

## From Margins to Academia: Narratives of Womanhood and Educational Access with Reference to Bama's *Karukku*

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### Abstract

This paper examines the complex relationship between womanhood, marginality, and access to education through a detailed analysis of Bama's autobiographical work *Karukku*. Within the frameworks of Dalit feminism and intersectionality, the study explores how caste and gender intersect to shape the educational experiences of marginalised women in India. The paper argues that *Karukku* not only documents systemic discrimination within educational and religious institutions but also presents education as a transformative force that fosters resistance, self-realisation, and identity formation. Through a close textual analysis, the study highlights how narratives of marginalised women challenge dominant discourses and demand inclusivity in academic spaces. Ultimately, the paper underscores the importance of integrating such narratives into mainstream academic discourse to create a more equitable educational system.

**Keywords:** Bama, *Karukku*, Womanhood, Educational Access, Dalit Feminism, Intersectionality, Marginality, Resistance, Identity

### Introduction

Education is widely recognised as a powerful instrument of social transformation, offering individuals the opportunity to transcend socio-economic limitations and achieve empowerment. However, access to education is not equally distributed across different social groups. In India, deeply entrenched structures of caste and patriarchy continue to restrict educational opportunities for marginalised communities, particularly women. The intersection of caste and gender creates a unique set of challenges that shape the experiences of Dalit women in profound ways.

Stories from marginalized women help reveal these problems. They show what it's really like to face exclusion, discrimination, and to be resilient—things often missing from mainstream discussions. *Karukku* by Bama is an important example. First published in Tamil in 1992, it is a key work in Dalit literature and gives a direct, honest look at the author's life as a Dalit Christian woman.

The title *Karukku*, which refers to the serrated edges of palm leaves, symbolises both pain and resilience. The narrative is characterised by its fragmented structure, reflecting the

complexities of lived experience. Through her autobiographical account, Bama critiques social, educational, and religious institutions that perpetuate inequality and marginalisation.

This paper analyses how *Karukku* represents the journey of a marginalised woman navigating the challenges of educational access. It examines how education functions as both a site of oppression and a means of empowerment, and how Bama's narrative contributes to a broader understanding of womanhood and marginality. By situating the text within the frameworks of intersectionality and Dalit feminism, the study aims to highlight the transformative potential of education while also exposing its limitations within an unequal society.

### Objectives of the Study

1. To critically analyse the representation of education in *Karukku*.
2. To examine the intersection of caste and gender in shaping the protagonist's experiences.
3. To explore the role of education in fostering resistance and self-awareness.
4. To understand narrative as a tool for articulating marginalised womanhood.
5. To evaluate the implications of Bama's narrative for inclusive educational practices.

### Theoretical Framework

This study uses the ideas of **intersectionality** and **Dalit feminism**. Intersectionality, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, shows how social categories like race, class, and gender connect and create overlapping discrimination. In India, caste is a key part of identity that, along with gender, shapes the lives of Dalit women.

Dalit feminism questions both mainstream feminism and dominant caste views by focusing on the unique experiences of Dalit women. Scholars like Sharmila Rege highlight how important Dalit women's stories are for understanding caste and gender oppression. This approach fits well for studying *Karukku*, since it centers on a Dalit woman facing many kinds of marginalization.

Paulo Freire's idea of education as a way to achieve freedom also helps us see how education can be transformative in this story. Freire believes education should help people understand their society and question unfair systems.

### Analysis

#### 1. Education as a Site of Exclusion and Discrimination

In *Karukku*, education is shown as both promising and problematic. It offers hope for empowerment, but is also a place where caste discrimination happens again and again. Bama shares her school experiences, where she becomes very aware of her caste and the stigma that comes with it.

Teachers and peers often treat her differently, reinforcing a sense of inferiority. The curriculum itself is disconnected from the realities of marginalised communities, further alienating students like Bama. These experiences highlight how educational institutions, rather than being neutral spaces, are embedded within broader social hierarchies.

The story shows that just having access to education does not mean everyone is treated equally. Even in the classroom, Dalit students face both obvious and hidden discrimination, which makes it hard for them to take part fully in learning.

## 2. Intersection of Caste and Gender

One of the central themes of *Karukku* is the intersection of caste and gender. As a Dalit woman, Bama faces a dual burden of oppression. While caste determines her social position, gender shapes the expectations placed upon her behaviour and aspirations.

The narrative represents how patriarchal norms restrict women's access to education, often prioritising domestic responsibilities over academic pursuits. At the same time, caste-based discrimination limits opportunities and reinforces social boundaries. This intersectional perspective highlights the inadequacy of analysing gender or caste in isolation.

Bama's experiences demonstrate that educational access is not merely a matter of institutional availability but is deeply influenced by social and cultural factors. The interplay of caste and gender creates barriers that are both structural and psychological, affecting the confidence and self-perception of marginalised women.

## 3. Awakening and Critical Consciousness

Despite the challenges she faces, education plays a crucial role in Bama's intellectual and emotional development. Through her engagement with literature and learning, she begins to question the injustices she encounters—this process of questioning marks the emergence of critical consciousness.

Education helps Bama see that what she goes through is not just her own problem but part of a bigger system of oppression. This realisation changes her, moving her from just accepting things to actively resisting them. The narrative thus shows how important education is for building awareness and critical thinking.

However, this awakening is not without conflict. As Bama becomes more aware of social injustices, she also becomes more disillusioned with the institutions that perpetuate them. This tension between awareness and disillusionment recurs throughout the narrative.

## 4. Narrative as a Form of Resistance

The act of writing *Karukku* itself is a powerful form of resistance. By sharing her experiences, Bama challenges dominant narratives that marginalise Dalit voices. The text disrupts conventional literary forms, employing a fragmented, nonlinear structure that reflects the complexities of lived experience.

Through her narrative, Bama reclaims her identity and asserts her agency. She refuses to conform to societal expectations and instead creates a space for her voice within the literary and academic landscape. This act of storytelling is both personal and political, highlighting the transformative power of narrative.

The text also serves as a collective voice for marginalised communities, bringing attention to issues that are often ignored or silenced. In this sense, *Karukku* transcends individual experience and becomes a broader commentary on social inequality.

## 5. Transformative Potential of Education

While *Karukku* critiques the limitations of educational institutions, it also highlights the transformative potential of education. For Bama, education becomes a means of achieving self-respect and independence. It enables her to challenge oppressive norms and assert her identity.

The narrative suggests that education, when combined with critical awareness, can serve as a powerful tool for social change. It allows individuals to question authority, resist injustice, and envision alternative possibilities. Bama's journey from a marginalised background to becoming a writer and intellectual exemplifies this transformative potential.

However, the narrative also emphasises that education alone is not sufficient to dismantle systemic inequalities. Structural changes are necessary to create a truly inclusive and equitable educational system.

## 6. Critique of Religious and Academic Institutions

An important aspect of *Karukku* is its critique of religious institutions, particularly the Church. Despite its emphasis on equality and compassion, the Church is depicted as perpetuating caste hierarchies. Bama's disillusionment with the Church reflects a broader critique of institutions that fail to uphold their professed values.

Similarly, academic institutions are criticised for their lack of inclusivity. The absence of representation and the persistence of discriminatory practices create an environment that is often hostile to marginalised individuals. These critiques highlight the need for systemic reform in both religious and educational institutions.

## 7. From Margins to Academia: A Journey of Resilience

The central theme of this paper, 'the journey from margins to academia', is vividly illustrated in *Karukku*. Bama's life story is one of resilience and determination. Despite facing numerous obstacles, she perseveres and uses education as a means of transformation.

Her journey is not linear but is marked by संघर्ष, disillusionment, and self-discovery. It reflects the broader experiences of marginalised women who navigate complex social realities in their pursuit of education. This journey underscores the importance of support systems, representation, and inclusive practices in facilitating access to education.

## Conclusion

*Karukku* is an important book that gives deep insights into how womanhood, marginalization, and access to education connect. Through her story, Bama reveals the deep inequalities faced by marginalized women and also shows how education can help bring change.

The study demonstrates that education is both a site of oppression and a means of empowerment. While it can reproduce social hierarchies, it can also challenge and transform them. The key lies in creating educational environments that are inclusive, equitable, and responsive to the needs of marginalised communities.

Incorporating narratives like *Karukku* into academic discourse is essential for fostering a more nuanced understanding of social inequality. Such narratives not only enrich literary studies but also contribute to broader discussions on education, policy, and social justice. Ultimately, the journey from margins to academia is not just about access but about recognition, dignity, and the right to be heard.

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