way it says it. The formal properties of the book – its language, structure, chronology and address – are arguments in themselves about what the Dalit experience is and the circumstances of its portrayal. Any acceptable reading of the text has to be sensitive to these formal elements as well as to its thematic content. The first and most noticeable formal aspect of Karukku is its language. Bama writes in colloquial Tamil, the everyday dialect of the Dalit population of Puthupatti, not in the exalted literary Tamil of the classical and modern traditions. This is an intentional, politicised decision. The dominant Tamil literary tradition has always belonged to upper-caste educated men, and its stylistic rules are shot through with the signs of that ownership — indications of exclusion, of a refinement precisely defined in opposition to the vernacular speech of the lower castes. In writing in the voice of her community, Bama refuses to seek legitimacy on such grounds, insisting that the speech of Puthupatti is already a

literary language, that it need not be elevated to be worthy of the page.

This linguistic decision has implications for the text's politics of address. Karukku is not primarily a text for the upper caste or elite readers who need to be convinced of Dalit humanity – a framing that would implicitly position such readers as arbiters of that humanity. It is intended, first and most urgently, to Dalit readers themselves: to people who already know what Bama is describing, whose acknowledgment of truth in the text does not require an imaginative work of sympathy across social distance. This is what sets testimony, in the sense elaborated by academics like John Beverly, apart from confession or appeal: testimony is uttered from within a community of the wronged to that community itself, as well as outward, and its essential validation is the acknowledgment of that community. The structure of the text is important.

Karukku is not a simple linear story of development – the conventional bildungsroman arc from innocence through experience to mature selfhood. But it is a succession of incidents, recollections and reflections, arranged thematically rather than chronologically, that keeps returning to the basic themes of caste violence and spiritual seeking. This framework formally reproduces the experience of living under caste: there is no tidy narrative of development, no final departure from the mechanisms of oppression, no realized resolution. The self-formed in the poem is not a triumphant individual self but a relational, communal one – constituted through its relationships to family, community and the greater history of Dalit struggle.

It is also worth exploring the temporality of the text. Before she wrote Karukku, Bama had left the convent and become involved in Dalit political movements. It is thus a retrospective narrative in which the adult narrator reflects upon the experiences of childhood and young womanhood with a critical consciousness, informed by political engagement. This generates a productive double temporality in the text, where the experiencing self of the past and the narrating self of the present are in productive conflict, and the narrating self is able to describe and understand what the experiencing self could only feel. This gap between experience and narrative--the gap that is inherently created by the form of autobiography--is here put to political work: it is precisely in the act of narration that the change from quiet into assertion is effected.

Finally, Bama's direct approach, her many appeals to the reader, her use of second person to summon collective experience, turns the book from a private record into a public act. In writing "we," she is doing more than describing a group; she is constructing a collectivity, conjuring into existence a community of recognition through language. This is the performative part of Dalit autobiography: it does not just describe a pre-existing community; it contributes to creating the conditions for that group to recognize itself as such and consequently to act together.

The arc Karukku traces—from a childhood of imposed ignorance and shame to an adulthood of critical consciousness and political engagement—is not merely a personal narrative, but a paradigm for what Dalit feminist scholars have called conscientization: the process by which the oppressed come to understand their condition as socially produced and not naturally given, and thus amenable to change. This idea, taken from Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed and rearticulated within Dalit thought, is the transformation that Karukku both portrays and enacts.

The crucial moment in this arc is not Bama's leaving the convent—though that is its most vividly legible inflection point—but the earlier, quieter time when she starts rereading her experience in political terms. It is at this time when shame is no longer just painful but becomes comprehensible, when she understands her suffering as the operation of a system rather than as a sign of natural or divine order. Such recognition does not do away with pain, but it changes its meaning: suffering becomes proof, testimony, data for an analysis that goes beyond itself to transformation. In this connection Karukku is part of a larger tradition of women's testimonial writing from positions of multiple subordination. This tradition includes, among others, Rigoberta Menchú's I, Rigoberta Menchú, Domitila Barrios de Chungara's Let Me Speak and, closer to home, the autobiographies of Dalit writers such as Urmila Pawar and Shantabai Kamble. What unites these works is not only the content of their testimony – experiences of violence, prejudice and survival – but their formal commitment to the first person as a place of political knowledge. In these works, the personal is not just political, it is epistemological: the experience of the subordinated subject is positioned as a privileged source of insight into the functioning of the social order.

Bama's claim of selfhood in Karukku is consequently not individualistic in the liberal sense of her deserving acknowledgment as a unique individual. It is a claim that Dalit women as a social category know, possess dignity and the right to speak – and that the social institutions that deny these are not natural or divine, but historical and therefore modifiable. This is the political core of what I have been calling radical assertion: not merely the courage to speak, but the insistence that to speak is an act of epistemic and political opposition.

To grasp the full significance of Karukku it is crucial to place it in its immediate literary setting — Tamil

Dalit writing — and its larger political background — the rise of a self-conscious Dalit political movement in India from the 1970s onwards, inspired in part by B.R. Ambedkar's seminal work and the anti-caste social movements he inspired. Tamil Dalit literature (also termed Dalit Tamil ilakkiyam) arose as a unique creation in the 1980s and 1990s, represented by periodicals such as Kalachuvadu and Uyirmai and by writers such as Imayam, Poomani and Cho. Dharman. Bama's work fits within this pattern, but it is unique for its blend of autobiography, women's point of view, and theological critique. Though many Dalit literary texts of this period foreground caste violence in more directly confrontational modes, the achievement of Karukku is its rendering of the intimate, daily texture of caste, its penetration into the subjective life of a girl and woman formed by caste norms, and its structural critique.

The text also comments on the politics of Indian feminism. In the 1980s and 1990s, the major women's movement in India was dominated by upper-caste women, and its theoretical frameworks — partly taken from Gandhian traditions and partly from Western feminist theory — tended to see caste as secondary or separate. In this sense, Karukku's affirmation of the interlocking nature of caste and gender is a critique not only of the caste Hindu society but also the feminist mainstream that had rendered the particular experience of Dalit women invisible. Sharmila Rege's key article on Dalit women's autobiographies interprets this emphasis as a contribution to what she terms "a Dalit feminist standpoint" – an epistemological perspective that takes the multiply subordinated experience of Dalit women as its starting point for social analysis.

Internationally, the text has been studied through the lenses of subaltern studies, postcolonial theory, and comparative autobiography, and has been placed in conversation with testimonio literature from Latin America and with African American autobiographical traditions. These comparative readings are productive, but must be done carefully: the specificity of caste as a social formation – its religious-cosmological underpinning, its occupational organization, its particular articulation of gender – means that analogies to other systems of stratification are illuminating only if their limits are also recognized.

The term Karukku – the sharp edge of the palm leaf – represents the major accomplishment of the work. Bama has taken the material of her own wounding—the daily humiliations of caste, the compound oppressions of gender, the spiritual disillusionment of institutionalized religion—and fashioned from it something that can, in turn, cut: cut through the naturalizing discourses that render caste invisible, cut through the gender ideologies that would silence Dalit women, cut through the religious hierarchies that dress caste in liturgical garb.

This turning of pain into weapon, of suffering into critique, is not specific to Karukku – it is the hallmark achievement of witness as a literary and political form. But Bama does this with extraordinary force and formal sophistication, and in doing so produces a text that is a work of literature, a document of social history and an act of political resistance. The self-produced in its pages is not an Enlightenment autonomous person but a relational, social, embodied self—a self whose statement is also, and principally, an assertion on behalf of the community from which it arises and to which it speaks.

Karukku does not enact the move from silence to assertion as a finished process but as an ongoing practice – a practice that has to be reenacted in every act of reading, in every community that takes up its language and politics, in every Dalit woman who sees her reflection unadulterated in its pages. What is revolutionary about the text is that it has formed that mirror – that it has produced, from the jagged edge of a life lived in the interstices of caste and gender, a mode of knowing and speaking that, against to all the systems constructed to preclude it, asserts the right to exist.

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