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VOICES OF RESISTANCE: A CRITICAL STUDY OF BAMA FAUSTINA SOOSAIRAJ'S "KARUKKU" AND "SANGATI"

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the voices of resistance based on the complex intersections of caste, gender, and religion in Bama Faustina Soosairaj's seminal autobiographical works, "Karukku" (1992) and "Sangati" (1994). As pioneering Dalit feminist literature, these texts illuminate the multifaceted oppression faced by Dalit Christian women in Tamil Nadu, India. Through close textual analysis, this research demonstrates how Bama's narratives challenge traditional literary paradigms by articulating experiences at the margins of multiple identity categories. The paper argues that Bama's works reveal a "triple burden" of discrimination where caste prejudice, gender subordination, and religious marginalization create interlocking systems of oppression. By examining specific textual instances of this intersectionality, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how identity-based discrimination operates in complex, overlapping ways that cannot be reduced to single-axis frameworks.

INTRODUCTION

Bama Faustina Soosairaj's emergence in the early 1990s as one of India's first female Dalit writers marked a significant turning point in Indian literary history. Her autobiographical works "Karukku" (1992) and "Sangati" (1994) broke new ground by articulating the previously silenced experiences of Dalit Christian women. As Dalit literature had been primarily dominated by male voices, and feminist literature in India had largely represented upper-caste concerns, Bama's intervention created a crucial space for examining how caste, gender, and religion intersect to create distinct forms of marginalization.

The title "Karukku," referring to the serrated edges of palmyra leaves, metaphorically represents the double-edged existence of Dalits who simultaneously face wounds and develop resistance. "Sangati," meaning "events" or "news," presents a collection of interconnected stories that reveal the daily struggles and resilience of Dalit women. Both texts employ a non-linear narrative structure and use Tamil dialect to challenge mainstream literary conventions, embodying what scholar Gayatri Spivak terms "the subaltern speaking."

This paper employs an intersectional framework, drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw's foundational concept that various forms of discrimination do not operate in isolation but intersect to create specific forms of oppression. Through this lens, I analyze how Bama's works demonstrate that the experiences of Dalit Christian women cannot be understood through singular frameworks of caste studies, feminist theory, or religious studies alone.

Before delving into textual analysis, it is essential to establish the theoretical underpinnings that inform this research. While intersectionality as a concept emerged from Black feminist thought

in the United States through scholars like Crenshaw, Bell Hooks, and Patricia Hill Collins, it has proven valuable for analyzing various contexts where multiple forms of oppression coexist. In the Indian context, scholars like Sharmila Rege, Gopal Guru, and Anupama Rao have adapted intersectional approaches to understand Dalit women's experiences. Rege (2006) argues that Dalit feminism challenges both the Brahminical tendencies within mainstream feminism and the patriarchal elements within Dalit movements. This perspective aligns with Bama's project, as she writes: "The position of women is both different from and similar to that of men. If we speak of their different position, we find that Dalit women are the most vulnerable of the lot. They are prey to the desires and despotic authority of upper-caste men and Dalit men alike."

This statement from "Sangati" exemplifies how Bama's writing theorizes intersectionality through lived experience rather than abstract concepts, demonstrating what scholar Susie Tharu describes as the "epistemological advantage" of marginalized standpoints.

In "Karukku," Bama provides vivid accounts of how caste discrimination structured every aspect of her village life. The autobiographical narrator's gradual awareness of her caste identity is depicted as a series of painful revelations rather than an innate knowledge:

> "When I was studying in the third class, I first came to know of my community's low status. An elder from our street worked as a general dogsbody in the landlord's big house. One day, I watched him carry a packet of vadais [savory snacks] by its string without touching the packet itself. He came along, holding out the packet by the string... I didn't understand and asked my elder brother why the elder had carried the vadais like that. Annan told me that everyone believed that if Dalits touched the food, it would be polluted."

This passage illustrates how caste consciousness emerges through everyday interactions, revealing how notions of purity and pollution regulate even the most mundane activities. The child narrator's confusion highlights how caste discrimination is not natural but constructed and maintained through social practices.

In "Sangati," Bama extends this analysis by documenting the specific forms of caste violence faced by Dalit women in the workplace:

> "In the fields, they have to escape from the landlords' watchful eyes just to drink water or to go to the lavatory. When they work in the landlords' houses, they are made to sweep and swab the cowshed and courtyards, but they may not enter the kitchen or the room where the god is kept. They have to remain in the yard if they want to say anything."

This passage captures the spatial politics of caste, where Dalit women's bodies are restricted and regulated. The text emphasizes that caste is not merely ideological but materializes in bodily experiences of exclusion, restriction, and surveillance.

While confronting caste oppression, Bama's narratives simultaneously critique gender discrimination within Dalit communities. "Sangati" particularly focuses on women's experiences, challenging the assumption that intra-community patriarchy is less significant than inter-caste oppression:

> "The women in our community, though they work hard day and night, are not respected and do not have a high place. All the hard work and toil is for the men... Once they come home from their work, men are free to go wherever they please. If they feel like it, they can eat and go to sleep. But for women, the work never stops. They have to cook, clean vessels, see to the needs of the children, and do countless other chores."

This passage reveals how labor is gendered even within Dalit households, with women bearing disproportionate burdens. Bama demonstrates that women's oppression cannot be attributed solely to caste but must be understood as emerging from patriarchal structures that cut across caste lines.

"Sangati" also documents gender-based violence within the community through stories of women like Mariamma, who faces sexual harassment from an upper-caste man and is subsequently blamed and punished by her community. The narrative exposes how Dalit patriarchy often colludes with caste hierarchies, doubly victimizing women: "The same panchayat that was lenient with the upper-caste man who tried to molest her, blamed the girl for having gone to fetch water and punished her. Everyone who came to give evidence spoke only about the girl's character; not one of them said a word about the landlord's son."

Through such examples, Bama illustrates what scholar Anupama Rao terms the "gendered economy of caste," where Dalit women's bodies become sites where both caste dominance and patriarchal control are simultaneously exercised.

The third dimension of Bama's intersectional analysis concerns religion, specifically the paradoxical position of Christian Dalits. In "Karukku," Bama describes her initial hope that Christianity would provide an escape from caste discrimination: "I studied in a convent from the time I was in my fourth class. The nuns there kept telling us that God would accept only good children, and they taught us to be humble, obedient, modest, and so on. So I tried to be good always, knowing that otherwise I would be separated from God."

However, this hope is gradually undermined as she encounters caste discrimination within Christian institutions:

> "When I was studying in the seventh class, I had a great desire to become a nun. But later, when I discovered that I would be compelled to go about in the upper-caste streets, announcing retreats and meetings and that I would have to go alone to upper-caste houses and beg for donations to run our institutions, I gave up the idea."

This passage reveals how Christianity, despite its egalitarian theology, reproduces caste hierarchies in practice. Bama's critique extends to the Church hierarchy, which she portrays as complicit in maintaining caste distinctions: "In the church, too, they announced that the sacramental bread would be distributed to the congregation. The priest had no habit of placing it in anyone's mouth. It was always passed from hand to hand... All the people belonging to the upper castes sat separately, refused to take the communion bread directly from the priest's hands, and they all said that

they would take it only from the plate."

This observation highlights how even sacred practices become sites for caste performance, undermining Christianity's potential as a liberatory force. Bama's analysis reveals how religious conversion while offering new spiritual resources, does not automatically erase caste identity or provide escape from discrimination.

Despite documenting multiple forms of oppression, Bama's texts are not merely catalogs of victimization but narratives of resistance. This resistance operates precisely at the intersections of caste, gender, and religion; creating what scholar M.S.S. Pandian calls "a politics of the possible."

One key form of resistance is linguistic. Both texts employ the Dalit Tamil dialect, rejecting standardized Tamil with its Brahminical associations. In "Karukku," Bama reflects: "The language of our people came to me spontaneously, and I began to write using that language. In reality, our grammar is different, and our usage of words is different too. Even our pronunciation is different. So our language is considered ugly and crude... I wanted to prove that our language was original and beautiful."

This linguistic assertion represents not just an aesthetic choice but a political stance that challenges the cultural hegemony that devalues Dalit expression. Another form of resistance emerges through community solidarity, particularly among women. In "Sangati," Bama describes how Dalit women create support networks: "In the face of all their troubles, these women still found something to laugh about. They would joke and laugh uproariously together. I had seen women from the other castes, who were better off, filled with horrible pride, behaving arrogantly, always showing off their jewelry... Our women have so many other strengths as well."

This passage emphasizes how laughter and community become sources of power for Dalit women. By highlighting these alternative forms of strength, Bama challenges deficit-based narratives about Dalit communities.

Religion also becomes a site of resistance when Bama reinterprets Christianity through a Dalit feminist lens. In "Karukku," she rewrites religious narratives to center marginalized experiences: "When I read the Bible, I got a clear picture of Jesus being a person who lived and struggled with ordinary people, a person who touched and healed the segregated minority of lepers, a person who allowed himself to be touched by the polluting hemorrhagic woman."

This reinterpretation of Christian theology through the lens of caste and gender creates what scholars call "vernacular theology" – a localized, contextual understanding of religion that serves liberatory purposes.

CONCLUSION

The textual analysis of "Karukku" and "Sangati" demonstrates how Bama's narratives illuminate the complex intersections of caste, gender, and religion in the lived experiences of Dalit Christian women. By documenting how these identity categories interact to produce specific forms of oppression, Bama offers an embodied theory of intersectionality that challenges single-axis frameworks of discrimination.

Her works reveal how caste discrimination structures everyday interactions, how gender subordination operates within and beyond community boundaries, and how religious institutions both reproduce and potentially challenge social hierarchies. These intersecting oppressions create what I have termed a "triple burden" for Dalit Christian women.

Importantly, Bama's texts also document resistance strategies that operate precisely at these intersections – through linguistic assertion, community solidarity, and reinterpreted religious frameworks. This resistance demonstrates that marginalized subjects are not passive victims but active agents who negotiate complex identity positions.

The significance of Bama's contribution extends beyond literary innovation to offer vital insights for social justice movements and theoretical frameworks. Her works suggest that effective challenges to oppression must address multiple axes of discrimination simultaneously rather than prioritizing one form of identity politics over others.

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