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Epiphany of Tamil Dalit Christian Women: Through the Lens of Bama's *Karukku*

M Bernice Bala, Guest Faculty, Department of English (Shift 1), Women's Christian College, Chennai.

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Abstract: *The caste system in Tamil Nadu has evolved over time, undergoing countless ideological and normative changes. However, due to its deep-rooted nature, oppression and subjugation have persisted in different forms within these shifting patterns. While the complete abolition of caste remains a distant goal, growing awareness has empowered people to speak out and resist the hegemonic rule of the upper caste society. Bama, a Tamil Dalit Christian from a marginalised community, provides a clear account of the struggles faced by individuals like her. In her autobiography Karukku, she portrays the hardships endured by her family, shaped by systemic oppression ingrained since childhood, where each character describes each generation's idea of the caste system. As a woman in a society where caste holds immense significance, Bama experiences triple oppression through caste, community, and gender. This paper examines her journey of self-realisation and the impact of her awakening on her community, positioning her as a role model for those advocating for their rightful place in society. Through a comparative study of two generations—Bama and her mother—this paper explores the transformation from enduring triple oppression to emerging as a woman who asserts her voice and autonomy. Bama's narrative stands as a moment of awakening for women from similar backgrounds, inspiring them to challenge systemic injustices and subjugation.*

Keywords: *Dalit, Caste, Women, Triple oppression, Epiphany.*

Tamil Nadu, a state celebrated for its rich cultural heritage, is home to many rituals, traditions, and community-specific practices that reflect its social diversity. The population encompasses multiple religions, predominantly Hinduism, further divided into sub-religions and caste-based communities. Although people often express mutual respect for different cultures and identities, the enduring presence of the caste system frequently contradicts these claims. Despite decades of reform and a range of government initiatives aimed at promoting social equality, caste continues to be a defining and divisive factor in determining one's social standing, access to opportunities, and sense of identity. Approximately eighty per cent of the state's population identifies as Hindu, while the remainder includes adherents of Islam, Christianity, and Jainism. Among these, Christians form a minority, often facing unique challenges due to their intersecting religious and caste identities. In Tamil society, the intersection of caste and religion continues to be a potent source of social exclusion and marginalisation. Gender discrimination further exacerbates this marginalisation, particularly for women from oppressed communities. As Stalin insightfully remarks, "Many women have achieved economic independence, but men still have the mentality that equates women with slaves." This observation highlights a troubling paradox: even when women gain financial autonomy, social and gender equality often remain out of reach.

This paper focuses on the lived experience of a Tamil Dalit Christian woman, who endures a layered and persistent form of triple oppression, by her caste, religion, and gender. Her journey



towards self-realisation becomes a turning point, not only for her own empowerment but also as a source of inspiration and resistance for others who share her background. Through her awakening, she challenges the structures that have long confined her and paves the way for a more inclusive and equitable social future.

Faustina Mary Fatima Rani, more widely known by her pen name Bama, hails from the village of Pudupatti in the southern part of India, then part of the Madras Presidency. She was born into a Roman Catholic family belonging to the Paraiyar community, a caste historically relegated to menial labour, often serving upper-caste Naickers for generations. Her seminal work, *Karukku*, is an autobiographical narrative that brings to life the lived realities of her community. Unlike conventional autobiographies, *Karukku* adopts a non-linear narrative style and defies traditional literary structures. With a nameless protagonist, it reads more like a testimonial or a collective voice for Dalit Christian women than an individual life story. Through vivid depictions of her personal experiences and the broader socio-cultural struggles of her people, Bama sheds light on the layers of marginalisation faced by her community, particularly at the intersections of caste, religion, and gender. The text delves into her growing awareness of the contradictions between institutional religious ideologies and the faith she came to understand through personal reflection and lived experience. Her critical engagement with religion allowed her to challenge the ways in which divine authority had been historically used to justify oppression. “But Dalits have also understood that God is not like this, has not spoken like this. They have become aware that they too were created in the likeness of God” (Holmstrom). Through such reflections, Bama effectively reclaims spiritual agency for Dalits and affirms their intrinsic dignity. In this way, *Karukku* serves not only as a powerful personal narrative but also as a transformative text that inspires awareness and empowerment among Dalit communities, particularly women. Bama’s voice continues to resonate as a catalyst for social consciousness and collective resistance.

In *Karukku*, Bama does more than recount her own experiences of marginalisation, she extends her narrative to encapsulate the suffering of her community across generations, particularly through the lives of her mother and grandmother. The oppressive systems faced by these earlier generations reveal the deeply rooted structures of caste-based discrimination in rural Tamil Nadu. Bama’s grandmother lived a life of total servitude to the Naickers, the dominant caste landlords in her village. She worked relentlessly from dawn until nightfall, often without rest, merely to earn scraps of food that were thrown at her rather than respectfully given. Conditioned from a young age to believe that her community was destined to serve the upper castes, she accepted her role unquestioningly. As Bama writes, “Except for Sundays, she went to work every single day. Sometimes, if the Naiker insisted, she would rush through Pusai before daylight on Sunday, and then run to work” (49). Her unwavering obedience and dedication earned her the reputation of being a “true servant.” This perception was not born out of choice or pride, but from years of internalised oppression and the normalisation of caste hierarchy. Her reverence toward the Naickers, viewing them almost as gods who sustained her, reflects the psychological domination that accompanied physical exploitation. Bama’s mother, while similarly burdened by systemic oppression, began to exhibit a subtle resistance through her actions and aspirations for her children. Like her mother, she toiled endlessly in the fields and collected firewood, work that was both back-breaking and underpaid. The economic transactions were rarely fair; the physical effort required was never equivalent to the minimal compensation offered by upper-caste landowners or traders. With little access to education or legal knowledge, the Paraiyar community often had no choice but to accept these unjust terms to ensure their families’ survival. Yet, Bama’s mother stood apart in one significant way; she



recognised the value of education and was determined to ensure a different future for her daughter. Despite her physical exhaustion, she provided consistent emotional and practical support for Bama's studies, believing that education could offer a way out of generational bondage.

Growing up amidst this backdrop of relentless labour and quiet resistance, Bama was deeply affected by the realities she observed. She often accompanied her mother and grandmother during school holidays, witnessing firsthand the physical strain they endured and the dehumanising treatment they received. "Even tiny children, born the other day, would call her by her name and order her about, just because they belong to the naicker caste." (Bama 16). These experiences profoundly shaped her consciousness and her later writing. Through *Karukku*, Bama not only documents the struggles of her community but also honours the resilience of the women who came before her. Their stories reveal the extent to which caste oppression was normalised, and how small acts of resistance, like a mother's belief in education, can become powerful tools for transformation.

Bama thoughtfully documents the internal strife that existed among marginalised communities, drawing attention to how such divisions weakened their collective strength and ultimately contributed to the downfall of their freedom. She highlights how minor disagreements, such as disputes over purchasing bananas or the exchange of inappropriate remarks, would often escalate into street fights. These insignificant incidents had severe consequences as law enforcement would routinely intervene, arresting men from the lower caste regardless of their actual involvement in the conflict. This not only perpetuated a cycle of injustice but also left the women in these communities particularly vulnerable in the absence of their male counterparts. Bama recounts how even the police officers would exploit the situation, issuing veiled threats and warning the women to be cautious at night, implying danger now that their husbands were not at home. Through a poignant reflection, she observes, "A hundred times a second there are scuffles amongst them. Shameless fellows. Of course the upper-caste men will laugh at them" (Bama 47). Her commentary reveals the painful irony that while the oppressed groups should have found strength in solidarity, internal conflict made them easy targets for ridicule and further exploitation by the dominant castes. The constant friction among the lower caste communities fractured any potential for unity, thereby allowing the upper castes to maintain their power with little resistance. Bama's narrative not only sheds light on the external forces of oppression but also critically examines how internalised divisions hinder the possibility of collective liberation.

From a young age, Bama experienced firsthand the realities of caste-based oppression and social exclusion. Even during playtime with other children, the insidious effects of caste discrimination were evident. The games they played often mimicked the social hierarchy around them; some children would take on the roles of upper caste individuals, while others were forced to act as subordinates, referring to the former as *ayya* and enacting scenes of submission and servitude. Such seemingly innocent games reflected the deeply ingrained structures of caste that shaped their worldview from early childhood. This discrimination extended into the school environment, where lower caste children were routinely subjected to injustice and prejudice. Bama recounts a specific incident in which she was falsely accused of stealing a coconut, a baseless accusation clearly rooted in caste bias. Teachers, rather than investigating incidents fairly, would often make sweeping generalisations and place the blame on students from the lower caste community, reinforcing harmful stereotypes. These children were routinely humiliated both by their teachers and their peers, and were often relegated to



menial tasks such as sweeping and cleaning, while students from more privileged backgrounds received a proper education and the opportunity to learn.

Despite these obstacles, Bama's academic abilities afforded her a slight reprieve from the harsh treatment. She notes that because she excelled in her studies, teachers and classmates began to treat her somewhat better, largely because they could benefit from her academic help. "I studied hard and got the best marks in my class. Because of this, all the children would speak to me and were friendly." (Bama 21). However, this conditional acceptance only underscores the deeply flawed and unequal nature of the system, where a lower caste child had to prove exceptional merit to receive respect and affection.

Due to her strong academic performance, Bama received encouragement from many around her to pursue higher education. However, the path to college was far from smooth, as her family faced significant financial constraints. Her father, an army officer, was primarily concerned with providing basic necessities for the family and viewed higher education as an unaffordable luxury. He was firmly opposed to Bama continuing her studies, believing it was beyond their means. In contrast, Bama's mother recognised her potential and supported her aspirations, offering emotional encouragement during a critical phase of her life. A pivotal moment came when one of Bama's compassionate teachers stepped in to help. Understanding Bama's circumstances, the teacher gave her a pair of earrings to help cover the initial costs of college. With this generous gesture, Bama was able to enrol in a bachelor's degree program in education. Yet, her college life was marked by hardship. She recalls how difficult it was even to dress appropriately, as she lacked the financial resources to buy suitable clothes. Her father, angered by the teacher's involvement in helping her, withdrew any remaining financial support, further compounding her challenges.

Despite these obstacles, Bama remained determined. Her resilience and inner strength carried her through the most difficult periods. She endured the emotional and material hardships of college life with quiet fortitude, ultimately completing her degree. This phase of her life became a formative period, one that not only shaped her future but also laid the foundation for the strong, courageous woman she would become.

"I lamented inwardly that there was no place that was free of caste." (Bama 25). Despite the many struggles Bama endured during her school and college years, her life did not improve as one might hope after such persistent effort. Determined to make a difference for children like herself, she began her career as a teacher in a convent school. Her aspiration was not just to teach, but to become a source of hope and change for Dalit students who faced the same injustices she once did. However, before she even began, Bama was warned by many about the difficulties she would face as a Dalit woman in the teaching profession. These warnings, far from deterring her, only strengthened her resolve. Unfortunately, the discrimination she had been cautioned about soon became her lived reality. Within the convent, Bama faced humiliation and exclusion at the hands of her fellow teachers. Rather than being welcomed into the academic community, she was marginalised for her caste identity. When she bravely voiced her concerns and expressed how deeply the treatment affected her, she was met not with empathy but with dismissal. The authorities silenced her by claiming that it simply was not the will of God for her to be a teacher. "They go on and on about the vow of obedience and force us into submission so that we can scarcely lift up our heads." (Bama 113). This experience led Bama to grapple with the contradictions within religious institutions. The ideals of compassion, justice, and equality, so often preached by the nuns, stood in stark contrast to their actions. The very faith that claimed to uphold moral righteousness was being used to justify caste-based oppression. This moral dissonance left Bama questioning the authenticity and purpose of



religious teachings that failed to uphold the dignity of all human beings, particularly those from oppressed communities like hers.

From the experiences narrated thus far, it becomes clear that Bama was subjected to a triple oppression along the axes of caste, religion, and gender. Throughout her life, she endured relentless discrimination and humiliation, not only from the dominant upper caste groups but also, at times, from members within her own community. Although some individuals outwardly projected an image of inclusion, their underlying intent was often to maintain the marginalisation of Dalits, ensuring that they remained on the periphery of society. Even education, which is often viewed as a liberating force and a path to equality, did not guarantee Bama an emotionally secure or dignified life like that of her privileged counterparts. However, Bama's response to oppression marked a significant departure from the compliance and silence that characterised the experiences of many in previous generations. She chose not to accept the subjugation imposed upon her by those who claimed centrality in both religious and social structures. Instead, she asserted her agency and determined to reclaim her dignity. After years of silent endurance and emotional torment, Bama made the courageous decision to change the course of her life, not just for her own well-being, but for others who, like her, had been forced to live in the shadows. Her most defining act of resistance was her decision to walk away from the convent. This step was more than a resignation; it was a symbolic departure from a life shaped and constrained by institutional authority. Though she left without a clear plan for her future and faced the uncertainty of unemployment, she chose instead to honour her identity and live authentically. "I comfort myself with the thought that rather than live with a fraudulent smile, it is better to lead a life weeping real tear." (Bama 122). This marked the beginning of what Bama herself would consider her real life, one no longer dictated by structures of power, but by her own values, voice, and vision.

In conclusion, Bama's unwavering commitment to preserving her dignity has become a powerful example for many, demonstrating the importance of choosing self-respect and authenticity over material comfort or societal approval. Her life stands in sharp contrast to the narratives passed down through previous generations, which often encouraged Dalits to accept their marginalisation in silence. Instead, Bama offers a new vision, one rooted in courage, self-worth, and resistance. Through her lived experiences, she not only confronts the forces of caste, religion, and gender-based oppression but also redefines what it means to live with integrity. Her story continues to inspire others to rise above subjugation and to assert their right to a life of dignity and purpose.

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