



## Deconstructing the 'Other' in Bama's *Karukku*

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### Abstract

Bama, the pseudonym of Fathima Faustina, comes forward to represent the silenced voice of the Dalits who have been marginalized, exploited, humiliated, ridiculed and labelled as untouchables and uncivilized through ages by the upper castes. Bama's painful journey as a Dalit Catholic is a reflection on the abhorrence of the Dalit community which ultimately becomes rejected in hierarchical structures of the Indian society. Bama fights equally for caste oppression and gender oppression through her writings. Bama's writing becomes a weapon to dismantle the hypocrisies of the societal institutions. Drawing from the Derridean theory of Deconstruction, this paper attempts to deconstruct the cultural binaries that are entrenched in the Indian system through writing.

**Keywords:** Dalit, body, relegation, Othering, binaries, deconstruction, writing, inclusion.

Bama's celebrated autobiography *Karukku* is a testimonio that challenges the hegemonic power structures of the Indian society and the institution of the church. Bama's *Karukku* has been translated into English by Lakshmi Holmström. Bama's writing is touching, absorbing and gripping where she represents the plight, frustration and agony of the marginalised community of Dalits. The Dalits have been humiliated, exploited, rejected and relegated to the status of the 'other' by the upper castes. Thenmozhi Soundarajan remarks:

Dalit means broken. Broken by suffering. Broken by caste: the world's

oldest and longest running dominator system, decreed in scriptures and enforced by unspeakable acts of violence. Broken by the horror of the enormity of human potential that was lost to this violent system – lives not fully lived and souls who got to sing their full song. (2)

Bama expresses her rebellion against the Indian society which is deeply rooted in caste system.

Othering can be defined "as a set of dynamics, processes, and structures that, consciously or unconsciously, denies, or fails to

accord, full and equal membership in society as well as human dignity on the basis of social group affiliation and identity, and therefore tends to engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities. Dimensions of othering include, but are not limited to, religion, sex, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status (class), caste, disability, sexual orientation, and skin tone" (John A. Powell, Stephanie Menendian, 1). 'Othering' highlights the notion of being socially excluded. It creates social barriers between a person or a group of people and society through gender, sex, race, social class, religion, colour or caste. Othering fosters exclusion, discrimination, marginalization and emphasizes the notion of power that is embedded in the hierarchical social structures.

The objective of the process of othering is to create one's own cultural and social space and alienate the other group from this space. R C Tripathi affirms that "the boundaries between the self and the other are created in order to create a positive identity for self, in an effort to create purity for the self and purity for the own group" (14). These boundaries are constructed and conditioned by established social laws, principles and cultural practices. This phenomenon reduces the subjectivity of the individual and leads to objectification. It always involves a power relation that relegates and exploits the oppressed group. The process of othering is central to understanding of the hegemonic power and violence perpetuated against the vulnerable group.

The notion of othering is originally rooted in Hegel's "Master-Slave dialectic". According to Hegel, all human beings are governed by the natural desire to be recognized as superior to other beings. In the master-slave relationship, the master affirms his power over the slave. As an autonomous subject, the master seeks pleasure of possessing the slave, an object that produces everything for the master and owns nothing. The slave

discovers his position in the universe as merely an object. The master realizes that he depends upon the slave for affirming his superior position in the universe.

It is noteworthy to mention Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist and political theorist who developed the concept of hegemony. Gramsci reflects on how Europe became industrialized in the late nineteenth century and states that the bourgeois, capitalist classes grabbed authority and power through force and hierarchical systems that ensured that the proletariat let themselves to be dominated. Michel Foucault, a French philosopher records that othering is strongly associated to power and knowledge. Colonialism is one such example of the powers of othering. The process of 'Othering' can be traced back to the period of colonialism. In his prominent work *Orientalism*, Edward W Said, the key founder of postcolonial studies, highlights the process of othering through the duality of West / East. Orientalism is a critique of European colonialism and cultural domination. Said draws from Antonio Gramsci's concept and elaborates how the West constructed the Orient in travelogues, historical accounts, archives and novels. The West has represented the East as exotic, mysterious, dangerous, unchanging and "the other". The people of the Middle East, Southwest Asia and North Africa are portrayed as weak, barbaric, irrational and uncivilized that required enlightenment from the Western culture. Said argues that the Western literary and cultural canon has misrepresented the Orient, constructed the binary oppositions and reimposed the colonial domination.

Riley Quinn shares Said's thought in her statement: "European colonialism was really about taking advantage of colonized people's labor and their resources, while claiming that the Western colonial power was a 'savior' helping these societies to be more "modern" like Europe. This was easier for the colonial power to do because it consistently categorized "the Orient" through the use of degrading

stereotypes" (11). The Occident has always been portrayed as the Self and privileged whilst the Orient has been underprivileged, reduced and devalued. The European power had the hegemony to relegate the Orient as the 'other' to affirm its identity. As Said states: "At this moment, the relationship of the Occident and Orient becomes the relationship of "power, of domination, of varying degree of a complex hegemony" (5). By the process of Othering, the colonizers rationalized the colonial rule, dehumanized the colonized and labelled them as savages through power generated by imperialism.

In her groundbreaking text *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir presents othering as a process rooted in the power dynamics of gender where women have been marginalized and defined as "Other". Beauvoir's trailblazing statement "One is not born but rather becomes a woman" is an affirmation of the process of othering. Simone de Beauvoir claims that the identity of women is constructed by men to serve their own interests. Man is the Subject and the Absolute, whilst woman is the Other.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's pioneering essay, *Can the Subaltern speak?*, elucidates the relationship between colonialism and the other systems of oppression including patriarchy and capitalism. She questions the cultural and philosophical foundations of western imperialism. Spivak argues that the marginalized and the lowest group of the hierarchical strata of society can never speak for themselves and never been able to represent themselves. Spivak hopes that if subalterns could both speak and have a forum to be heard, these people would achieve an effective political voice (Riach,11). Spivak also showcases how the western canon has always misrepresented the Third World people.

Spivak claims: "If in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (Spivak, 28).

When oppressed people are not allowed to speak for themselves, or to have their contributions recognized, they are in fact erased from their place in the world. This is especially common for subaltern women. For Spivak, women are silenced by both colonialism and patriarchy (Riach,11). Othering is explored as a post-colonial theoretical concept. In her article "The Rani of Sirmur", Spivak defines Othering as "a process by which the empire can define itself against those it colonizes, excludes and marginalizes" (Spivak, quoted in Ashcroft et al.,171). In this dialectical process of Othering, the colonisers are the subjects who occupy the hegemonic position while the colonised are the marginalised Others. Her analysis throws light on the British colonial rule in India which imposed its power and superiority over the native population who were undermined as objects and the Others. Othering creates binaries where the 'Other' is devalued, stigmatized and excluded.

With this theoretical background, let us delve into the text where Bama confesses: "That book was written as a means of healing my inward wounds; [...] *Karukku* made me realize how potent a book can be. My parents read it. They understood me a little more. My siblings read it. They could comprehend the pain I had experienced in my life. My friends read it. They praised it because it was a new type of writing [...] I described myself in *Karukku* as a bird whose wings had been clipped; I now feel like a falcon flying that treads the air, high in the skies" (ix). *Karukku* refers to the leaves of Palmyra which, with their jagged edges on both sides, are like double-edged swords. Bama introduces the Tamil word *Karukku* as a felicitous pun; the word *Karu*, embryo or seed also signifying freshness and novelty. A feminist reading of *Karukku* highlights the dual exploitation of Dalit women owing to caste and gender oppression. It draws our attention to ruminate how the Dalits have surrendered themselves to the hierarchical system and lost their voice, existence and identity. Dalit women

are subject to derogatory remarks and inhuman treatment that reinforce the caste system and gender inequality in India. Dalits have been muffled throughout their history and have lived their lives dreaming of a possible future.

Caste system in India is among the oldest forms of social stratification in the world. Caste is the basis for the segregation and oppression of people based on their ancestry and occupation which constitutes a distinct form of slavery. The caste system divides the Hindus into hierarchical groups: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. At the top of the hierarchy were the Brahmins who were teachers and intellectuals. The kshatriyas were warriors and the Vaishyas were traders. Shudras performed menial work. The Dalits were typically social outcasts. Caste system is a social construct designed by ancestors, reinforced by culture and passed down from generation to generation. Caste oppression is systemic and more insidious than other forms of oppression because of the religious sanction it enjoys. Thenmozhi Soundarajan states: "Caste apartheid is a fictitious system of separation for the purposes of exploitation, just like white supremacy" (4). In India, Othering has been established through caste systems owing to the sociocultural context where the Dalits or Harijans are excluded as 'other'. The 'other' is stigmatized to secure a positive identity for oneself or one's own group. Othering ignores the subjectivity of the individual by objectifying another person or a group. (R C Tripathi, 11). The life of Dalits has been threatened since time immemorial. Discrimination and denial have been socially and culturally institutionalized; it had legitimacy and long-term implications for the social and economic status of the caste groups and communities (Jodhka,15).

In her memoir, Bama recollects the childhood days in her native village and records the trials and tribulations of the Dalit community. Rural communities have long been organized on the basis of caste. Upper and lower

castes have always lived in partitioned spaces since time immemorial. Brahmins did not accept food or drink from Shudras and Dalits and excluded them as untouchables. The upper castes perpetuated endogamy to uphold their cultural heritage. Soundarajan's affirmation holds true in this context: "Caste is inherited from the family you are born into and is unalterable being maintained through generations by endogamy. It is a project that is not just spiritual, but also racial, economic, gendered, and political" (13).

Bama describes the miserable life of the Dalits who were mainly agricultural workers and coolies. Dalit women worked hard from dawn till dusk to earn their livelihood. Bama's grandmother was a maid. She woke up before the rooster crowed at two or three in the morning, fetched water, performed the household chores, walked a long distance to the Naicker's house where she worked till sunset; then she returned home in the dark and cooked some porridge. Habitually, Bama collected branches and leaves from palm and coconut trees to cook in the fire pit at home. She went to the fields, collected cow dung and patted them into flat cakes for the fire pit. During the holidays, she went with her grandmother to work in the fields. Most often, she helped her to pull out peanuts and clean and sort the husks. At lunch break, they drank their Kuuzh or gruel with fresh nuts. In the evening, they went to the Naicker's house to shell peanuts in the stable. They lived on gruel, wore a few rags, had no piece of property or house to live in. They possessed nothing and R C Tripathi's assertion is relevant in this context: "Othering implicates exclusion i.e. denial of rights and entitlements [...] which permits the powerful and the privileged to maintain their dominance over those who they "other" or marginalize" (11).

At times, Bama accompanied the other children to collect firewood in the mountain jungle. They had to climb steep mountain slopes to collect pieces of dried wood and tied them together into bundles. Entangled

in the branches, the skin of the children was all torn and bleeding. Bama burst into tears expressing the plight of the Dalits: "But it was only by toiling like this, without taking any account of their bodies as human flesh and blood, that people of my community could even survive" (52). In such agonizing conditions, they worked only for the goodness of the rich and to fill their bellies. Owing to their poverty, girls stayed at home, looked after the babies and the household chores. The women went to the fields, winnowed the grains and were paid in kind. When the cotton pods burst, they brought the cotton and exchanged it for goods. The boys went away to attend and guard the goats and cattle. Little children ran down the streets with tattered clothes and dripping noses, rolling around and playing in the mud and mire.

Usually, Dalits had gruel in the morning and at midday. To go along with the porridge, they took onions, peanuts, ground jaggery and green chillies. In the evening, they went to the lakeside, picked wild vegetables or drumstick leaves and ate them with stirred muddle of finger millet. Sometimes, they cooked curries with the cheapest fish they could afford. Surinder S. Jodhka's observation is pertinent in this context: "Caste does not simply imply power in the cultural sense of the term. It is also a structural and material where inequality is institutionalized by unequal distribution of resources" (15). Unfortunately, they accepted and endured patiently their pathetic lives, consoling themselves that their excruciating life was their destiny.

Bama muses that she felt what untouchability was during her primary education. The Naickers who belonged to the upper class were doubly conscious that they did not touch the Dalits so as not to be polluted. Bama sympathizes the way Dalits were given drinking water. Bama's grandmother who went to the Naicker's house, washed the cow, collected the manure and soil, then brought home the rest of the rice and curry. After having finished all the chores, the Naicker women

poured water from a height of four feet while Bama's grandmother drank it with cupped hands raised to her mouth. Then the Naicker lady came with the leftovers and poured them into the grandmother's pot from a distance. She ensured that her pot was not polluted by chance. To Bama's grandmother, the Naickers were maharajas who fed them with rice and curries. She asked Bama: "Without them, how will we survive? Haven't they been upper caste from generation to generation and haven't we been lower caste? Can we change this?" (17). Bama declares: "And for some reason she would behave as if she had been handed the nectar of the gods" (16). Dalits were condemned to a life of servitude, humiliation and exploitation.

Dalits did not dare to sit beside the upper caste groups in the bus. Bama, who was audacious, sat next to them whilst they preferred to get up and stand rather than sit next to the untouchable. Bama questions this system of exclusion. With pain and fury, she states that a person born as a Dalit or Harijan is doomed to death during his or her lifetime. She laments that there was no space free of caste. She deplores: "Because we are born into the Paraya jati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that" (17-18). Such incidents force us reflect on the notions of purity and impurity conditioned in the hierarchical order. Jodhka's observation is worth reflecting: "These ideas produced a hierarchical social order, structured around the notions of purity and pollution" (20). The notions of purity and impurity create dichotomies or binary divisions that hail one group and stigmatize the other.

The nuns of the convent where Bama did her secondary education labelled Dalits as impure and ridiculed the children. Bama recollects their mockery: "Look at the Cheri children! When they stay here, they eat their fill and look as round as potatoes. But look at the state in which they come back from home-just skin and bone!" (20). For Bama, it was a disgraceful scene because the Cheri children paid the fees for tuition and food like the others.

Bama was extremely puzzled by the fact that the nuns were collectively oppressing Dalit children and teachers. In fact, the church, the school, the convent and the priest's house were all located where the upper caste communities lived.

Fortunately, Bama pursued her higher education with the help of a compassionate nun. Bama was confident that life would become quite comfortable once she had started working. Bama expressed her happiness and her eagerness at earning her living and becoming independent with some authority, status and prestige. Bama dreamt of becoming a nun in a convent with the sole mission of teaching and serving the poor. But she was totally torn by the luxurious image of the convent. She interrogated that these women had taken vows to live in poverty but in contrast the convent had no trace of poverty. Bama also pondered how the nuns, who claimed to dedicate themselves to the service of God and the poor, could discriminate Dalits without any mercy even for children. Even if Dalits wished to choose the path of renunciation, they were still excluded and marginalized.

Thanks to her education, Bama managed to survive in the community. After having finished her training, she became a nun and was sent to a convent where no one ever knew that she was a Dalit. The nuns believed that Dalits had neither moral discipline nor cleanliness or culture. Bama records her fury:

In this society, if you are born into a low caste, you are forced to live a life of humiliation and degradation until your death. Even after death, caste-difference does not disappear. Wherever you look, however much you study, whatever you take up, caste discrimination stalks us in every nook and corner and drives us into a frenzy. [...] Are Dalits not human beings? Do they not have common sense? Do they not have such attributes as a sense of honour and self-respect? Are they without any wisdom,

beauty, dignity? What do they lack? [...] They seem to conspire to keep us in our place: to think that we who have worked throughout history like beasts, should live and die like that; we should never move or go forward. (26- 28)

Bama admits that Dalits have reached a saturation point where they declare themselves untouchable, unworthy and voiceless. They cannot find a way around or away from structural violence. As Graham Riach notes: "Spivak concludes that the subaltern cannot speak [...] and are never able to represent themselves. Further, if they do speak, they are not heard" (12).

Bama constantly reflects on how Dalit women have been massacred by caste and gender oppression. They had toiled and survived by plowing, watering, sowing seeds, weeding, harvesting, digging wells, carrying gravel and stone and making bricks. Though men and women performed the same labour, men were paid more than women. Besides this, women had no leisure other than singing. They worked to the rhythm of their songs in the fields. They also sang to their babies while rocking them. The rigid codes and conventions of the society ensured that women in the community never went to the cinema. They worked under the scorching heat of the sun, burnt their skin and suffered injuries. In the midst of this dark and tiresome life, Dalit women also became victims of domestic violence. As Bama describes of a battered woman: "Everyday 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" (61). Soundarajan adds: "Dalit women face the compounded challenge of caste-based sexual violence, a key tool of maintaining a climate of terror and shame, so that Dalits fear challenging the system" (17). Besides burning the midnight oil and being tormented by upper castes, Dalit women continued to be exploited and abused in the domestic space. They were ostracized by patriarchal community and family structures and owing to double oppression, Dalit women

were disconnected from their bodies and mind. R C Tripathi asserts: "In a patriarchal society, for example, men provide the standard of norms, which women as the other are expected to follow. These norms feed into the formation of women's identities" (11).

Graham Riach shares Spivak's thought in her statement: "It is not enough just to let subalterns speak from their subaltern position; rather we have to work to rethink structures of power - colonialism, law, academia, government, economics, patriarchy - and so end the exclusion of some members of society that creates subalterns in the first place" (13). The Derridean tool of deconstruction comes as a helping hand to deconstruct the binaries in the Indian hierarchical system and foster inclusion. Poststructuralism emerged in France in the 1960s as a movement to criticize structuralism. Jacques Derrida's lecture entitled *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences* delivered in a conference at Johns Hopkins University in 1966 appears as a manifesto against structuralism. Jacques Derrida's argument challenges the fundamental metaphysical assumptions of Western philosophy since Plato.

The thought of the Western philosophical tradition includes logocentrism, phallogentrism, and the metaphysics of presence. Logocentrism is the concept that explains how language relies on a hierarchical system that values speech over writing in Western culture. Logocentrism, which glorifies speech over writing, is structured around hierarchical binary oppositions where each term obtains its meaning through its structural relationship to the other term, thus hailing the concept of presence over absence. Metaphysics creates dualistic oppositions and installs a hierarchy that privileges one term of each dichotomy (presence / absence, speech/writing). All metaphysicians, from Plato to Rousseau, from Descartes to Husserl, conceive of good over evil, positive over negative, pure over impure, and simple over complex.

Logocentrism is thus a system which assumes that presence is the foundation of truth and identity while absence represents corruption and lack.

According to Jacques Derrida, philosophers like Plato, Rousseau, Saussure, and Lévi-Strauss, who value speech/writing argue that spoken words are the symbols of psychological experience while written words are the symbols of those symbols that already exist. Further, these philosophers affirm that speech is the natural expression of thought. They also claim that although the Bible was written, the word of God was essentially spoken. Hence, speech was valorised and writing was denigrated. Jacques Derrida's strategy of deconstruction aims at subverting and corrupting the dichotomies. Derrida coins the term *phallogocentrism* merging the terms *phallogentrism* and *logocentrism* where binary divisions thrive. Poststructuralism opposes logocentrism and rejects the cultural binary divisions. Derrida's theory of Deconstruction seeks to disrupt the dual hypocrisies which glorify speech/writing, presence/absence, good/bad, masculine/feminine, activity/passivity. To override the traditional valorisation of speech over writing, Jacques Derrida coins the term *différance*. The derridean term '*différance*' with its letter 'a' from the original '*différence*' with the letter 'e' is a deliberate attempt to subvert the Western privilege attributed to speech. Both the words are pronounced identically; the difference of the misspelt letter being inaudible which proves the mandatory requisite of writing. Therefore, writing becomes a threat to the tradition of presence over absence entrenched in Western metaphysics.

The hierarchy of speech over writing is thus subverted by Derrida. This disruption is what we call Derrida's deconstruction which is primarily concerned with the critique of the Western philosophical tradition. For Derrida, identity and meaning are not fixed and produced in the static closure of the binary

opposition drawing attention to the fact that meaning and identity are continually in the process of becoming. Poststructuralist feminist theory aims to deconstruct the binary oppositions that reinforce Western culture and male sovereignty: man/ woman, presence/ absence, rational/irrational, light/darkness, and good/evil. In this binary division, the woman is constructed as the "Other."

Drawing from Derrida's theory, let me state that social identities are not fixed and they continue to evolve bringing forth a positive identity and inclusion. Derrida's deconstruction seeks to subvert the various binary oppositions that exist in a hierarchical society. Writing, which is glorified, has the power to break and shift binary cultural stereotypes of master/slave, male/female, active/passive, body/mind, pure/impure that have been socially and culturally institutionalized. Writing has the power to transform and shape the minds of individuals. Writing is revolutionary and questions cultural ideologies, awakens human minds and liberates the Dalits. Writing becomes an act of resistance to overthrow the power structures that exclude Dalits.

*Karukku* evokes Bama's unequivocal need to reclaim a positive identity for Dalits. She challenges and dismantles societal institutions through her writings to liberate Dalits from the status of the 'other'. Through her revolutionary writings, Bama calls for collective resistance for transformation. She states:

We must not accept the injustice of our enslavement by telling ourselves that it is our fate, as if we have no true feelings; we must dare to stand up for change. We must crush all these institutions that use caste to bully us into submission and demonstrate that among human beings, there is none who are high or low. Those who have found happiness by exploiting us are not going to let us go easily. It is we who have to place them where they belong and bring

about a changed and just society where all are equal. (28)

Victim of double marginalization as a Dalit and a woman, Bama overcomes taboos and social barriers in search of Dalit identity. Discriminated and brutalized, she highlights the trauma of the entire Dalit community by seeking modes of resistance to free themselves from binary oppositions. Even though Bama aspires to become a nun to serve the Dalit community, she leaves the religious order to assert her rebellion against the institution of the Church which has massacred the lives of Dalits. Bama reflects, "I don't know when my wings will heal and gain enough strength so that I will be able to fly again" (122).

Writing becomes an act of resistance to topple the power structures that establish othering. Through her revolutionary writing, Bama calls for a collective resistance for transformation. Bama's writing is also an act of rebellion to deconstruct and reconstruct the enslaved lives of Dalits. Bama's autobiography attempts to give voice to the silenced Dalit community, thus providing a space for progress and transformation in society. As Bama reflects and ruminates on her childhood distress and agony, the reader discovers that Bama does not follow a linear narrative or chronological order. Bama transgresses and disrupts the hegemonic and rigid pattern of writing and uses the demotic and colloquial language of Dalits to highlight their stained and tainted lives. As Lakshmi Holmstrom, the translator of the autobiography observes that Bama breaks the rules of written grammar and spelling throughout, elides words and joins them differently using informal discourse that addresses the reader intimately (xix). She uses the language of Dalits which subverts the decorum and aesthetics of the Tamil upper class bringing forth a renewed reading of *Karukku*. Writing paves the way for their voices to be heard.



## Conclusion

*Karukku* signifies Palmyra leaves which were used for writing in ancient days in Tamil culture. *Karukku* is a metaphor of Bama's writing that is informal, fluid and transgressive that is bound to bring about a transformation. Bama believes that her writing should topple the hierarchical system and pave way for a dawn in the lives of the Dalits. Bama's writing is also an act of rebellion to deconstruct the cultural ideologies of Othering and liberate the Dalits. Expression of resistance through writings to sensitise the readers also becomes an awakening call towards liberation and empowerment of the Dalits. Every individual is entitled to live a life of dignity. Bama's writing encourages, gives the Dalits and Dalit women a ray of hope of an inclusive society and space to dream of a possible future

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