



# Bound with Two Wounds: A Dalit Woman's Fight Against Caste and Church in Postcolonial India

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**Abstract**— This paper examines Bama's *Karukku*, which is a foundational text in Dalit literature, with a focus on the reciprocation of caste oppression and Christian colonialism in postcolonial India. It analyzes Bama's personal story to investigate how the caste system, supported by colonial structures, continues to marginalize Dalits even in the post independent India. It explores the simultaneity of oppression for Dalits who often are, especially Dalit women, subject to oppression in both society and the church. Additionally, this paper examines Bama's act of resistance through education and story telling, demonstrating how her choice to leave the convent and subsequently to speak is about taking back identity and fighting against systemic injustice. This combination of postcolonial analysis around caste and religion, contributes to new ways of thinking about how colonial legacies continue to persist in contemporary India and shines light on personal storytelling as an act of social change.



**Keywords**— Bama, *Karukku*, Caste, Religion, Oppression, Resistance, Dalit women, Religious discrimination, Postcolonial theory, Christian colonialism.

## Introduction

There have been few voices in Indian literature as disruptive as Bama - a Tamil Dalit woman - who challenged the violent silencing of caste or religion in her autobiography, *Karukku*. Released first in Tamil and then in English in 1992, *Karukku* tells the geohistorical tale of Bama's life growing up a Dalit Christian in rural Tamil Nadu where she faced discrimination by not only upper-caste Hindus but also within the Catholic Church. A tale about the experiences of one person, *Karukku* is a postcolonial product, attacking the coalitional communities of colonial and postcolonial domains.

While coloniality and western education as a signifier of globalization has been accepted, Bama sheds light on how coloniality continues to structure the reproduction of colonial and caste social divisions long after Britain departed. Protestant and Catholic Church structures, introduced with colonial history, laid no structures to protect the Dalits, while continuing to deny the existence of caste in Christian thought. Through the use of potentialities in the

vernacular Tamil language, Bama's *Karukku* illuminates how a Dalit woman traverses colonial legacies embedded in caste divisions. This paper advances Bama's *Karukku* as a postcolonial work, the coalition of caste and Christianity as colonial weapons, and anecdotal storytelling as a weapon and mitigation of one's identity.

## The Persistence of Caste After Independence

While India was able to achieve political independence from Britain, Dalit lives like Bama's were still very much shaped by the oppressive caste system. In her book, *Karukku*, she writes forth and reflects on the discrimination she faced as a youth growing up in a small Tamil Nadu village, she speaks of the segregation enforced on Dalits, the dangerous and hardest work Dalits were assigned to, and how through all of this, people were consumed by both racial and societal hierarchy. These things tended to be so entrenched that many children simply grew up feeling as if these traditions were in fact normal. Bama recollects how she and most Dalit children were not

permitted to intermingle with upper caste children freely and how any encounter, even natural occurring ones, maintained an obvious separateness.

One anecdote that continued to resonate with Bama was the sight of a Dalit man transporting food to a landlord and holding it away from his body so it would not become "polluted." This moment crystallized in Bama's mind representing the complete dominance that caste had over life in Southern India. The British were gone to be sure, but the social division they assisted in cementing was unchanged. That Bama would be very candid in sharing her very personal experiences using plain language reconfirmed for her the message, despite independence, things are still very difficult for Dalit communities.

### Religious Discrimination and Colonial Legacy

Like caste, religion became a new site of oppression for Bama, particularly in the form of the Christian church. Like other Indian minorities that found their way into Christianity during colonial rule, Bama was led to believe that she would be equal on all fronts. But equality was a concept that was realized in the same manner for Dalits and others; from the very beginning, exploitation and subjugation were reinforced, and they were treated as inferior individuals again within the church. Bama recalls sitting on the floor and being forced to sit at the back of the church on Sundays. Bama was not allowed to sit with many other regular church goers; she could stay and attend church when everyone else was already busy and excluded in other church activity. Rather than being a source of protection, the church, which needed to find a way to salvation, was a place where Bama observed caste-based discrimination.

Bama has a moment of realization about the deep irony of her situation; she escaped the Hindu caste system, but now she was still subject and oppressed by the church and Christianity. The church, much like every other institution put in place by the British colonizers, adapted the colonial caste system into the postcolonial future of Indian society. The promise of a new life of equality existed with the old and outdated caste hierarchy. Eventually Bama's experience of feeling oppressed because of caste and religion shows the ways caste and religion, but also methods of colonial control on Dalit communities continued to operate and exploit and harm Dalits in what was claimed to be free and independent of colonial control.

### Resistance through Education and Writing

Bama viewed education and writing as two powerful forms of resistance against her double oppression as a result of caste and religion. While she was a child, she was implicitly denied an education based on assumptions that the untouchables viz. Dalits ought to be ignorant and that education was reserved for the non-Dalits. However,

her desire to learn to read and write was a quiet form of rebellion against the powers of her caste education. A second instance of defiance was when she made the decision to leave the convent where she originally sought refuge. To write her own story (*Karukku*), gave her power as a writer and allowed her freedom of expression for a voice that had been silenced.

While Bama's narrative is personal, it not only liberates her from the bondage of caste and that of the church, but it also represents the voice of a community that had been silenced. Her writing critiques the oppressive powers that continue to control the Dalits while representing a vision of resistance and even a sense of empowerment. Bama's transcribing of her pain into literature acting in a way was transforming her personal struggle into a communal struggle, for dignity, self-respect, and freedom.

### Critical Analysis

This article provides a critical analysis of Bama's *Karukku* narrative while emphasizing the role of caste and religion, inextricably linked to structures of colonialism, in the lived experience of Dalit people in postcolonial India. Focusing on Bama's personal struggles with caste oppression in both society and the Christian church demonstrates that the vestiges of colonial oppression remain entrenched in these institutions long after India's formal independence.

The pieces of Bama's story, in particular the brutal violence of being Dalit and a Christian, become a reminder of the motivation for resistance when taken together. To illustrate the act of resistance as a reclaiming of space, Bama's decision to leave the convent and the act of writing *Karukku* must be read as a reclamation of the self, and reflection on colonial rules of separation and specification that persist today. In this way it is also something more, a powerful reminder of how colonialism harms the lives of people across domains and systems but it is also a reminder how those systems do not define them.

While previous studies on caste have addressed colonialism and coloniality in a more theoretical way, this paper argues it is just as important to address Bama's dual oppression via caste and religion in the context of both categories. Through this placement, Bama's story serves as an important case, not only for the complexities of her resistance but also, as a reminder that the struggles of marginalized groups continue in the postcolonial era, while acknowledging the power of the personal narrative and storytelling in working towards social and political change.

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