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Speaking from the Margins: Subaltern Voice and Oppression in Bama's *Karukku*

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Abstract:

Dalit literature warps long-established postcolonial discourse by focusing on indigenous, caste-based subjugation. This paper highlights how postcolonial authors like Bama employ intertextuality to encounter the colonial narratives to assert cultural identity and voice resistance through their works. Dalit autobiographical literature has emerged as a powerful genre in postcolonial literature for contesting the supremacy narratives of caste, class and identity. As well explores how Bama's Karukku unveils the existence of subjugated community in postcolonial India and tries to reveal the prevailing societal, political freedom which often exist without societal or cultural liberation for oppressed people (Dalits). The novel taken for the discussion, visualises caste as a form of neo-colonial power, amending ingress to learn, labour, holy spaces, and public flexibility, while replicating classified autonomy within fragile democratic structures. Gayatri Spivak's, Can the subaltern speak? on Karukku transforms the Western autobiographical pattern to reinforce the Dalit women's voices, by creating a hybrid history space that challenges both colonial and postcolonial discourses. Bama puts forth the enduring bequests of colonial status, everywhere in the nation, where lawful freedom exists with inseparable enslavement. Orientating Karukku within postcolonial world literature, the analysis highlights how intertextuality and cultural hybridisation allow relegated voices to intervene on literary traditions, and challenge existing interpretations in historical and literary narratives, transforming inherited literary forms into instruments of resistance, testimony, and collective assertion.

Keywords: Intertextuality, domination, Caste, Freedom, Resistance.

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Introduction:

The Myth of Postcolonial Liberation Postcolonial literature tends to interrogate the legacy of imperial dominance by giving the historical, economic and psychological aftermath of foreign occupation. The dominant narrative of the postcolonial nation-state is usually one of triumphant liberation, a collective shedding of the colonial yoke. However, the geographical and social realities of former colonies often call for a wider, more nuanced definition as well. The more recent writers have contended that their nations remain internally colonised by the presence of indigenous hierarchies and that political independence does not equate social freedom for all citizenry. In this regard Dalit literature presents as a necessary and radical interruption in the project of postcolonial study. It forces it to address the dominance narratives of caste, class and identity that endure following the British departure. Bama is a pioneer Tamil Dalit writer and one of the earliest to break through the limitations of traditional literature by recording the brutal double colonisation of Dalit women, caught in the crosshairs of patriarchal gender paradigms alongside its harsh, suffocating caste systems. Bama conjures caste as a potent mode of neo-colonial power through the visionary autobiography Karukku. Political freedom was hollow, in the eyes of the marginalised, as it replicated the exercise of classified autonomy within tenuous democracies. Using Gayatri Spivak's rubric for the subaltern to speak, Karukku is an essential educational and cultural intervention. Spivak notes at length that marginalised voices are often formed (and thus misrepresented) by dominant groups and thus become part of the way representation is determined by oppressor (Spivak 283). The word "subaltern," which comes from Antonio Gramsci, actually means individuals who cannot do more than take orders, who do not have even the basic institutions of citizenship and self-determination present. For decades, Dalits' lives were largely recounted from outside, reported out by upper-caste writers, missionaries, social reformers—for decades, Dalit grief was viewed through their own ideological filter.

Bama disrupts this historical silencing by appropriating the autobiographical "I" and expanding it into a shared "we." In so doing, she creates a hybrid historical place that moves narrative control from these outside documentarians. This paper chronicles the trajectory of Bama's main thesis: that real emancipation happens only when caste hierarchies are wholly dismantled. It looks at the way in which oppression is imposed spatially, economically, and institutionally and considers how the subaltern voice in the end constructs an epistemology of resistance.

The Topography of Caste: Spatial Segregation as Psychological Warfare

Within the Indian framework, caste functions intrinsically through space, reflecting the architectural and geographic divisions of colonial administration. As Frantz Fanon put it, in his analysis of the colonial world, a world divided into compartments: a world cut in two, where barracks and the police stations symbolise the divide (Fanon 3-4). Karukku vividly maps the physical segregation of Bama's village, demonstrating how geographical marginalisation serves as the foundation of social subjugation, mapping Fanon's colonial topography onto the indigenous caste system. Bama writes in excruciating detail about the village layout, observing that the upper-caste and lower-caste communities are sharply divided by an invisible but rigid boundary. She comments on the glaring disparity of the distribution of resources: "The post-office, the panchayat board, the milk-depot, the big shops, the church, the schools—all these stood in their streets. So why would they need to come to our area?" (Bama 18). This spatial restriction serves as the core methodology of psychological colonisation. Just as colonised subjects were confined to specific sectors by imperial rulers to emphasize their subordination and replaceability, Dalit populations are relegated to the most remote corners, resembling the physically derelict remains of colonial settlements. Bama observes the grim, symbolic truth of this placement: "To the east of the

village lies the cemetery. We live just next to that" (Bama 18). The isolation is not just residential — it determines every part of mobility, social life, and bodily autonomy. Dalit children are taught from childhood to understand this geography of power. They learn early on where they are permitted to move, whom they are allowed to talk to, and how they must physically shrink in the presence of upper-caste bodies. Bama recounts how the land itself becomes an instrument of systemic discrimination, locking the marginalised community into a physical locale of subalternity from which social mobility is deliberately obstructed. This spatial tension is violently eruptive in the village during disputes over a cemetery, contested almost completely by the upper-caste members of the Chaaliyar community. The fact is the conflict shows how vulnerable the postcolonial protective edifice of rule for those in society who are marginalised became. When the riot does break out, the state—via the very police who represent them—violently enforces spatial boundaries on behalf of the upper castes. The police invade the Dalit settlement, revealing how state apparatuses work to preserve spatial mastery over the upper castes. Bama remembers the terror of an invasion backed by the state: "All of a sudden, a huge gang of policemen came out of the Chaaliyar settlement, batons in hand, drove our men back ruthlessly, mercilessly beating up those they apprehended, then arrested them" (Bama 42). These police walk the Dalit streets, kick open doors, pull men from their hiding spots and beat them "like they whip animals" (Bama 43). As the land is protected by state violence, it becomes a militarised zone within which the subaltern is hunted. In these harrowing descriptions, Karukku shows that spatial segregation is not a passive tradition but proactive and violent warfare that is waged against the Dalit community in order to keep them paralysed.

The Economics of the Dalit Body: Labour, Exploitation, and the Agrarian Machine

In addition to spatial control, caste dominance is upheld through the continuous exploitation of Dalit labour. This form of economic subjugation denies the marginalised justice and bodily autonomy, reducing the Dalit body to a mere tool of agrarian production. While Dalit labour sustains the entire economy of the village, the workers remain trapped in severe, cyclical poverty. Postcolonial independence brought no vertical mobility; instead, caste continues to dictate professional roles and strictly enforce servitude. Bama offers extensive textual evidence of this economic subjugation, highlighting the grave physical toll that is exacted most deeply on Dalit women, who bear a devastating triple burden of caste, class, and gender oppression. She recounts the exhausting, unavoidable reality of her family's work: "From the time that I was a small child, I saw people working hard... At home, my mother and grandmother laboured from sunrise to sunset, without any rest. Furthermore, to this day, in my village, both men and women can survive only through hard and incessant labour" (Bama 53). Moreover, the work the Dalit body undergoes comes in great quantities, often brutal, and uncompromising nature. Even the mere act of procuring firewood in the mountains is portrayed as a physically damaging necessity, one such as "twigs and thorns would scratch and tear your face," the result as women bleed just to secure basic fuel so that their families could cook their meager rations of watery gruel (Bama 56). The gross indignity of this work is compounded by strict enforcement of untouchability that requires Dalits to submit to humiliating and dehumanising rituals of purity and pollution simply to survive. The text shows this through the grandmother's daily interactions with the landowning Naicker families. Bama looks on as her grandmother is degraded at a profound level, forced to receive her wages and drinking water as though she were a biohazard. "The Naicker women would pour out the water from a height of four feet, while Paatti and the others received and drank it with cupped hands held to their mouths," (Bama 26). The grandmother's submission to such

treatment — justified by her belief that the Naickers are the "maharajas who feed us our rice" — demonstrates just how intense the psychological conditioning is essential for carrying on this exploitative economic system. This dehumanisation reaches a turning point for the young narrator in the pivotal 'vadai' incident. Bama sees a respected Dalit village elder carrying a small parcel of food for a Naicker landlord by a string, afraid of polluting the wrapper. Bowing low, extending the packet carefully through the string, she watches confused as the elder comes to the Naicker. When her brother says that the elder performed this action because the upper-caste man believes a Dalit's mere touch is polluting, her original amusement changes to a great deal of shock and anger. "It was such a provocation and anger that I wanted to go and touch those wretched vadais myself straight away," she says in a later response (Bama 25). The earlier awakening of caste consciousness reveals the psychological violence of the labour system. It parallels colonial economic models where natives were turned into dispensable, inexpensive labour without dignity, basic human rights, or the option of taking control of the fruits of their labour. Bama learns that the Naickers are rich on Dalit sweat, and that the Dalits are considered to be untouchable commodities.

Ideological State Apparatuses: Education as a Mechanism of Control

As physical spaces and labour markets act as the overt, physical enforcers of caste, formal institutions are the insidious machinery of neo-colonial control. Education is historically framed as a key to social mobility and empowerment in democratic societies—a great equaliser. Karukku's analysis shows how educational institutions weaponise learning to create submissive subjects rather than liberate them, constituting what Marxist theorist Louis Althusser would call an Ideological State Apparatus. Dalit children are also constantly humiliated in schools, even though they may never be found guilty of an offence, and often verbally abused based on their caste identity. Bama clearly remembers what happened when

she accidentally dislodged a green coconut while playing in the schoolyard. In the event of what should have been nothing but a childhood misdeed, the headmaster humiliates her in front of the full assembly, weaponising the incident as evidence of caste stereotypes. He shouts, "You have shown us your true nature as a Paraya... You climbed the coconut tree yesterday after everybody else had gone home, and you stole a coconut. We cannot allow you inside this school. Stand outside" (Bama 28). The institution requires Dalit students to learn to embrace feelings of lowliness, inherent criminality, and a damaged sense of self. The school is not there to raise the Dalit kid; it is there to reinforce his/her place at the lowest level of the social pyramid. This segregation and psychological abuse continue long after Bama succeeds in academics and goes to higher education. Moving to a hostel, she observes gross discrimination from the wardens who make fun of “Cheri children” (children from the Dalit settlement). They are publicly humiliated by the warden, whose explanation of their behaviour is that they “eat their fill and look as round as potatoes” when at school but return from home as “just skin and bone!” (Bama 29–30). Later in college, she is publicly singled out after a lecturer asks “Harijan students” to stand up to receive special evening tuition, which triggers a “titter of contempt” from the upper-caste students and gives rise to strong, suddenly felt rage for Bama (Bama 31). The educational system forces the subaltern to constantly balance the need to finish a degree with the ugly reality of institutionalised bigotry. Instead of liberating the Dalit mind, education becomes an endurance examination of suffering through systemic gaslighting.

The Illusion of Sanctuary: The Catholic Church and the “Wealthy Jesus”

Bama directs her most meaningful, mournful and theoretically dense criticisms at the Christian Church. Historically, Christianity appealed to marginalised groups in India by offering doctrines of equality, unconditional love, and compassion for the oppressed, and it

presented a theological context that fundamentally stood with the dispossessed. For the Dalit community, it represented a safe haven from the savage hierarchies of Hinduism. However, Karukku painstakingly shows the religious institution only reproduces caste status within its own sacred structures, preserving upper-caste hegemony while disguising itself as pious restraint. The Dalit Christians are systematically barred from leadership and decision-making positions, kept on the margins of the same institution that offered them salvation. The priests, who identify with primary castes, validate – rather than overturn – the existing reign of oppression. Such betrayal climaxes when Bama vows to become a nun out of the need to help poor Dalit children. Inside the convent, she must confront the staggering hypocrisy of the religious order. She notices that the severe menial labour is invariably assigned to Dalits, who the upper-caste sisters treat with profound contempt. She writes, "I was pained to see even older people trembling, shrinking like small children, frightened by the power and wealth that the sisters had, burying their pride and self-respect, running to do the menial tasks assigned to them" (Bama 35). Instead of living out its vows of poverty, and of giving the marginalised center stage, the convent operates as a site of extreme elite privilege. Bama acknowledges that the institution caters almost exclusively to the rich and bitterly states, “And the Jesus they worshipped there was a wealthy Jesus” (Bama 104). She notes that the vows of obedience, chastity, and poverty are not being used for spiritual liberation, but rather as a "means of control and enslavement" to coerce Dalit nuns into unquestioning submission (Bama 109). The theology preached inside the convent is entirely disconnected from the suffering of the masses outside its walls. Bama writes, “They shout themselves hoarse that God is just... But it is injustice that dances like a demon in the convents, and within all the institutions that are run by these people” (Bama 104). Her ultimate decision to leave the convent is a radical rejection of this institutional hypocrisy. By exiting the religious order, she refuses to participate in a system that asserts universal salvation while imitating colonial

patterns of domination. Her departure is a profound act of spiritual and political resistance, reclaiming her human dignity and aligning herself firmly with the unvarnished, lived reality of her community rather than the sanitised, hypocritical halls of the Church.

The Epistemology of Resistance: Language, Form, and the Collective "We"

In response to the systemic silencing imposed by spatial boundaries, economic exploitation, and institutional gaslighting, Karukku utilises the act of writing itself as a weapon of liberation. To challenge both colonial and postcolonial discourses, Bama fundamentally alters the epistemology of the traditional autobiography. Western autobiography traditionally relies on a linear, highly individualised narrative focused on the singular triumph of the ego. Bama explicitly disrupts this expected prospect, warning the reader early on, "These events did not occur in the order in which I have narrated them" (Bama 9). Her fragmented, non-linear, and thematic structure deliberately mirrors the broken, interrupted realities of Dalit existence in postcolonial India. In addition, Bama utterly denies the literary supremacy of the standardised, upper-caste Tamil. Furthermore, by writing in Dalit Tamil—a dialect that is deeply steeped in oral traditions, folk songs, agricultural rhythms, and the informal cadence of everyday village speech—she turns linguistics into a battlefield. She uplifts the cultural signifiers of her own society, describing the importance of village nicknames such as Munkovam (short-temper) or Kazhinja (Leaky), which contradict formal upper-caste naming procedures and create a vigorously autonomous subaltern identity (Bama 19-20). By refusing to sanitise her own language for an elite readership, she forces the literary establishment to meet the Dalit on their own terms. This linguistic revolt refuses aesthetic separation and thrusts the reader into an intimate engagement with the subaltern world. Gayatri Spivak claims that the role of the female intellectual is the job of representation itself, warning against the assumption that the subaltern can easily speak through dominant institutional

channels without having their message diluted or co-opted (Spivak 308). Bama is fulfilling her representational imperative here by enabling the autobiographical "I" to merge easily into a collective "we." Her personal trauma is never an isolated case; it is always bound up with the suffering of her people. As she states, "What I have written is not just my own story. It is the story of the many Dalit people who are like me" (Bama 7). In doing so, she shatters the historical silence so heavily imposed on her people, reclaiming the narrative authority that has long been usurped by those who sought to speak for the Dalit rather than listen to them.

Conclusion

Bama's Karukku makes for an essential reconsideration of postcolonial theory by showing that political independence of one nation does not guarantee human liberation for the weakest. The text does its best to uncover caste as a persistent, shape-shifting, neo-colonial thing, and how it tightly regulates the geography and employment, the institutions, and the psyche of the dispossessed. With compelling narrative, brutal structural critique, and radical language innovation, Bama deconstructs the idea of the oppressed, transforming internal trauma and the "triple burden" of Dalit women into a communal defence of dignity and power. Karukku is not just documenting suffering before an empathetic audience, but insisting on spaces of radical transformation. True freedom requires the complete obliteration of caste hierarchies, social inequity, and the hypocritical institutions that support them. Bama succeeds in intervening within the literary tradition because she gives a fierce, unadorned voice to the subaltern, showing that those marginalised communities have the intellectual and cultural means to create their very own spaces of resistance. Speaking from the margins, Bama reclaims not only her own humanity, but the humanity of an entire community that refuses to remain silent in the shadows of postcolonial history.

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