

Exploring the Dynamic Relationship Between Caste and Gender in Bama's Two Novels

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Abstract—This research explores the dynamic relationship between gender and caste in the select novels of Bama, a prominent Tamil Dalit writer. Drawing on feminist and Dalit literary theories, this study analyzes Bama's novels, *Karukku* and *Sangati*, to reveal the nuanced ways in which gender and caste intersect that shape the lives of Dalit women. Through close readings of Bama's narratives, the article highlights the systemic violence, discrimination, and marginalization faced by Dalit women. She fearlessly scrutinizes the role of family, church, school, and government in inflicting both physical and psychological harm on the Dalit community. She emphasizes the need for collective struggle against this systemic favoritism as the key to individual liberation. Bama's literary work brings to the fore the critical importance of comprehending the complex interplay between gender and caste in the context of oppression. Through her writing, she illuminates the agency and unwavering determination of Dalit women as they strive for social justice and equality.

Index Terms—intersection, Dalit literature, caste, gender, marginalization

I. INTRODUCTION

The intersection of gender and caste has enslaved the inner voice of women in Dalit community in India. Women and Dalits have been targets of violence instituted and practiced by upper castes and patriarchal structures. Any violation of hierarchy by Dalits or women is handled only by resorting to violence by the dominant structures of power. Dalit writers, in Tamil like Bama, probe how these institutions operate against Dalit women. Bama's literary works in Tamil Dalit fiction, known as writing from the margin, represent a groundbreaking and transformative contribution. As a Dalit woman, Bama brings her unique perspective to the forefront, unfolds her personal and professional experiences while exploring the various contexts that shape her life. Through her writing, she vividly portrays the intersectionality of her identity as a Dalit, highlighting the compounded marginalization she faces due to her gender, social class, and religious background, "thereby creating their (dalit) consciousness and dalit identity among the dalits" (Aziz, 2015, p. 78). In her literary works, Bama utilizes the lexicon and vernacular expressions of marginalized communities.

Bama's novels, including *Karukku* and *Sangati*, often commence by delving into the childhood experiences of the protagonists. Ruchi Tomar states that, "Dalit women's voices have been muted and kept in silence. Hence, there is a need to articulate their visions and build their own praxis and theory" (Tomar, 2021, p. 1). In a similar vein, Bama herself began these narratives by recounting her own childhood. During her school years, Bama faced mistreatment and discrimination based on her caste and race. The ugliness and stigma associated with untouchability puzzled her, as she witnessed her community being disregarded and despised by both teachers and classmates. Like many other Dalit girls, she was relegated to the last bench of the classroom, symbolizing the marginalization they endured.

In the early 1990s, Bama played a significant role in the examination of the interconnections between gender and caste in the lives of Dalits by actively engaging with the discourse of Dalit literature. Dalits need to have a political consciousness or enlightenment, not just more degrees from universities. If *Karukku* upholds education, *Sangati* foregrounds organized agitation. The paper intends to analyze the intricate ways in which gender and caste intersect in the lives of Dalits and underscores the violence, discrimination and violence faced by dalit women in particular in Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati*. As Mangalam says, "An inquiry into the modes of violence against Dalit women as represented by Dalit writers would bring to focus the complex intersection of caste and gender principles as they operate in our society" (Mangalam, 2023, p. 11).

II. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this research are to analyze the portrayal of female characters within the Dalit context, exploring how caste hierarchies influence their experiences, identities, and agency. Additionally, it seeks to examine the ways in which Bama's narratives challenge or reinforce prevailing societal norms and contribute to a deeper understanding of the multifaceted relationship between gender and caste in contemporary Indian literature.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a multidisciplinary approach that integrates qualitative content analysis of Bama's novels. The aim is to identify prevalent themes and character portrayals concerning the dynamics of gender and caste. Furthermore, a

comparative analysis is conducted to juxtapose Bama's depictions with pertinent theoretical frameworks from gender studies and caste studies. This analysis aims to illuminate the intricate interactions between gender and caste identities, employing intersectionality as a guiding concept.

IV. CASTE AND GENDER IN *KARUKKU*

Within the domain of Tamil literature, Bama's *Karukku* stands out as a pioneering piece, as it represents the inaugural autobiography authored by a Dalit woman. Its publication in 1992 heralded a new era of self-expression and empowerment for Dalit women, giving voice to their experiences and challenging the prevailing social and literary norms. As Salini says, "A Dalit woman's autobiography should not be subsumed under the category of a mere personal narrative that traces the trajectory of her personal development; rather it is to be seen as a social discourse and commentary of her life experiences in a historical context that saw Dalit woman as non-existent and shaded by the mainstream upper caste men, women and the Dalit men (Salini Jayaprakash, 2016, p. 50). Thenmozhi observes, "While Bama's famous work *Karukku* speaks about the Dalit experiences, it attempts to how the author's childhood is interspersed with events that repetitively propel her to raise ultimate questions regarding equality, double oppression, and untouchability which the society considers unfeasible" (Thenmozhi, 2022, p. 66). The novel traces realization of Bama as a Dalit and a child's journey of spiritual growth within the Catholic faith.

Bama opines in her introduction, "*Karukku* means Palmyra leaves, that, with their serrated edges on both sides, or like double-edged swords. By felicitous pun, the Tamil word *Karukku*, containing the word *Karu* embryo or seed also indicates freshness and newness" (Bama, 2017, p. xv). The novelist observes in Hebrews 4:12 (New Testament), "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two edged sword, piercing to this decision of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Bama, *Karukku*, 2017, p. xv). In her life she had astringent experiences for being a Dalit woman. The novel portrays the struggles faced by the Paraiyar community and highlights the entrenched caste-based discrimination that permeates their existence.

A. *Double Marginalization*

Bama explores the notion of double marginalization experienced by Dalit women. They face discrimination both within the Dalit community and in society at large. The narrative serves as a compelling expression of a marginalized individual, reflecting the painful ordeals she and others endure as victims of both societal and linguistic exclusion. Bama's character and identity have been shaped by her own personal and deeply painful experiences, which she candidly reflects upon in the preface of her book *Karukku*. The intense and poignant suffering she endured from childhood onwards has played a pivotal role in motivating her writing. In Bama's Preface to the first edition, she states, "In order to change this state of affairs, all dalits who have been deprived of their basic rights must function as God's word, piercing to the very heart. Instead of being more and more beaten down and blunted, they unite, think about their rights and battle for them" (Bama, *Karukku*, 2017, p. xxiv). She further says,

the driving force that shaped this book are many: events that occurred during many steps of my life, cutting me like *Karukku* and making me bleed; unjust social structures that plunged me ... my own desperate urge to break, throw away, and destroy these bonds; and when the changed were shattered into fragments, the bold that was split- all these taken together. (Bama, *Karukku*, 2017, p. xxiii)

Dalit girls are subjugated, even within the confines of their own homes, where they are relegated to subordinate roles compared to their male counterparts. In Paraiyar village, these roles are further reinforced through games where boys assume the personas of Naickers, signifying upper-caste landlords, while girls are relegated to the roles of 'Pannaiyaals', symbolizing laborers on farms. These childhood games perpetuate a power dynamic where males consistently occupy superior positions. Girls, in their own Dalit households, bear the brunt of oppression, lacking protective figures. This vulnerable status sometimes drives them to extreme measures, such as digging for earthworms or catching fish from ponds to satiate their hunger, unless they are caught and harassed by upper-caste authorities. While boys and girls engage in communal play, certain pleasures are reserved exclusively for boys, like riding buffaloes or engaging in water snake hunting, further reinforcing gender disparities and discrimination.

Bama was in third grade when she first learned about untouchability. Her first encounter with this dehumanizing practice was both humorous and heartbreaking. One afternoon, on her way back from school, she noticed a respected elder from her community holding a tiny bundle of snacks fastened to a string. He was holding the string and walking towards a Naicker man in the village. Bama was amused by the sight of the elder man walking in such a strange way. She laughed out loud. But then she realized that there was nothing funny about the situation. The elder man was being forced to debase himself because of his caste. He was not even allowed to touch the packet of snacks that he was carrying. This incident had a profound impact on Bama. She realized that untouchability was a serious problem that needed to be addressed. She vowed to educate herself and work for the betterment of her community. Bama writes: "What did it mean when they called us 'Paraiya'? had the name become that obscene? But we too are human beings. Our people should never run these petty errands for these fellows. We should work in their fields, take home our wages, and leave it at that" (Bama, *Karukku*, 2017, p. 16). Bama, having endured the oppression of untouchability, began to seek ways to empower herself and her community. Her brother provided her with guidance, emphasizing that education was the sole means to attain equality. According to him, her brother expressed his opinion that:

Because we are born into the Paraiya jati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that. But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities. So study with care, learn all you can. If you are always ahead in your lessons, people will come to you of their own accord and attach themselves to you. Work hard and learn". (Bama, *Karukku*, 2017, pp. 17-18)

The counsel from Bama's older brother left a deep and lasting impact on her. She was resolute to show herself and achieve her goals. From the day her brother spoke to her, she worked tirelessly in her studies, pouring all her heart and soul into her education. She was determined to be the best student in her class. Bama writes: "In fact, because of that, many people become my friends, even though I am a Paraichi" (Bama, *Karukku*, 2017, p. 18). During her educational journey, Bama constantly encounters a stark reminder of her marginalization through the persistent presence of untouchability wherever she ventures.

B. *Patriarchy and Caste*

Bama discusses how women in her community are subjected to oppression not just from the upper-caste individuals but also from men within their Dalit community. Bama reflects on the rigid gender roles and expectations placed on women, their lack of agency, and the discrimination they face, both within their homes and in the broader society. Bama's personal experiences and observations as a woman within the Dalit Christian community provide a lens through which she explores the intersection of caste and gender discrimination. "What Bama faces in the society is that Dalits are denied self – respect and identity. They are refused to be recognized as a part of the mainstream society and are thrown out of the space. They are treated as untouchables and are considered impure because of their occupation associated filth are dirt. Moreover, they are considered 'outcaste' because they fall outside the four fold caste system i.e. Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, shudra and are excluded from the Vedas. In the name of caste and social hierarchical system, the Dalits are exploited" (Pandit, 2019, p. 13844).

Dalit women occupy the lowest rung of the social hierarchy, facing multiple forms of oppression: caste, class, and gender. They are forced to fight for survival, facing discrimination and violence from their own community. Dalit women work alongside men, but they receive lower wages and less respect. They are also more likely to be subjected to sexual harassment and assault. At home, Dalit women face the additional challenges of early marriage, absence of education, and health issues related to childbearing at a young age. Their position in society is still deplorable, and they suffer greatly for being both Dalit and female. They are not spared from anguish and harassment, and their lives are often characterized by struggle and hardship.

The novel is a powerful indictment of patriarchy and its oppressive impact on Dalit women, who is forced to endure a lifetime of suffering and humiliation at the hands of men, both within and outside of her community. Bama (2017), on the violence and exploitation of Dalit women by men of upper castes writes, "My father used to say that if a Dalit woman is beaten, it is not a crime. He said that it is like beating a dog" (Bama, *Karukku*, 2017, p. 15). Further asserts that "The upper-caste men would come and stare at the Dalit women while they were bathing in the river. They would make lewd remarks and gestures. Sometimes, they would even try to molest the women" (Bama, *Karukku*, 2017, p. 20).

Patriarchy is embedded in Dalit culture and traditions. She is forced to marry at a young age, even though she does not want to. She is also expected to obey her husband and father without question. It is used to justify the violence and exploitation of Dalit women and limits the opportunities and choices available to women. She emphasizes the need for Dalit men to become allies in the struggle for gender justice, highlighting the importance of collective liberation within oppressed communities. Bama underscores the need for dismantling not only caste-based hierarchies but also gender-based inequalities.

Dalits face caste discrimination in every aspect of their lives, including their search for jobs and housing. Bama secures a teaching position in a school, but she soon realizes the harsh reality of caste discrimination. Her colleagues are reluctant to accept her education because she is a Dalit. To her dismay, Bama also encounters caste discrimination within the convent institutions. She observes, "Before they became nuns, these women take a vow that they will live in poverty. But that is just a sham. The convent does not know the meaning of poverty" (Bama, *Karukku*, 2017, p. 77). Further, she states, "It is only the upper-caste Christians who enjoy the benefits and comforts of the Church ... And if Dalits become priests or nuns; they are pushed aside and marginalized first of all, before the rest go about their business" (Bama, *Karukku*, 2017, p. 80). Bama reveals the discrimination meted out to her by the Telugu nuns who look down upon Tamils. Bama declares that, "I began to understand, little by little, that in that order, Tamil people were looked upon as a lower caste. And then among Tamils, Parayas were a separate category" (Bama, *Karukku*, 2017, p. 24).

Bama recounts her personal experiences in the village she originated from, highlighting how even the concept of worship underwent a complete transformation based on one's caste. Power and authority act as a major role in this dynamic, and the belief in God takes on a curious form, influenced by wealth and influence. Even if individuals change their religion, their circumstances and treatment remain unchanged. The higher class Christian people enjoy the benefits provided by the church, while the ignorance of the Dalits is exploited, serving as a capital for their caste. This exploitation allows them to establish thriving businesses and further benefit their own caste.

I felt in my heart that I could go and speak directly to God without their intervention. I could no longer believe that God could only be reached, as they taught us, through prayer learned by rote, thorough pious practices, through the novena and the rosary. I came to realize that you could see God through the mind's eye, in nature and in the ordinary events of every day. So all the rituals that I had followed and believed in so far suddenly

began to seem meaningless and just a shame. The desire to become nun fell away from me entirely at this time. (Bama, *Karukku*, 2017, p. 102)

C. *Liberation and Solidarity*

Bama's perspective on education centers on its role in liberating the Dalit community. According to her, education functions as a means of resistance and empowerment, providing a voice to those who have been marginalized in society. *Karukku* is not solely a tale of despair. It also illuminates the fortitude and tenacity of Dalit women who come together to challenge the oppressive system. Her work emphasizes the importance of solidarity, as the characters in the novel strive for collective liberation. In *Karukku* she comments in her afterword to the First edition,

Because I live by myself in this society, without supports of my own such as a family, a husband and children, I have to face many problems. But even though there are a thousand difficulties which beset a Dalit woman living on her own, yet the truth is that in my position as an independent woman, there are many opportunities for me to spend my life usefully, and especially, to work for the liberation of Dalits. (Bama, *Karukku*, 2017, p. 137)

Karukku serves as a powerful plea to Dalits, urging them to break free from the chains of caste and religious oppression. Bama's transformative journey in the book renews her belief in the potential of education to liberate individuals from manipulative communal systems. Bama emphasizes the importance of solidarity among Dalits and marginalized communities. She describes the support and unity within her community, which enables them to confront and challenge the oppressive forces that seek to keep them subjugated. The book illustrates the strength and resilience of the Dalit community when they come together to fight for their rights and dignity. Bama's writing also highlights the role of women in fostering solidarity within the community, challenging the patriarchal norms that exist in both castes Hindu and Christian contexts.

V. CASTE AND GENDER IN *SANGATI*

Bama's *Karukku* provides a profound exploration of the sufferings endured by Dalit women. While *Sangati* incorporates elements of autobiography, it transcends the individual narrative to encompass the collective experiences of an entire community. Singh opines, "Bama very realistically, throws light on the ways how a Dalit girl child suffers a lot and faces the derogatory process of growing as a woman" (Singh, 2021, p. 74). Within *Sangati*, Bama exposes the struggles faced by numerous strong Dalit women who grappled with oppressive systems of authority. The plight of Dalits during that time was truly horrific, as they were systematically denied access to temples and educational institutions. Bama's acknowledgment reflects her deep awareness of the hidden women subjugation and exploited condition of Dalit women within the converted Dalit Christian society, which she has internalized at a profound level of her consciousness.

My mind is crowded with many anecdotes: stories not only about the sorrows and tears of Dalit women, but also about their lively and rebellious culture, their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter them, but to swim vigorously against the tide; about the self-confidence and self-respect that enables them to leap over threatening adversities by laughing at and ridiculing them; about their passion to live life with vitality, truth, and enjoyment; about their hard labour. I wanted to shout out these stories. (Bama, *Sangati*, 2005, p. ix)

This form of discrimination, rooted in the notion of individual inferiority, can be likened to the insidious nature of racism. Through *Sangati*, Bama amplifies the voices of these women, capturing their anguish, anger, frustration, and courage. The language employed in the narrative sometimes includes explicit abuse with sexual undertones, serving as a stark reflection of the harsh realities faced by Dalit women.

A. *Caste Based Discrimination*

Bama vividly portrays the deep-rooted caste-based discrimination faced by the Dalit community in the novel. The Dalit women in the story endure the social, economic, and political inequalities perpetuated by the dominant caste groups. These inequalities are embedded in various aspects of their lives, such as education, employment, and access to resources. Priti Sharma (2015) opines that, "The novel creates an image into dalit feminist perspectives and Explorers the carnival of multiple voices of the discriminated, oppressed, resistance and agency in life and suffering faced by dalit women Tamil Nadu (Sharma, 2015, p. 187). A song sung by young children can be considered as one such instance:

Crab, O crab, my pretty little crab, who wandered through all the fields I planted, I pulled off your claws and put you in the pot, I gave the pot a boil and set it down. I waited and waited for him to come home and began to eat as he came through the door. He came to hit me, the hungry brute. He pounced at me to kill me. He struck me, he struck my child. He almost crushed the baby in my womb. He beat me until my legs buckled. He thrashed me until my bangles smashed. (Bama, *Sangati*, 2005, p. 30)

Dalit women face persistent threats of sexual harassment from upper-caste men. They are often objectified as symbols of sensuality and sources of pleasure. The novel narrates an unending narrative of profound despair, unfeeling subjugation, and deeply ingrained prejudice. This is exemplified when the grandmother offers caution to the girls collecting firewood: Bama cautions, "Women should never come on their own to these parts. If upper-caste fellows clap eyes on you, you're finished. They'll drag you off and rape you, that's for sure" (Bama, *Sangati*, 2005, p. 8). It is often

observed that boys exploit their circumstances, and when women dare to protest, they are unjustly stigmatized as promiscuous individuals. The story of Mariamma serves as a striking example of this phenomenon. Mariamma, who is the narrator's cousin, bears witness to the pervasive issue of sexual harassment experienced by Dalit women, along with their struggles to assert themselves in the face of such atrocities. In Mariamma's case, Kumaraswamy, a landlord belonging to an upper caste, attempts to molest her, yet she finds herself unable to voice her objections against him. She thought that, "He's upper caste as well. How can we even try to stand up to such people?" (Bama, *Sangati*, 2005, p. 20). But Kumarasami accused the guiltless girl who tried to save his face: "When she went innocently to get some water, he seized her hand and pulled her inside. Frightened out of her wits, she left everything and ran home, hardly knowing how she escaped" (Bama, *Sangati*, 2005, p. 20).

The author also highlights the disdainful treatment Dalit women receive from upper-caste women. In this regard, she shows a parallel between the lifestyles of these women and those of the Paraiyar community. Bama embraces a sense of pride in emphasizing that the women in her community, unlike their counterparts, work diligently and earn their own income, thus achieving a measure of economic independence without relying solely on their husbands. Despite enduring physical and mental subjugation to men, these women find ways to resist and assert themselves by vocally expressing their frustrations through shouting and hurling obscenities. The author astutely notes that outcry and shrieking function as survival strategies for these women. She earnestly wishes for them to recognize their inherent "self-worth, honour, and self-respect" (Bama, *Sangati*, 2005, p. 68).

B. Gender Based Discrimination

Sangati underscores the gender discrimination experienced by Dalit women from an early age. Female infants are consistently deemed inferior and receive lesser care. Bama raises the issue of gender bias by saying, "If a boy baby cries, he is instantly picked up and given milk. It is not so with the girl. Even with breast-feeding, it is the same story; a boy is breast fed longer, with the girl, they bear them quietly, making them forget the breast" (Bama, *Sangati*, 2005, p. 7). The narrator highlights the early distinctions in the treatment of boys and girls. Girls are discouraged from speaking loudly or expressing hearty laughter. They are not permitted to lie on their backs or stomachs while sleeping and are expected to maintain a posture with their heads lowered as they walk. Bama writes, "Even when our stomachs are screaming with hunger, we mustn't eat first. We are allowed to eat only after the men in the family have finished and gone" (Bama, *Sangati*, 2005, p. 29).

Bama depicted inequality in payment between men and women, portraying women as workers who earn wages in occupations such as agricultural labor and construction work. However, they are consistently received lower pay than their male counterparts. Bama comments that, "The women, in any case, whatever work they did, were paid less than men. Even when they did the very same work, they were paid less. Even in the matter of tying up firewood bundles, the boys always got five or six rupees more. And if the girls tied up the bundles but the boys actually sold them, they got the better price" (Bama, *Sangati*, 2005, p. 18).

Satyendra Prasad Singh (2016), while interpreting about gender discrimination, points out that, "Maikkanni is the first girl to climb into the factory bus and rushes to find a window seat. But the boy from Kakkalayakudi, who arrives later, pushes her away and grabs all the window seats. She is also beaten by her father for money and then by the maistri Annaacchi in the factory for throwing away two match-box labels" (Singh, 2016, p. 153).

Bama offers a critique of both patriarchy and casteism within the church. She strongly condemns the church's regulations on divorce and its subtle religious methods to subjugate women. In her view, parish priests show little regard for women's autonomy in choosing their life partners and often assign them to the least desirable roles within the church. The narrator, despite her efforts, is never granted access to the sacristy. In contrast, even the youngest boys, newly born, are permitted entry, while the church authorities consistently deny this privilege to girls. She points about the plight of Dalit women, "In the fields they have to escape from upper-caste men's molestations. At church, they must lick the priest's shoes and be his slaves while he threatens them with tales of God, Heaven, and Hell. Even when they go to their own homes, before they have had a chance to cook some kanji or lie down and rest a little, they have to submit themselves to their husband's torment" (Bama, *Sangati*, 2005, p. 35).

C. Resistance and Empowerment

Bama's narrative goes beyond the mere depiction of suffering experienced by Dalit women, serving as a testament to their resilience and active agency in challenging oppressive structures. Throughout the novel, she emphasizes the importance of education and empowerment as a means to challenge and overcome discrimination. Bama pictures their plight: "Everywhere you look, you see blows and beatings, shame and humiliation" (Bama, *Sangati*, 2005, p. 118). Bama consistently shows concern for Dalit women, persistently urging them to stand up and confront the challenges: "If we continue to be frightened, everyone will take advantage of us. If we stand up for ourselves without caring whether we die or survive, they'll creep away with their tails between their legs" (Bama, *Sangati*, 2005, p. 66). The primary cause of suffering among Dalits is the absence of access to education. Bama also implores her community to adopt certain measures to bring an end to these issues. She appeals them to treat both boys and girls alike, showing no difference between them as they grow into adults. Throughout history and across various cultures, the role of women in society has varied widely. However, a consistent theme across most societies is the lack of equal status and recognition for women compared to men.

Bama passionately advocates for the empowerment of girls, emphasizing the importance of granting them freedom. She inspires them to recognize and embrace their inner strength and vitality. She opines that, “there will come a day when men and women will live as one, with no difference between them; with equal rights. Then injustices, violence and inequalities will come to an end, and she is sure that the saying ‘Women can make and women can break’” (Bama, *Sangati*, 2005, p. 123). The writer encourages the womenfolk that, we must bring up our girls to think these new ways from an early age. We should educate boys and girls alike, showing no difference between them as they grow into adults (Bama, *Sangati*, 2005, p. 123).

In *Sangati*, Bama skillfully offers a reflective glimpse into the emotions of Dalit women, highlighting their struggles and advocating for transformation and improvement in various areas of their lives. These areas include addressing sex and gender discrimination, promoting equal opportunities in the workforce, and fighting for education rights. The narrator, taking on the role of both an all-knowing narrator and a directing force, effectively shapes the incidents and events in the story, while also shedding light on the bygone facets of the Dalit people through a diverse range of characters. This narrative technique contributes to the overall development of the novel. Bama emphasizes that the responsibility for uplifting the hopeless women in her community rests solely on the women themselves. She recognizes that no outside help can truly transform their lives, and it is essential for Dalit women to take control of their own destinies. The novel vividly portrays the grueling toil and menace faced by Dalit women, which perpetuates a tradition of violence that permeates throughout the story. This theme underscores the urgent need for societal change and serves as a driving force behind the events in the novel.

VI. CONCLUSION

According to S.K. Paul’s (2007) observations, Dalitness serves as a catalyst for conflict and confrontation “Dalitness is a matter of appreciating the potential of one’s total being. Thus, individual, culture, social burden, and Dalitness cannot be isolated ... For this new Dalit individual, social and cultural freedom has come because of his self-elevation and self-identification” (Paul, 2007, p. 35). In both *Karukku* and *Sangati*, Bama skillfully brings to the forefront the layered forms of domination experienced by women. She delves deep into the habitual tasks performed by Dalit women, both within the confines of their homes and in the outside world. Bama critically examines how violence against Dalit women is not only perpetuated but also legitimized and institutionalized by various powerful entities such as the state, family, religious institutions, and upper-caste communities. Through her fiction, Bama vividly portrays the arduous labor undertaken by Dalit women and the systematic subjugation they endure within their homes and beyond. They face sadistic treatment not only from upper-caste landlords, the panchayat, and the police but also from Dalit men within their households. Bama depicts Dalit women chiefly as laborers who enter the workforce from a young age and continue to toil throughout adolescence, womanhood, middle age, and even into their elderly years, persisting until their final moments. Regrettably, their tireless efforts often go unnoticed and unappreciated by both their own community and society at large, leaving them subjugated at every possible juncture.

Bama’s depiction of the life journeys of Dalit women is emblematic of the broader battle for empowerment and the pursuit of a life of dignity within the Dalit community. Through her narratives, she sheds light on the challenges faced by Dalit women at various stages of their lives, offering insights into their unacknowledged contributions and the obstacles they confront. Her powerful storytelling helps as a window into the ongoing struggle for empowerment within the Dalit community, highlighting the need for understanding and recognition of their unique experiences. It provides a meticulous portrayal of the trials faced by Dalit women, their triumphs, and their aspirations, ultimately documenting the broader striving for empowerment in social, economic, and political spheres within the Dalit community.

Bama’s writing explores the profound impact of a success-driven and consumerist society on children. She expresses deep concern for the well-being of young individuals who suffer the consequences of societal obsession with achievement and materialism. Amongst these children, Dalit students become particularly vulnerable targets for mockery, disapproval, and disgrace due to their social background. Bama shines a spotlight on the systemic biases and prejudices that perpetuate such mistreatment, emphasizing the urgent need for social change and a more inclusive education system that uplifts and nurtures all children, regardless of their caste or social group.

To conclude, this research has endeavored to illuminate the intricate and dynamic intersection between gender and caste within the narratives of Bama’s two novels. A comprehensive analysis of her works revealed the profound complexities, struggles, and resilient voices that characterize this intersection. The significance of Bama’s novels lies not only in their literary merit but in their ability to serve as a window into the lived experiences of individuals whose lives are entangled in the web of gender and caste-based discrimination. The findings reveal that Bama’s narratives challenge preconceived notions and stereotypes, offering a nuanced perspective on the multifaceted relationship between gender and caste. It is evident that these issues are not isolated but deeply interwoven, shaping the social fabric and individual identities of her characters.

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