

The Role of Education in Resisting Caste Hegemony: A Thematic Study of Bama's Autobiographical Fiction

***Mr. Bhagwant Rao Nandeshwar**

Research Scholar

Department of English & Foreign Languages

IGNTU, Amarkantak, M.P., Pin Code- 484887

****Dr. Rituraj Trivedi**

Assistant Professor

Department of English & Foreign Languages

IGNTU, Amarkantak, M.P., Pin Code- 484887

Abstract

This paper examines how education can serve as a powerful form of resistance against caste-based oppression, focusing on Bama's autobiographical works, *Karukku* (1992) and *Sangati* (1994). As a Dalit Christian woman, Bama writes from a position of extreme marginalisation, yet it is a critique, informed by sensitive ethnic solidarity, dialectically considered and of the most subtle appreciation of caste, class, gender, and religion. Her story is a positive example shows that education is not just about getting good marks but about the process one takes towards self-awareness, empowerment, and collective liberation.

Using a close reading of *Karukku* and *Sangati*, this paper explores that Bama represents how education act as a double-edged sword. it has been used against subjugated by the dominant castes and used as an instrument of perpetuating social injustices. But it can also be reclaimed by the Marginalized as a site of self-assertion and empowerment. Similar to Paulo Freire's concept of education as a practice of freedom, this paper explores Bama's advancement from facing caste-based inferiority to using literacy for resistance, self-representation dignity and justice.

The study also engages with the work of Dalit scholars, such as Gopal Guru, emphasising the need to centre Dalit voices in discussions on social progress. Bama challenges savarna educational structures as they stigmatize Dalit knowledge system and identity. but she redefines education as inseparable from dignity, self respect and social justice. Her work specially exposes the fact that even with constitutional safeguards, how caste discrimination persists even within religious and teaching institutions. It reveals the limitations of formal education how it is far away from emancipatory ideals.

Ultimately, Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati* offers education not just only as a upward mobility but as a radical, liberating force. That makes one capable of tearing down caste hierarchies and patriarchal norms.

Keywords: Resistance, Caste, Class, Gender, Hegemony, Role of Education, Marginalization, Subjugation, Gender Patriarchy, Invisible Untouchability, Alienation, self-representation, Dignity and Justice.

Introduction

Education, often considered an opportunity to change in life towards empowerment and mobility, has been historically denied or made inaccessible to Dalits by various processes of exclusion, stigma and systemic discrimination. In this context, education stands as a Janus-faced phenomenon which can either reinforce the inequalities inherent in the caste system or emerge as an important instrument of struggle and liberation when appropriated by the oppressed.

This paper analyses the contribution of education in contestation of caste hegemony under the rubric of Bama's autobiographical fiction focusing mostly on her seminal works *Karukku* (1992) and *Sangati* (1994). *The Power to Refuse* by Bama "Bama, a devout Tamil Dalit Christian, writes both a deeply personal and a passionately political narrative about caste, gender and religion. Her work is evidence of how a marginalized voice challenges hegemonic stories and redefines education on the side of the oppressed. The first ever autobiography written by a Dalit woman in Tamil literature, the book questions the hegemonic savarna educational systems and exposes the prejudiced practices at work even in religion and institutions that ostensibly promote equality. As well *Sangati* recounts the stories of the pathetic condition of women due to lack of education and money as seen and experienced by the narrator.

Karukku is not a narrative of personal suffering, it is a critical discourse of resistance which education bears witness to the story of Bama — from an inquisitive girl who experienced the humiliations of everyday caste to a self-conscious writer and educator — is a testament to the transformative potential of critical consciousness. Building on Paulo Freire's concept of education as a "practice of freedom," this paper argues that Bama's narrative embodies a Dalit feminist pedagogy that challenges the ideological foundations of caste oppression (Freire, 72). This is an example that illustrates how real education is not simply the formal education that her students could receive but also a political education that would transform a social conscience that would defy the powers of oppression.

The paper also places Bama's story in the wider context of Dalit literature and challenge, drawing on the work of scholars like Gopal Guru, , who emphasize the epistemic significance of Dalit voices in redefining the parameters of Indian modernity (Guru, 2548). Bama's writing demonstrates that the mainstream institutions of education are unable to be inclusive, hierarchically-equitable spaces; it exposes the working of caste hegemony through language, curriculum, authority, and peer-correlations. Nevertheless, her story also suggests that education, if reimagined and reclaimed, can be a radical act of self-assertion and collective empowerment.

Through an analysis of Bama's autobiographical fiction, this essay seeks to illuminate how education can function as a site of subjugation and as a site of liberation. It examines her life experiences revealing the structural impositions facing Dalits in and around educational institutions and how she mobilises these experiences as a dynamic critique of caste society. In this perspective, Bama's *Karukku* is not simply a personal narrative, but a piece of political writing that urges readers to reconsider the nexus between knowledge, power, and social justice.

Understanding Caste Hegemony in India through Bama's Novels *Karukku* and *Sangati*

Caste system is deeply rooted in India. It affects the every possible aspects in every individual's life in India, from education, employment to social freedom and dignity. Although Indian constitution abolished untouchability. But exclusion and discrimination based on caste pervades in both public and private spaces. In this context, Bama's novels *Karukku* (1992) and *Sangati* (1994) presents a grounded reality of this system.

Bama's *Karukku* presents narrative of her personal upliftment from facing humiliation every day, due to caste, to a deviant woman who challenges oppressions and marginalization caused from caste system. She presents her lived experiences, since other historical narrative has been silenced or distorted by dominant class. Bama recalls, the caste-based inequality, even in the Christian missionary school system, which apparently preaches equality, she writes:

"When I was studying in the third class, I hadn't yet heard people speak openly of untouchability. But I had already seen, felt, experienced and been humiliated by what it is." (Bama, *Karukku*, p. 11).

Such incidents give insights of caste hegemony in spaces that claim to be progressive or egalitarian.

While *Sangati* offers collective narrative that documents the lives of Dalit women in her society. Through a series of short stories, Bama narrates, how caste and gender oppression shape the lives of Dalit women. The text exposes the normalized violence, that is physical, emotional, and economic, that Dalit women endure due to upper class and Dalit men. Yet, *Sangati* is also a celebration of female strength, solidarity, and resistance. Bama writes:

"I have a little education; I earn a living, and stand on my own two feet. But when I think of the women from my community who can't tell 'a' [the first letter] from 'aa' [the second letter of the Tamil script] and bend low to receive endless blows at home and at work, I am filled with frustration." (Bama, *Sangati*, p. 122).

In this manner, *Sangati* challenges the victim narrative frequently assigned to Dalit women and emphasizes their strength amid systemic oppression.

The scholars like Gopal Guru and Kancha Illaiah enlightens the concept of caste hegemony, gives account of how dominant class institutionalized caste-based inferiority in oppressed. In an essay Guru says:

“Dalit women’s claim to “talk differently” assumes certain positions. It assumes that the social location of the speaker will be more or less stable; therefore, “talking differently” can be treated as genuinely representative. This makes the claim of Dalit woman to speak on behalf of Dalit women automatically valid. In doing so, the phenomenon of “talking differently” foregrounds the identity of Dalit women.” (Guru, Dalit Women Talk Differently, p. 2549).

Education as a Tool for Social Changes in Bama’s Novels Karukku and Sangati

Despite of constitutional provisions, caste hierarchies continues in the society. So here education stands as a remarkable tool for the social transformation for Dalit communities, there is still a struggle to get education. It's a gate to liberty. Bama in her works Karukku (1992) and Sangati (1994). gives pitiful account of her transformational journey, from a dalit christian girl to an educated teacher, her early incidents presents, how she faced degrading treatment by teachers and peers, she writes:

"Because we are born into the Paraya jati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that." (Bama, Karukku, p. 27).

Even with these humiliations, Bama continues to persue her education, acknowledging it's potential to transform her life and communities fate as well.

in Karukku, Education is just not only a catalyst for critical thinking, but also a tool for personal upliftment, her exposure to education gives her power to identify the contradictions between Christian teachings of equality and caste practices within their institutions. This radical realization leads her to choose activism over conformity, as she leaves the convent school where she served as a Nun, and returns to her community to teach the oppressed Dalit children. This decision reflects Paulo Freire’s theory of critical pedagogy, where education becomes a “practice of freedom” that allows the oppressed to:

“For the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive reality as something which can be transformed, rather than merely as a closed world in which they are caught. That perception is a necessary but not sufficient condition for liberation; it must become the motivating force for liberating action.” (Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, p. 35).

In Sangati, Bama shifts her perspective from her personal experience to those of dalit women in her village. Text in this novel emphasizes lack of knowledge blocking them to move forward, and solely responsible for poignant conditions of them. here text also emphasizes role of informal, oral shared experience as a site of resistance. most of dalit girl denied from formal education due to poverty, early marriage, domestic labour and

cheap field labour as well. Still, they possess deep knowledge about surroundings, they were factually aware of it:

“It is we who must uphold our rights. We must stand up for ourselves and declare that we too are human beings like everyone else. If we believe that someone else is going to come and uplift us, then we are doomed to remain where we are, forever.” (Bama, Sangati, p. 66).

According to Bama Education is not merely a schooling, but tool of liberation tied with self-respect and social justice. she advocates for formal education in dignified way to break the cycle of caste and gender subjugation. she recalls a incident where her cousin Annan says:

“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, p. 27).

Also, Bama rejects the old savarn notion, according to her education doesn't imply assimilation into dominant culture, she envision education rooted in own mother tounge, her use of spoken tamil incorporate this fact. As Susie Tharu and K. Lalita note, Dalit women's writing often redefines education by asserting lived experience as a legitimate and powerful form of knowledge. (Tharu and Lalita, xxiii).

Resistance and Assertion through Bama's Narrative: Comparison with Omprakash Valmiki and Urmila Pawar

In India, Dalit literature spring up as a powerful medium for resisting and reclaiming identity. It challenges the oppressive structures of caste, gender and class. Some of the most appealing voices among them are of Bama, Omprakash Valmiki and Urmila Pawar. Who lay ahead their lived experience of caste-based exclusion to assert their voices. Their autobiographies Bama's Karukku (1992), Valmiki's Joothan (1997), and Pawar's The Weave of My Life (2003), not only gives account of violence of caste but also reflect their struggle for dignity, education and social justice. This paper presents how Bama's strategies of resistance corresponds with those of Valmiki and Pawar, highlighting their shared experiences and different approaches shaped by gender, geography and communiy contexts.

Bama's *Karukku* put forward a searing critique of prejudice in caste within both secular and religious institutions. As a Tamil Dalit Christian woman, Bama suffers multiple layers of marginality. Her narrative focuses on the emotional and psychological trauma caused due to caste-based insults, particularly in educational and religious places. She remembers being competent enough but still be treated as inferior in school and in the Catholic convent where she served as a nun:

“But I felt a burning anger when I saw that all the menial jobs there were done by Dalits who were abused all the time and treated in a shameful and degrading way.” (Bama, Karukku, p. 35).

Her resistance lies in leaving the convent school as a teacher, where these malpractices are going on and returning to her community to educate and empower them. she writes in spoken Tamil instead of standard Tamil and gives strong first-person voice.

Joothan by Omprakash Valmiki too shows the fight of a Dalit boy living in a north Indian village. His name of autobiography itself refers to leftover food represents the degradation of Dalits, who are often forced to eat scraps left over from upper-caste homes. Valmiki graphically portrays how Dalits were consigned to menial work and subjected to systemic discrimination:

“One day, Headmaster Kaliram ... asked for my name ... then asked me to make a broom ... and clean the school like glass. After cleaning the classrooms and the corridors ... he was asked to clean the field also. ‘The field was bigger than my existence; the dust had covered my face and head and had entered inside my mouth.’ (Valmiki, Joothan, p. 5).

Similar to Bama, Valmiki sees education as a terrain of exclusion as well as empowerment. Teachers beat him for even dreaming of equality, but he persevered, going on to become a writer and activist. Where Bama focuses on hypocrisies of religion and gendered oppressions, Valmiki's writing is shaped by brutal manual work and rural caste hierarchies.

The Weave of My Life of Urmila Pawar as well presents a feminist perspective of Dalit autobiography. Pawar, who is a Marathi writer and Ambedkarite Buddhist, writes about converting to Buddhism, getting involved in the women's movement, and eventually becoming political activist. Like Bama, she is interested in the intersection between caste and gender, but her story privileges the collective struggle over the possibility of transformation through activism.

“For these Dalit women, who were also silenced by the authority of patriarchy, to make a public use of speech was at the time truly revolutionary.” (Pawar, The Weave of My Life, p. 18).

Her resistance has taken the shape through education, community mobilization and writing her resistance stories that asserts a Dalit women's intellectual and emotional strength.

What they have in common is an insistence on asserting themselves through stories. As Gopal Guru argues, Dalit autobiographies function as counter-discourses that challenge dominant caste epistemologies (Guru, 2549). Both writers validate their own experience in the face of a culture and historical erasure. Their works are not just of suffering, but of endurance, of resilience, and of the production of other systems of value based on justice and equality.

resistance comes in all shapes and sizes. Bama privileges faith, emotion, and gendered suffering, while Valmiki focuses on physical labour and caste violence in Hindu society. Pawar mixes his autobiography with a social analysis, asserting the crucial need of feminist politics to the Dalit movement. Such differences enhance Dalit literature by demonstrating the diversity of Dalit identities and modes of resistance. Their autobiographies are not only works of literature but moments of resistance that dare to challenge systems of power, restore lost or erased narratives and provoke collective will and effort towards an egalitarian community.

Implications for Modern Education Policy: Lessons from Marginalization and Resistance in Bama's Novels

Even as Indian education is constitutionally committed with notions of equality. For long it has remained a vehicle for the reproduction of Caste, Class and Gender hierarchies. Despite affirmative-action opening up access, providing mid-day meal, gaining a quality education for the historically underprivileged, the Dalits in particular, continues to be riddled with structural impediments. The works of Bama, a Dalit Christian writer who writes in Tamil, are particularly significant in this context. Karukku (1992) and Sangati (1994), two of her autobiographical works take up the experiences of caste prejudice in educational contexts and propose new nodes of counter-inscription. These are not just personal testimonies, but critical interventions that compel us to reflect on the limitations of the Indian system that exclude and make complementary interventions towards inclusive pedagogy.

In her book Karukku, Bama narrates the humiliations she faced both in being a student as also a teacher in institutions that professed openly egalitarian values, but practiced hidden caste hierarchy. Instances where Dalit students have been separated in classrooms and their notebooks stigmatised indicate that “invisible untouchability” is yet to be a thing of the past. These are the kind of experiences that show how schools reproduce — not ameliorate — larger social inequities. Citing such evidences, however, scholars such as Nambissan emphasize a version of the familiar argument that Dalit children continually face lowered expectations and discreet forms of exclusion which undermine the assumption that education is intrinsically liberatory. Bama's witness then demands a further gesture than token inclusion and the challenging of systemic casteism in pedagogy, curricula, and institutional culture.

This analysis is carried forward in her second work, Sangati, which draws attention to the shared deprivations of Dalit women, informal forms of education via recited traditions, narratives, the community. These types of understandings, frequently delegitimized in mainstream educational literature, are a means of resistance and political consciousness for subaltern communities. The story highlights the importance of incorporating Dalit histories/epistemologies in the curricula to help legitimate the voices on the margin. And it also draws attention to the intersectional disadvantages of Dalit girls, majority of whom are deprived of uninterrupted education on account of being engaged in domestic work, early marriage or gender-based violence. These stories call for

policy interventions — targeted scholarships, health and counseling services, safe school environments that clearly protect dignity and windows of opportunity.

“Even though the white priests offered them a free education, the small children refused to go to school. They all went off and took up any small job they could get. At least the boys went for a short while before they stopped school. The girls didn't even do that much. They had enough to do at home anyway, carrying the babies around and doing the housework. My mother at least studied up to the fifth class. My Perimma didn't know anything.” (Bama, Sangati, p. 5)

Just as important is Bama's choice to write in spoken Tamil, which defies Brahmanical norms of what is deemed literary, and demands the preservation and promotion of the mother-tongue, the basis of education. This resonates with the NEP 2020 stress on multilingualism, though Bama's work warns that linguistic inclusivity should be based on social justice. In the end, her texts are not only literary documents, but pedagogical templates. They show how education, once divested of caste privilege and reconceptualized from the lens of critical pedagogy, can be a practice of freedom in Freirean terms—enabling the oppressed to question, resist, and transform the very structures that make them marginalized. As in Introduction to Karukku by Lakshmi Holmstrom:

“Bama is doing something completely new in using the demotic and the colloquial regularly, as her medium for narration and even argument, not simply for reported speech. She uses a Dalit style of language which overturns the decorum and aesthetics of received upper-class, upper-caste Tamil. She breaks the rules of written grammar and spelling throughout, elides words and joins them differently, demanding a new and different pattern of reading.” (Lakshmi Holmstrom, Introduction to Karukku, p. 9)

Conclusion

An analysis of Bama's Karukku (1992) and Sangati (1994) illustrates the ambivalent nature of education in caste society. It is a location of exclusion while also a resource for empowerment. Bama's autobiographical voice foregrounds the crossroads of caste, gender and religion and exposes how schools, convents and religious institutions mirror larger hierarchies. The classroom and school, supposedly neutral educational spaces, instead reproduce systemic discrimination, as Dalit students are labeled as inferior and deprived of dignity. These experiences point to the inadequacy of mere access to education without the parallel processes of ideological and structural change that confront and confrontationalise privilege in curriculum, pedagogy and the institution.

But Bama's story refuses to succumb to reductive victim status by converting educational alienation to one of empowerment. In choosing to leave the convent, to refuse to be part of an institution that shut her down, she chooses education as collective liberation over education as passive assimilation. It is the literal instance of Paulo Freire's idea that education should be approached as a “practice of freedom”: the lesson is more than content—more than learning—but how to not just understand but reenvision and remake your world. In

Sangati, Bama works to extend this critique by privileging Dalit women's collectivity and by foregrounding informal and oral modes of knowledge that affirm dignity, resistance, and a consciousness apart from elite academic discourses.

In the end, her work signifies towards an egalitarian pedagogy of inclusion, cultural recognition and caste hegemony resistance. Through a focus on lived experience, regional languages and critical reflection, Bama enunciates an epistemology that subverts powerful configurations of knowledge. Her narrations are therefore both critique and blueprint, that is, a call for an education system that is socially engaged, anti-caste, and transformative from the base.

References

Bama. *Karukku*. Translated by Lakshmi Holmström, Oxford University Press, 2000.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum, 1970.

Guru, Gopal. "Dalit Women Talk Differently." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 35, No. 41/42, 1995, pp. 2548–2550.

Ambedkar, B. R. *Annihilation of Caste*. Navayana, 2014.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos, Continuum, 1970.

Bama. *Sangati*. Translated by Lakshmi Holmström, Oxford University Press, 2005.

Tharu, Susie, and K. Lalita, editors. *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*. Vol. 2, Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1993.

Valmiki, Omprakash. *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*. Translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, Samya, 2003.

Pawar, Urmila. *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*. Translated by Maya Pandit, Columbia University Press, 2008.

Nambissan, Geetha B. "Social Exclusion, Classroom Practices and the Education of Dalit Children." *Indian Journal of Social Development*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2006, pp. 293–308.

D Swamy, Premila, "Meena Kandasamy as a Dalit Feminist Activist: A Study with Reference to Select Poetry". *Sahityasetu: A Peer Reviewed Literary e-journal*, Issue 6, Continuous Issue 66, November - December 2021, <https://www.sahityasetu.co.in/issue66/premila.html> Accessed 13 Aug. 2025

Patva, Durga. "Bama's Sangati: A Study of Dalit Women's Hardship". *Boloji.com*.

<https://www.boloji.com/articles/49110/bamas-sangati-a-study-of-dalit-womens-hardship> Accessed 13 Aug. 2025

<https://en.themooknayak.com/dalit-news/homage-to-omprakash-valmiki-and-his-resonating-legacy-through-joothan> Accessed 13 Aug. 2025

Nayar, K Pramod. Bama's Karukku: Dalit Autobiography as Testimonio, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Sage Publications, 2006 Vol 41(2): 83–100. DOI: 10.1177/ 0021989406065773

Tomar, R. Dalit feminism: A transformation of Rejection into Resistance. *The Criterion. An International Journal in English*, volume. 4, no. 12, p. 1-8, 2013.

Rege, Sharmila. "Real Feminism" and Dalit Women', *Economic&Political Weekly*. (5-11 February, 2000).