Layered Marginalization and Narrative Resistance: An Intersectional Study of *Karukku*

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Abstract
This paper reflects Crenshaw's idea that marginalized subjects can be debarred from manifold political agendas at once and tries to distinguish between the structural and political intersectionality. In Karukku, the writer, Bama unveils the scenario of Dalit women who experiences structural repression that varies from the women belonging to the upper caste and men in Dalit community. Crenshaw's construction of structural and political intersectionality offers a perilous vision to look into the existence of power in terms of caste, gender, religion, and class that can operate the system together in order to mould the existed practice of the Dalit Christian woman. This paper focuses on the delivery of Bama's narratives in an alternative intersectional Dalit feminist consciousness. Caste is not a secluded individuality sign but the strong base determining each and every domain of life like education, labor, religion, and social interaction. Besides, the tale's split form and use of colloquial Tamil function as acts of epistemological struggle, challenging both upper-caste fictional rules and conventional feminist discourse. Eventually, this paper copes with an interpretation of Karukku in par with Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality which helps to understand comprehensively on the subjectivity of Dalit women and as well expands the theory beyond its racial origins. The text puts forth the urge for the subaltern to have a liberation from the clutches of interconnected systems of the society.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Dalit Feminism, Caste, Structural Oppression, Marginalisation.

Such a narrative of the marginalised has historically been homogenized within the remoteness of post-colonial Indian literary studies, where subaltern oppression has often been depicted in a monolithic, single-axis form within the realm of post-colonialism. Sociological and literary discourse as a whole has often tried to separate the experience of human suffering into tidy isolated boxes, breaking subjects down into one atomized narrative based upon caste, class or gender. There is actually a kind of isolation of experience that human experience rarely works in a single direction, and the violence of oppression not only can't be put out as the same, as discrete, but also not separable through mathematics: violence of marginalization is never separable. Kimberlé Crenshaw's pioneering theory of intersectionality offers an essential and necessary theoretical tool for

making sense of how multiple social identities intersect, as individuals are subjected to different forms of oppression and privilege. While Crenshaw originally drew upon this theoretical frame to respond to the unique legal and social erasure of Black women within the American justice system, with Black women being marginalized by both antiracist politics (which historically centered men) and feminist politics (which centered white women), the underlying structure of the framework is equally powerful throughout. Transposed to the Indian experience, intersectionality becomes a tool for analysing the experience of the Dalit woman. Bama's seminal autobiography, Karukku, is a deep primary text for this analysis. The narration reveals the harsh reality of Dalit women, who face very different kinds of structural and political repression than upper-caste women or Dalit men. This interdependence works together to shape the life of the Dalit Christian woman, as we learn from a close reading of Karukku, whose power relations are framed as one of caste, gender, religion, and class. As a text of narrative resistance and epistemological struggle, the text extends Crenshaw's theory well beyond its initial racial provenance.

In order to understand the intricacy of Bama's story, it is necessary to first consider the notion of structural intersectionality specifically examining how the lived material conditions, physical spaces, and daily work of disadvantaged women are influenced by their overlapping identities. In Karukku, a landscape in rural Tamil Nadu, caste is not a remote, elusive identifier of personality; it is the powerful, unwavering axis controlling all aspects of life. Bama is acutely tuned into the spatial and economic segregation of the dominant upper castes from her youth. The geography of her village itself becomes a literal, geographical map of structural intersectionality. She notes this strong separation of living spaces and states, "I don't know how it came about that the upper-caste communities and the lower caste-communities were separated like this into different parts of the village" (Bama 18). The Dalit settlements — the Cheri — are relegated to the very peripheries, separate from schools and the main markets and the upper-caste streets. Bama maintains that her community only went to the upper-caste side "if we had work to do there" and that the upper castes "never, ever, came to our parts" (Bama 18). This spatial division serves as the base layer for the structural repression of the Dalit body.

The structural intersectionality of the Dalit woman's experience shines most clearly in the extreme exploitation of her labour. In Karukku, Dalit women occupy the absolute and suffocating bottom of the socio-economic ladder, acting as the ultimate subalterns. Their bodies are allocated exclusively for gruelling, underpaid manual labor in support of the wealth of the upper-caste Naicker landlords. Bama goes on to elaborate the systemic character of this agricultural exploitation, stating, "More than three quarters of the land in these parts is in the hands of the Naickers. People of our community work for them, each Paraya family attached to a Naicker family, as pannaiyaal, bonded labourers" (Bama 53-54). But this oppression is highly interwoven with extreme class deprivation and a profound patriarchal subjugation. The women bear double the burden that Dalit men and upper caste women endure. They do backbreaking work in the fields, but as Bama plainly points out, "Even if they did the same work, men received one wage, women another. They always paid men more" (Bama 59). The labor of the Dalit woman is essential to the village economy yet is systematically deprived of both human dignity and economic agency.

When these women return from the fields, they do not find sanctuary; instead, they face the brutality of domestic patriarchy, which intensifies their intersectional repression. Men in the Dalit community, deprived of their own dignity and respectability when it comes to the public sphere through upper-caste oppression, often express their wounded masculinity by physically and emotionally assaulting their own women to demonstrate their frustrations. Bama sees it in her own street daily, as this deeply entrenched patriarchy has left a mark on the lives of its men: As seen when a man named Uudan 'every day he'd drag his wife by the hair to the community hall

and beat her up as if she were an animal, with his belt" (Bama 64). So in doing so, Bama uncovers a structural intersectionality in which extreme poverty, the curse of untouchability and gender-based violence all combine to encase Dalit women in a matrix of domination that is not removable. Their battle is thus not just another addition to caste plus gender—it is the qualitative, composite experience of total oppression that strikes on multiple fronts simultaneously.

This structural intersectionality extracts a heavy psychological toll whereby the Dalit subject is systematically compelled to absorb their own degradation. Bama's experience of untouchability is not a theoretical proposition, but is intensely physical and deeply traumatic. She recalls seeing a respected elder from her street carrying a packet of vadai for an upper-caste landlord. The elder had to hold the packet by its string so that his polluting touch did not contaminate the food. "He came along, holding out the packet by its string, without touching it," Bama observes (Bama 25). Her older brother reveals the reality of untouchability to her, and her childhood innocence crumbles into a burning, helpless rage. But the village is structurally in such a position that the older generation has accepted their subjugation as a way of continuing to survive. When Bama asks her grandmother why they submit to such degrading and subhuman treatment, she hears back, "These people are the maharajas who feed us our rice. Without them, how will we survive?" (Bama 26). These tragic realities underscore Crenshaw's claim that structural oppression is sustained not only through physical force or economic deprivation in any context, but through a process of systematic erasure of the subject's self-worth as a marginalized whole. "Because Dalits have been enslaved for generation upon generation, and been told again and again of their degradation, they have come to believe that they are degraded, lacking honour and self-worth," says Bama (Bama 36).

Shifting from its structural and material basis, the life story of Bama stands as a devastating testament to political intersectionality. As Crenshaw contends, political intersectionality occurs when marginalized bodies are debarred from manifold political agendas and institutions simultaneously. In mainstream feminist spaces, the specific struggles of women of color—or Dalit women in the Indian context—are often sidelined by dominant-group women who frame 'womanhood' exclusively through an elite, privileged lens. In contrast, anti-caste movements have tended to focus on the public and political liberation of Dalit men, and to neglect the particular sufferings of Dalit women. In Karukku, Bama adds another vital, extremely complicated dimension to this theoretical framework: the institution of religion. As a Dalit Christian woman, Bama is maneuvering through an ambiguous and intersecting landscape where the promises of spiritual emancipation violently clash with institutional discrimination. Christianity, which theoretically rests on a radical equality of all human beings before God, is the most profound site of political intersectionality and betrayal in her life.

Inspired to serve the poor and uplift her marginalized community, Bama chooses to become a nun. She enters the Catholic Church thinking it's a refuge from the casteist world beyond, one that inspires her to create greater social change. But her visits to the holy convent reveal a deeply entrenched caste hierarchy that is masquerading as spiritual and religious discipline. The convent serves as a microcosm of the society she wanted to escape. It doesn't take long before she understands that the Church is a body preaching universal brotherhood (in the pulpit) yet effectively aligning itself with the oppressive social order in policy and practice to preserve its wealth and authority. In the churches, she notes with bitter clarity, "In numbers alone, Dalits are the most. In all else, they're the least" (Bama 81). Upper-caste nuns and priests wield nearly all administrative, financial and spiritual authority over the institution. Here the political intersectionality is blinding; the Dalit woman is required to be subservient not only because she is a woman in a patriarchal religious structure, but because her caste makes her subservient by default. Bama sees the true hypocrisies of her superiors when she remarks, "They speak in an empty way of devotion, renunciation, the

Holy Spirit, God's vocation, poverty, chastity and obedience; they behave in a manner that makes me remember only the Pharisees, Saducees, and High Priests who recur in the Bible" (Bama 105).

The convent utilizes patriarchal, religious vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience to silence and control the women inside its walls, weaponizing faith against those on the margins. Bama knows that the vows, however, do not free them to serve the poor but act as tools of epistemological and physical enslavement. There is much about the vows of 'obedience', she argues: "They go on and on about the vow of 'obedience' and force us into submission so that we can scarcely lift up our heads" (Bama 110). When Bama tries to question the convent's elitism (in particular, its emphasis on running prestigious schools for wealthy children while ignoring the destitute), she isn't regarded as a reformer but as a disobedient woman and an ungrateful Dalit. They robbed her of intellectual autonomy, requiring complete integration into a hegemonic culture that despises her roots. This form of institutional treachery is a pristine example of political intersectionality, where the Dalit female subject is completely erased by the political agenda of the Church. The institution insists that she forsake her identity altogether. Bama sees them as saying that if they cannot fit the marginalized subject into their dominant framework, "They wanted you to be destroyed utterly and remade in a new form" (Bama 111).

The trauma of this political and spiritual marginalization breaks Bama's spirit; she becomes isolated and disillusioned as a result. The religious establishment, which she believed would be an ally against systemic oppression, is revealed to be one of its chief architects. Her subsequent departure from the convent is a monumental act of self-preservation and narrative agency. It is a resolute refusal to be erased by the political agenda of the Church. However, the outside world offers no immediate comfort, as she steps out stripped of her former confidence. Yet, it is precisely from this space of profound brokenness and alienation that Bama's narrative resistance is born.

To counter such layered marginalization, the act of creating Karukku serves as a revolutionary instrument for both narrative resistance and an epistemological battle against dominant discourses. Bama is not so much documenting her subjugation as dismantling the literary paradigms of elite upper caste — the traditional form of writing literature. The autobiography's title alone stands in as a metaphor for this intersectional resistance. In her preface, she discusses how the palmyra leaf represents the concept, asserting, "There are many congruities between the saw-edged palmyra Karukku and my own life... cutting me like Karukku and making me bleed" (Bama 11). But that vulnerability is beautifully turned into a weapon of intellectual and social defiance. She states that those on the margins need to take back their agency, and convert their anguish into a weapon for dismantling hegemony: "They, who have been the oppressed, are now themselves like the double-edged Karukku, challenging their oppressors" (Bama 11).

This challenge is powerfully executed through the text's split form and radical linguistic choices. Unlike Western autobiographies or elite Indian memoirs, whose narrative structure is linear, cohesive, and chronological, Bama writes in a fragmented, episodic style. She moves seamlessly from personal childhood memories, communal history, sociological critique, and theological reflection. This non-linear pattern perfectly embodies the fragmented reality of the Dalit experience where trauma does not follow a straight line but is an ongoing cycle that repeatedly arises. Another aspect of this process is her choice of linguistic material, which is itself a deliberate act of epistemic warfare. Historically, written Tamil literature was policed by an upper-caste elite who determined what constituted "pure" or "chaste" language and which systematically silenced subaltern voices and sanitized their experiences. Through her decision to write Karukku completely in everyday Dalit Tamil (the spoken language of her village), with its idioms and emotive undercurrent, she contests both upper-caste literary conventions and feminist discourse. She won't sanitize her pain or the culture of her people to the delight of the privileged reader. This linguistic defiance guarantees that

Karukku is not simply a tragic confession. Instead, it stands as the development of an alternative, intersectional Dalit feminist consciousness. Through writing and preserving her people's oral traditions and everyday speech, Bama compels the academy and literary establishment to respond to her identity on her own terms.

In the final analysis, the rigorous theoretical lens of Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality provides a profoundly comprehensive understanding of Dalit women's subjectivity in Bama's Karukku. The text does not shy away from the devastating clarity of proof that the predicament of being born a Dalit, a woman, and a Christian in Tamil Nadu creates a marginalized condition that cannot be unstated or understood in a single line of sociological inquiry. Bama's lived experience is one of the interlocking, grinding gears of caste bigotry, severe labor exploitation, religious hypocrisy, and deep-seated patriarchal control. By rendering her trauma an epic of narrative resistance, Bama thus pays testament not only to the remarkable endurance of her community but also extends intersectionality beyond its original racial context, establishing its critical need in the Global South. Karukku remains a fierce, living example to us of how the subaltern subject cannot achieve meaningful liberation if society attempts to dismantle these interconnected systems of power one by one in isolation. And for true and long-term freedom we can only have one and the same thing: recognising and eradicating all interconnected forms of oppression, together.

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