

Intersectional Oppression and Subjugation Based on Gender, Caste, and Class in Bama's Karukku and Vanmam: A Dalit Feminist Study

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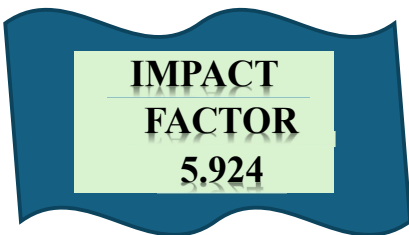
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Abstract

Dalit literature has taken birth to become a radical literary force against the deep-rooted socio-cultural and political structures that have led to this perennial state of oppression of a large number of communities in India. This paper explores Dalit feminism and the theories of intersectionality and subalternity to analyse how oppression based on class, caste, and gender intersect into Karukku and Vanmam by Bama. Karukku is an autobiographical account that reveals the oppressive, and often invisible, structures of discrimination with which Dalit Christian women contend at family, societal, educational and church level while Vanmam goes further to include caste-based violence against Dalits in rising tensions between various factions among

Dalit groups as well as historical/ contemporary dynamics of violent incursion into those communities by dominant caste interests. It finds that Bama does not depict oppression as a linear singular factor but as an interdependent web of caste, gender, class, religion and labour where each element reinforces the other through close textual analysis. In addition, her stories highlight education, community solidarity, and self-respect as tools of resistance and empowerment. Keywords: Dalit Literature, Dalit Feminism, Intersectionality, Caste, Gender, Class, Oppression, Resistance, Bama, Karukku, Vanmam.

Introduction

The Indian culture is very bias to people from the Dalit communities. They have been treated badly for a time. The country's rules say everyone is equal. That is not what occur in existent life. Women from the Dalit community are treated badly. When we talk about the problems of Dalit women in India we have to think about their caste, gender and class. These things are all. Make each other worse.

Dalit women face a lot of difficulties because of their caste, gender and class. The Dalit community has been suppressed for a time. Dalit women are particularly vulnerable. The

problems of women in India are very complex. Due to this, the experiences of these women cannot be incorporated in the singular narrative of feminism. Thus, there emerges the need for a separate discourse on the plight of the oppressed castes.

Literature of the Dalit community seeks to represent the voice of the voiceless and powerless, which is absent from the mainstream literature, either because it is deemed inappropriate or ignored altogether. Their literature focuses on the themes of discrimination and dignity, seeking to unveil the unjust social order and bring it to the light of day.

Karukku is a book written by Bama. It was her big book, published in 1992. *Karukku* is the story of Bamas childhood. It is about her school days and her time in the convent. Bama had to leave the convent because she was treated unfairly. This was very hard for Bama. She used this experience to fight for the rights of the Dalit community. *Karukku* is a story about Bamas life and her experiences as a Dalit woman, in India. *Vanmam*, the novel was published in 2002, and it is a story of caste wars among the Dalits.

Unlike *Karukku*, *Vanmam* portrays the injustices not only against the oppressed castes but also among them, as they are used by the upper caste to divide and conquer. The problem is compounded by the fact that the oppressed castes are not united, which makes them easy to exploit.

A critical analysis of both the novels is required in order to understand the themes of discrimination presented by the author. It can be argued that while *Karukku* illustrates the personal experiences of Bama, *Vanmam* brings caste conflicts into the picture. The stories show that discrimination happens in different ways. So, to deal with it we need to think about things, like caste, class, religion and gender and handle each one properly. The stories will also show how the author talks about these problems in her writing to make people aware and try to change things.

The research will utilize a qualitative and textual method of study. The main sources of information will include Bama's *Karukku* and *Vanmam*. However, the research will also review secondary sources such as books, journals, and articles on Dalit, feminist, post-colonial, and caste studies to compliment and support the main sources. The research will involve comparison and contrast between the two novels.

Scholars have done extensive research on Bama's contribution to Dalit literature. Her works have been analysed in terms of themes of caste discrimination, gender inequality, and social resistance.

Sharmila Rege states that Dalit literature's women writers address their narratives to reconstructing Dalits' autobiographies. According to Rege, their writing helps present the suppressed and misrepresented history. Bama's *Karukku* serves as an example of how the author connects her personal story with the experience of her whole caste.

Gopal Guru points out that Dalit women face discrimination from both sexes. Their position in the hierarchy is lower than that of Dalit men, although they are also mistreated by upper-caste men. Guru's opinion can be applicable to the central topic of Bama's writing.

Susie Tharu and K. Satyanarayana note that Dalit literature does not depict Indian villages in an idealized manner. Unlike other Indian writers Dalit writers show the village as a place where terrible things happen because of caste.

Anand Teltumbde says that the caste issue still affects people's ability to get things they need get an education and have power. Dalit writers and the caste issue are very important to understand what is going on. The author and Dalit writers want to make people aware of the caste issue and try to make a change. The author explains the persistence of the caste system despite its abolition according to the constitution.

Teltumbde's viewpoint can be applied to the central conflict in *Vanmam*. The story demonstrates the protagonist's struggle for her rights, which continues to be relevant today. Many researchers have analysed the themes of feminism and caste discrimination in Bama's works.

According to scholars, the author develops the idea of women's oppression in Indian society. Although many feminist writers address this problem, Bama introduces the notion of caste discrimination, which marginalizes the lower caste even further.

It is necessary to compare the narrative of *Karukku* and *Vanmam* since previous scholars' articles focus on separate stories. The current research will address the similarities and differences between the two short stories in terms of the themes of suppression and resistance.

The present study will utilize the theories and concepts of Dalit feminism, intersectionality, Ambedkarite thought, and subaltern studies to discuss the representations of oppression in Bama's *Karukku* and *Vanmam*. Each of these theoretical frameworks allows the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the various aspects of Dalit women's oppression.

Dalit feminism developed as a response to the neglect of the Dalit community's specific situation by Indian feminism and the feminine perspective by the Dalit movement. Indian feminism failed to acknowledge the caste discrimination as a crucial element of women's oppression. At the same time, the Dalit movement attempted to address the issue of caste inequality but remained blind to the gender-based discrimination experienced by Dalit women. The ideology of Dalit feminism claims that Dalit women are subjected to a severe and particular form of double oppression, which is manifested in their status as the lowest caste, the subordinate gender, and the disadvantaged class. According to Sharmila Rege, the discrimination experienced by Dalit women in India is evident in the intersection of gender, caste, class, religion, and labour. Moreover, she highlights that Dalit women's voices give an alternative epistemology, which has been neglected by traditional Indian literature and feminism.

The theory of intersectionality helps to understand how different dimensions of social inequality intertwine to form unique types of oppression experienced by subaltern groups. Intersectionality acknowledges that one's gender, race, caste, class, and other social categories cannot be addressed isolated from each other. When applied to the analysis of Bama's writing, intersectionality helps identify that Dalit women are doubly oppressed because they belong to the lower caste and suffer from gender discrimination.

It becomes evident that Dalit women differ from upper-caste women in terms of their social status, educational opportunities, and financial independence. Additionally, Dalit women are also different from Dalit men because they experience double subordination.

The perspective of Ambedkarite thought is essential to analyse the role of the caste system as a particular form of social oppression. Ambedkar's ideology is focused on the Dalit community's liberation from the exploitation imposed on them by the higher castes. He

promotes education, organization, and protest as the ways to achieve social change and end the centuries-old oppression.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern is useful in the analysis of Bama's creative heritage because it explains how the lower classes and castes were traditionally oppressed in India. Spivak states that the subaltern groups were not only deprived of rights but also unable to express their views because the dominant groups held all power and authority. However, Bama's literature gives voice to the voiceless and empowers the suppressed Dalit community. Thus, the themes of suppression and empowerment are also crucial for the analysis of Bama's books.

The oppression of the Dalit community is not limited to economic and social exploitation but also manifests in various forms of cultural discrimination. Bama's writings aim to expose how the subaltern groups are treated in society, which promotes social change and equality. The next paragraphs of this paper will provide a detailed literary analysis of the Dalit experience depicted in *Karukku* and *Vanmam* focusing on the themes of caste, class, creed, gender, education, identity, and protest.

Published in 1992, *Karukku* is a significant contribution to Tamil Dalit literature. Nothing like several more autobiographies, she reveals how caste discrimination, gender inequality, and economic exploitation dominate the life of Dalits and how these evils are interconnected.

The most prominent feature of *Karukku* is the theme of caste discrimination. From her childhood, the author notices that people are treated differently according to their caste. In one of the most memorable episodes, Bama recalls how she laughed at an upper-caste man carrying food on a string, but later she realizes that this was the manifestation of untouchability. This and many other examples help the author understand that caste discrimination is the primary source of the problem.

Even education, which is supposed to uplift the oppressed, is contaminated with casteism. Bama faces discrimination from her teachers and classmates but she does not allow it to affect her studies. Education is portrayed as a weapon against casteism and social equality,

and thus, the author emphasises the value of education. She also quotes Ambedkar, referring to the critical role of education in the empowerment of the Dalits.

Another crucial theme of the autobiography is gender discrimination. Women in *Karukku* are subject to oppression by both higher castes and men. They have to do heavy fieldwork and household duties, and they are not appreciated for it. Bama depicts the situation of Dalit women as one of the most miserable because they have to work more and be treated as inferior.

It is also important to note that Dalit women are treated worse than upper-caste men. The author shows that gender discrimination is manifested in the domestic sphere, while caste discrimination affects all areas of life. The intersection of gender and caste discrimination creates a better understanding of why Dalits, especially women, are in an extremely low social position. This theme is also connected with economic exploitation.

The economic situation of the Dalits in *Karukku* is also deplorable. The whole family works for a living, but they are not paid enough. The author blames not only capitalists and employers but also the government for not doing enough to improve the working conditions of the oppressed. They work for the same salary as before, and there is no opportunity for advancement. The theme of economic exploitation is closely related to caste discrimination and creates a solid foundation for social inequality.

Despite the fact that Bama had to endure harsh conditions, she never lost hope. The author narrates about her struggles to show that Dalits are not weak and that they have the strength to fight for their rights. The author describes how Dalits are treated worse than anyone else and how they are humiliated by people of the so-called higher castes.

The literary significance of *Karukku* is difficult to be overestimated. The book is not only an autobiography but also a collection of facts and a call for action. Bama lifts the veil of hypocrisy and exposes the truth about the treatment of Dalits. Her words contain a vivid example of how caste discrimination affects all spheres of life.

It is also worth mentioning that *Karukku* is a pioneering work in the field of Indian feminist literature. The author shows that women of the Dalit caste suffer from triple oppression, which is why her work is significant for both feminist and Dalit literature.

The book also contains universal themes and ideas, making it interesting to a wide range of readers.

However, she also says that there is hope because education, community, and equality can help overcome oppression.

The topics presented in *Karukku* are further developed in *Vanmam*, the sequel to this autobiography. If in the first book, Bama focuses mainly on the struggles of Dalits, in *Vanmam*, she turns her attention to the conflicts within the oppressed community.

Published in 2002, *Vanmam* (“Vendetta” or “Hostility”) is Bama’s revengeful novel. Unlike *Karukku*, which is Bama’s autobiographical story about caste discrimination, *Vanmam* focuses on the treatment of a group of Scheduled Caste people as a whole. *Vanmam* depicts the feud between two Dalit subcastes, Pallars and Parayars, and explains how the upper caste manipulates the conflict to profit from it. It demonstrates that the suppressed caste group’s internal struggles authorize the domination of more powerful groups.

Vanmam differs from the story of the upper caste and its relationship with the Dalits. In *Vanmam*, the conflict between two oppressed castes depicts the social issues of economic rivalry, political corruption, historical oppression, and social inequality. These factors contribute to the hostility between the groups of scheduled castes and explain how social discrimination affects the lives of poor people. *Vanmam* summons Dalits to peace, mutual understanding, and resistance to suppression.

One of the major themes in *Vanmam* is the conflict between Pallar and Parayar, two oppressed caste communities. Despite being of similar status in the society, the two groups are ruled by prejudices and local conflicts. Bama demonstrates the ways in which the powerful foster and manipulates the conflict between oppressed castes to maintain their dominance.

The author demonstrates how little conflicts and misunderstandings can cause disastrous riots if they are not resolved. The tension between Parayar and Pallar is caused by rumours,

political intrigues, and economic competition. In other words, there is a continuous struggle between the oppressed at different levels. The hostility between lower castes distracts them from addressing the real issue: the top caste's exploitation and the need for resistance. This theme highlights the author's view on social justice and equality. Bama seems to suggest that harmony between the oppressed is necessary to overcome exploitation and achieve true equality. Her message helps to understand what happens to caste communities ruled by prejudice and suppression. *Vanmam* deconstructs the relationship between the oppressed and the ones who exploit them from another angle – the perspective of those who have been struggling for a long time.

In *Vanmam*, the issue of caste discrimination is inextricably linked with economic injustice. The characters of the Dalit community are forced into agricultural labour and have limited access to resources and opportunities such as education. They have very little choice but to rely on the mercy of the landowners who exploit their labour.

Bama shows that poverty is intrinsically linked to discrimination on the basis of caste. The disparity between different social classes makes it impossible to eradicate years of oppression and injustice simply by outlawing them. Class discrimination and economic inequality are factors that exacerbate caste discrimination.

Additionally, the conflict caused by the lack of resources leads to resentment between members of different oppressed castes. Instead of questioning the right of landowners to employ agricultural labourers, poor people fight each other for the opportunity to work for those who do not work for them. By highlighting the competition among poor labourers for jobs, Bama shows that economic inequality must also be combated.

Violence plays a significant role in *Vanmam*. However, Bama goes beyond the physical aspects of violence and its impact on individuals. The author tries to expose the consequences of violence as a heinous act that has adverse effects on the families and the community at large.

The conflict causes chaos, family breakdown, and financial instability. Violence is also a hindrance to harmony and peace within the community. The fact that the author is able to

bring out the effects of violence on the community is a reflection of her understanding of the situation back home.

It is a common occurrence that the oppressed communities continue to be divided against themselves thus giving power to the oppressors. Bama is able to highlight this aspect of violence being used to divide people hence disadvantaging them from within.

In addition, she shows that the conflict brings out the importance of unity and cooperation in communities which is what is required to bring them to higher levels of development. Instead of advocating for vengeance against their oppressors, the author calls for an end to violence as the next step towards development.

Although *Vanmam* mainly deals with communal conflicts, it continues exploring the theme of women's life as Bama starts depicting the role of Dalit women in families. Despite the ongoing caste conflicts and insecurity, they perform their daily duties, such as working on farms and bringing up children, to keep families together and help overcome caste barriers.

Women are also portrayed as silent sufferings from communal violence as men usually act violently on both sides of the conflicts. However, they are not indifferent to the caste clashes, as they feel insecure and experience economic problems resulting from the tensions. By doing so, Bama highlights gender inequalities women suffer even within their own community. At the same time, women are active promoters of peace and reconciliation, balancing the narrative of caste conflicts. Portraying women's desire to maintain the well-being of their families, Bama appeals to universal values, such as peace, mutual support, and love, and depict communal disputes as an unsustainable source of tensions and caste barriers.

Education plays an essential role in *Vanmam* as well, although it is less prominent compared to *Karukku*. Bama indicates that education can contribute to empowerment in double meaning – intellectual and political.

An educated group of people can recognize the mechanisms of oppression and not be easily misguided by political rhetoric.

Political awareness is extremely important, as the novel shows how local leaders and elites can use people's superstitions to maintain power and authority. So, the uneducated can be misled, but those with knowledge and critical thinking skills can change society for the better. *Vanmam* points out the value of education and empowerment via political involvement and awareness.

Moreover, active participation should be directed toward collective action instead of individual achievements. The oppressed community should not be silent spectators of the oppression of their community but stand for their rights and unite. This message is one of the most vital aspects of *Vanmam* that showcases Bama's view on Dalit literature and empowerment.

A significant theme that stands out in *Vanmam* is the idea of reconciliation. Although the novel is characterized by conflicts, Bama does not promote hatred as a way of attaining justice. He emphasizes that it's time for communities to come together, to expose the bias and re-establish dignity for the oppressed.

Reconciliation does not mean forgetting or tolerating injustices. It means that those who have been wronged must see their common problems and work for equality. This theme is not common in many stories that talk about oppression and revenge. People who are marginalized need to know that their social status is the reason for their problems. When the oppressed understand this, they can come together and form a powerful force to challenge the dominant groups. To summarize, the author makes it clear that resistance must not be individual but democratic.

From a literary perspective, *Vanmam* develops the themes of Dalit literature in that it addresses internal social conflicts without eliminating the context of external caste oppression. Bama shows impressive mastery of her craft as she manages to present the issue not as a confrontation of good and evil but as a complex social phenomenon.

Also, the book reveals the theme of intersectionality, as it demonstrates how caste, class, gender, politics and economy intersect in people's lives. In this regard, the author invites the reader to look beyond oppression and to consider the importance of solidarity, mutual aid, social activism and political empowerment. Finally, *Vanmam* reinforces the central message

and strengthens the impact of *Karukku* as it elaborates on the theme of caste conflict to examine the necessity of overcoming social divisions through education and collective action. The book discusses issues of caste, class, gender and peacebuilding, contributing to an understanding of social fragmentation and how it can be overcome.

Bama's *Karukku* and *Vanmam* are both remarkable pieces of Dalit literature that reveal the inner world of the oppressed caste and symbolize their path to dignity and equality. Although the two novels are different in many ways, they have unique similarities and complement each other. *Vanmam* represents a more complex and realistic picture of the caste system than *Karukku* because it shows not only the Dalits' suffering and struggles but also their conflicts and internal divisions. The two novels help understand what oppression is, how the exploited caste suffers, and how they can resist.

In both *Karukku* and *Vanmam*, Bama shows that caste discrimination is an integral part of the social system and manifests itself in all areas of life. However, the two novels differ in what aspects of oppression they focus on. *Karukku* is a narrative of the author's own experiences, and it describes how she suffered under the caste system. *Vanmam*, in turn, shows the confrontations between the oppressed castes and describes in detail the social and political struggles of the Dalits.

Karukku is a book that talks about what the author went through. It shows how the author was affected by the caste system. The main character in *Karukku* is a girl. This girl is treated badly by people from the upper caste. They harass her. Make her feel worthless. When you read *Karukku* you see what life is like for the Dalits. You see the problems they have to deal with. The girl in *Karukku* is shocked that people from the caste get to choose who can work for them and who cannot. The caste system is very unfair, to the Dalits. The author of *Karukku* wants people to know what the Dalits go through.

Bama shows the injustice of the caste system, which dictates what work is suitable for a person depending on their caste. The novel reveals the social and economic inequality of the Dalits, which is reflected in their living conditions and the way they are treated by other people.

Vanmam: The Struggle Against the Oppressor In contrast to *Karukku*, the novel depicts not only the suffering of the Dalits but also their internal struggles. The Pallars and Parayars, two oppressed castes, fought with each other instead of fighting the oppressors.

Another similarity between the two novels is that they depict the injustice of the class system and the exploitation of the Dalits. In *Karukku*, the girl sees how the people of her caste are treated unfairly and suffers from the injustice done to them. The protagonist's father is also a victim of the oppressive caste system and is forced to work for the oppressors. *Vanmam* reveals the same injustice and shows that the economic oppression of the Dalits is the reason for their suffering and internal struggles. The Pallars and Parayars, two subjugated castes, clashed with each other instead of combating to oppressors.

Bama's novels also show the historical injustice and inequality of the caste system, which were especially strong in religious practices. *Karukku* describes in detail the relationship between the upper and lower castes in the Christian community. Bama shows that the Christian upper caste does not consider itself equal to the lower caste and discriminates against them. The author criticizes the Christian ideology that the upper caste is God's chosen people, while the lower one is sinful and must suffer. It is interesting that Bama did not write this novel as a religious text but as a human one. She criticizes the concept of the supremacy of the upper caste and shows that it is wrong both historically and currently.

Although religion is not a central theme in *Vanmam*, the novel reflects the ideas expressed in *Karukku*. *Vanmam* shows that social inequality and the suppression of the oppressed castes are also manifested in the behaviour of the oppressed themselves.

Bama shows that Dalit women are forced to work, while their work is not valued. In addition, the novel shows that women are often harassed and humiliated. Bama did not write this novel to evoke sympathy for the oppressed caste but to show how the upper caste was disrespectful and rude to the Dalits. Women in *Karukku* are portrayed as strong people who fight against the oppression of their caste. In *Vanmam*, women are also strong and endure the violence of the oppressors. Bama shows that female genital mutilation and female circumcision are the reasons for women's suffering.

Karukku shows that education can liberate the oppressed caste from the oppression of the upper caste. The concepts of identity and resistance are also reflected in the two novels. In *Karukku*, the author talks about finding an identity and shows how cruelly the Dalits were treated. The novel also describes the author's personal experiences of being humiliated and harassed.

The theme of resistance and liberation is really important in both novels. Resistance is, like a way of saying no to the things that have been done to the Dalit people as we see in *Karukku*. *Karukku* shows us that resistance is a way to protest against the wrongs done to the Dalits. The author writes about the strength of the oppressed caste and how they resist the upper caste. *Vanmam* shows that resistance is also a form of protest, but it is not enough. The novel depicts the long and difficult struggle of the Dalits for their rights.

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