



Reconfiguring Dalit Identity: Embodiment, Gender, And Collective Agency In Bama's *Karukku, Sangati, And Vanmam*

Mahendra Nath Patra¹, Ranu Khatua²

¹M. Phil, Department of English, Ravenshaw University

²M. A, Department of English, Tezpur University

Abstract

This paper undertakes a comprehensive analysis of Dalit identity formation in *Karukku*, *Sangati*, and *Vanmam* by Bama, situating these works within the intellectual frameworks of Dalit feminism and anti-caste thought. Drawing upon the theoretical insights of B. R. Ambedkar and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the paper argues that Bama reconfigures Dalit identity from a position of imposed marginality to a site of embodied resistance and collective agency. Through sustained textual analysis, it demonstrates how caste is inscribed on the Dalit body through everyday practices of labor, segregation, and ritual humiliation, while gender intensifies this inscription for Dalit women. At the same time, Bama's narrative strategies—particularly her use of oral storytelling, non-linear form, and colloquial language—construct a collective subaltern voice that challenges dominant literary paradigms. The study contends that Bama's works do not merely represent Dalit life but actively produce a counter-discourse that transforms identity into a dynamic and politically transformative process.

Keywords

Dalit identity; caste; Dalit feminism; embodiment; subaltern voice; collective agency; Tamil literature

1. Introduction

The question of identity occupies a central place in modern Indian literary and cultural discourse, particularly in relation to caste. For centuries, Dalit communities have been subjected to systematic exclusion, not only from socio-economic resources but also from the domain of representation. Their

identities have been constructed by dominant caste ideologies that reduce them to categories of impurity, labor, and subordination. In this context, Dalit literature emerges as a radical intervention that reclaims narrative authority and redefines identity on its own terms.

Among the most influential voices in this movement is Bama, whose works offer a powerful critique of caste oppression while foregrounding the lived experiences of Dalit communities in Tamil Nadu. Her major texts—*Karukku*, *Sangati*, and *Vanmam*—collectively construct a narrative universe in which identity is not a fixed category but a site of struggle, negotiation, and transformation.

This paper argues that Bama's works reconfigure Dalit identity through three interrelated processes: embodiment, gendered experience, and collective agency. First, the Dalit body is depicted as a site where caste is materially inscribed through practices of labor segregation, and humiliation. Second, the intersection of caste and gender produces a distinct form of marginalization for Dalit women, which cannot be understood within mainstream feminist frameworks. Third, Bama constructs a collective voice through narrative strategies that emphasize community, oral tradition, and shared memory, thereby redefining agency as a communal rather than individual phenomenon.

2. Literature Review

The study of Dalit identity has been profoundly shaped by the work of B. R. Ambedkar, whose analysis of caste as a system of “graded inequality” provides a foundational framework (Ambedkar, 1936/2014). Ambedkar's critique highlights how caste operates not only as a social hierarchy but also as a cultural and ideological system that regulates everyday life. His emphasis on self-respect, education, and resistance has had a lasting influence on Dalit literature (Omvedt, 1994; Zelliot, 2001).

Dalit feminist scholars have extended this framework by foregrounding the intersection of caste and gender. Sharmila Rege, for instance, argues that Dalit women's experiences cannot be subsumed under mainstream feminist discourse, which often ignores caste (Rege, 2006). Instead, she proposes a Dalit feminist standpoint that centers the lived realities of Dalit women as a basis for theoretical analysis. Similarly, Gopal Guru (1995) emphasizes that Dalit women articulate a “difference” that is often erased within both feminist and Dalit political discourse.

The concept of the subaltern, as articulated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, further complicates the question of representation. Spivak's assertion that the subaltern cannot speak within dominant discourses underscores the structural limitations of representation (Spivak, 1988). However, Dalit literature challenges this claim by creating spaces where marginalized voices can articulate their own experiences (Nayar, 2013).

Scholarly engagement with Bama's works has highlighted several key themes, including her critique of institutional religion, her use of autobiographical narrative, and her emphasis on oral tradition. Critics have noted that *Karukku* functions as a spiritual and political autobiography (Bama, 2000; Holmström,

2009), while *Sangati* expands the scope of narrative to include the collective experiences of Dalit women (Pandian, 2008). *Vanmam*, though less frequently analyzed, provides important insights into intra-community conflict and the challenges of collective identity (Satyanarayana & Tharu, 2013).

Despite these contributions, there remains a need for a comprehensive analysis that integrates these texts within a framework of Dalit identity formation. This paper seeks to address that gap by examining how Bama constructs identity through embodiment, gender, and collective agency.

3. Aim and Objectives

Aim:

This paper initially aims to examine how Dalit identity is constructed through caste-based experiences in *Karukku*, but extends this inquiry by analyzing how identity is reconfigured through gendered embodiment in *Sangati* and further complicated by intra-community conflict and collective agency in *Vanmam*.

Objectives:

The study is guided by the following objectives:

- To examine how caste is inscribed on the Dalit body
- To analyze the gendered dimensions of Dalit identity
- To explore the role of narrative form and language
- To evaluate the emergence of collective agency

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretative methodology grounded in close textual analysis of *Karukku*, *Sangati*, and *Vanmam* by Bama. The analysis is informed by Dalit feminist theory and the anti-caste framework articulated by B. R. Ambedkar, alongside subaltern studies perspectives, particularly those associated with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

The study focuses on key thematic and formal elements—including embodiment, gendered experience, narrative voice, and linguistic practice—examining how these operate within the texts to construct and transform Dalit identity. Rather than treating the texts as mere representations, the methodology approaches them as sites of knowledge production, where lived experience, memory, and oral forms generate alternative epistemologies.

A comparative framework is employed to trace both continuities and shifts across the three works, particularly in the movement from individual narrative (*Karukku*) to collective testimony (*Sangati*) and

to the exploration of intra-community conflict (Vanmam). This allows the study to analyze Dalit identity as a dynamic and evolving construct shaped by caste, gender, and social relations.

5. Discussion

5.1 Caste and the Inscription of Identity in *Karukku*

In *Karukku*, Dalit identity is constructed through the lived experience of caste oppression, which operates primarily through the body. One of the most significant episodes in the text involves a Dalit man carrying food for an upper-caste landlord using a string, thereby avoiding direct contact. This act encapsulates the logic of caste, where the Dalit body is considered polluting and must be kept at a distance.

What makes this episode particularly striking is the narrator's initial response. As a child, she perceives the scene as amusing, only later recognizing its humiliating implications. This shift in perception highlights the process of internalization, where caste ideology is absorbed and normalized before being critically examined.

The body, in this context, is not merely a passive object but a site where power is enacted. The regulation of touch, movement, and labor serves to reinforce social hierarchy. Dalit bodies are associated with menial and stigmatized work, such as cleaning and agricultural labor, which further entrenches their marginalization.

However, Bama does not present this condition as inevitable. Through the narrator's growing awareness, the text reveals the constructed nature of caste, exposing it as a system sustained through repetition and social conditioning. This awareness becomes the foundation for resistance.

5.2 Education, Consciousness, and Identity Formation

Education plays a crucial role in the transformation of identity in *Karukku*. On one hand, it exposes the protagonist to discrimination, as Dalit students are often treated with contempt by teachers and peers. On the other hand, it provides the tools for critical thinking and self-reflection.

Bama emphasizes the importance of education as a means of empowerment, echoing Ambedkar's call for "educate, agitate, organize." The protagonist's academic success becomes a source of pride, challenging the stereotypes associated with Dalit identity.

At the same time, the text acknowledges the limitations of education within a caste-based society. Institutional structures often reproduce the very inequalities they claim to address, making it necessary to combine education with social awareness and resistance.

5.3 Religion and the Politics of Identity

A significant aspect of *Karukku* is its critique of Christianity as practiced within caste society. Although Christianity is often associated with equality, Bama reveals how caste discrimination persists within religious institutions.

Her experiences in the convent highlight the ways in which the Church regulates behavior, enforces discipline, and perpetuates hierarchy. The protagonist's disillusionment with the institution reflects a broader critique of systems that claim to offer liberation while reproducing oppression.

Her eventual decision to leave the convent represents a reclaiming of identity. It is an assertion that true liberation cannot be achieved within structures that deny dignity and equality.

5.4 Gender and Collective Identity in *Sangati*

In *Sangati*, the focus shifts from individual experience to collective identity. The text presents a series of interconnected stories that capture the lives of Dalit women, creating a communal narrative. Dalit women in *Sangati* experience multiple forms of oppression, including economic exploitation, domestic violence, and social discrimination. Their labor is essential to the survival of their families, yet they receive little recognition or autonomy.

Despite these challenges, the text emphasizes resilience and solidarity. Women share their experiences, support one another, and develop strategies for survival. This collective identity becomes a source of strength, enabling them to resist oppression.

5.5 The Body as a Gendered Site

The body in *Sangati* is marked not only by caste but also by gender. Women's bodies are subjected to control and violence, both within and outside the community. Early marriage, domestic abuse, and labor exploitation are recurring themes. However, the text also portrays the body as a site of resistance. Women use humor, storytelling, and collective action to challenge their circumstances. These acts, though often subtle, represent a refusal to accept oppression as natural.

5.6 Language, Orality, and the Politics of Representation

One of the most radical aspects of Bama's writing is her deliberate use of colloquial Tamil, which resists the hegemony of standardized literary language. In *Sangati*, everyday speech—inflected with regional idioms, proverbs, songs, and humor—becomes the primary medium of narration. This choice is not merely stylistic; it is epistemological and political. By privileging spoken registers over codified "high" Tamil, Bama asserts that Dalit experience is best articulated through the rhythms and textures of lived language.

This linguistic strategy does three things simultaneously. First, it validates subaltern knowledge by locating authority within community speech rather than elite textuality. Second, it reconfigures readership, inviting those familiar with these registers while challenging those accustomed to standardized forms. Third, it archives oral culture—especially women’s speech—as a repository of history and critique. The cumulative effect is a redefinition of literary value itself: what counts as “literature” is expanded to include voices historically excluded from the canon.

In this sense, language becomes a form of embodied voice. The cadence of speech, the idiomatic turns, and the dialogic structure of anecdotes encode social relations and affective intensities that cannot be fully captured by sanitized prose. Bama’s language thus performs resistance by refusing translation into dominant norms, even as the texts circulate in translation.

5.7 Fragmentation, Form, and the Refusal of Coherence

Both *Karukku* and *Sangati* deploy fragmented, episodic structures that depart from linear narrative conventions. In *Karukku*, memories appear as shards—moments of recognition, anger, and disillusionment—rather than as a seamless autobiographical arc. This fragmentation mirrors the discontinuous experience of caste, where dignity is repeatedly ruptured by everyday humiliations.

Similarly, *Sangati* accumulates stories without subordinating them to a singular plot. The text functions as a collective archive, where each anecdote contributes to a larger pattern of gendered and caste-based oppression. The refusal of narrative closure is crucial: it resists the temptation to resolve structural violence into individual redemption.

Form here is not incidental; it is critical method. By rejecting coherence, Bama challenges the aesthetic expectations of realism that often domesticate suffering into consumable narratives. Fragmentation becomes a way to preserve the irreducibility of experience and to insist that structural injustice cannot be neatly resolved within the bounds of a story.

5.8 Intra-Community Conflict and the Limits of Solidarity in *Vanmam*

In *Vanmam*, Bama turns to a more uncomfortable terrain: conflict among marginalized groups themselves. The novel’s depiction of tensions between Dalit sub-castes complicates any straightforward celebration of community. Violence here is not only vertical (between upper castes and Dalits) but also horizontal, circulating within the oppressed.

This shift is analytically significant. It foregrounds how caste operates as a diffuse logic that can be internalized and reproduced even among those it marginalizes. Practices of distinction, honor, and rivalry—often exacerbated by scarce resources—generate cycles of retaliation that fracture collective resistance.

Yet, Bama does not lapse into moral equivalence or victim-blaming. Instead, she situates intra-community conflict within structural conditions: economic precarity, political manipulation, and historical divisions that predate the present. The novel suggests that solidarity is not given but must be actively forged, often against entrenched habits of division.

Importantly, *Vanmam* also gestures toward the possibility of reconciliation and political learning. Moments of reflection within the narrative indicate that recognizing the mechanisms of division is a first step toward overcoming them. Collective agency, in this sense, is not a stable possession but an ongoing practice.

5.9 Labor, Value, and the Political Economy of Identity

Across the three texts, labor is a crucial axis along which identity is constructed and contested. Dalit bodies are persistently tied to devalued labor—agricultural work, cleaning, and other forms of manual service. This association naturalizes hierarchy by presenting certain kinds of work as inherently inferior.

Bama disrupts this logic by re-describing labor from within. In *Sangati*, women's work—though underpaid and exploitative—is also depicted as skilled, collective, and sustaining. The scenes of women working together in fields or public spaces become sites of counter-publics, where conversation, humor, and critique circulate alongside labor.

At the same time, the texts expose how labor is gendered. Women bear a double burden: they are primary earners in many households while also performing unpaid domestic work. Their economic contribution does not translate into authority, revealing the persistence of patriarchy within the community.

By foregrounding labor, Bama links identity to material conditions. Resistance, therefore, cannot be purely symbolic; it must engage with the structures that organize work, wages, and access to resources.

5.10 Religion, Discipline, and the Rejection of Institutional Authority

Karukku offers one of the most incisive critiques of institutional religion in Dalit writing. Bama's experience within the convent exposes how a structure that professes equality can nonetheless reproduce caste hierarchies through everyday practices of discipline and differentiation.

The convent regulates bodies—through dress, speech, routine, and obedience—producing a form of subjectivity aligned with institutional authority. For a Dalit woman, this regulation is doubly constraining: it overlays gendered discipline with caste-inflected exclusion. The gap between doctrine (equality) and practice (hierarchy) becomes a source of acute disillusionment.

The decision to leave the convent is thus not merely personal; it is a political act of refusal. It rejects the legitimacy of an institution that demands submission without delivering justice. In Ambedkarite terms, it aligns with a broader skepticism toward religious structures that fail to dismantle caste.

5.11 Subaltern Voice: From Individual Testimony to Collective Articulation

A central contribution of Bama's work is the transformation of voice from the individual to the collective. While *Karukku* begins with a first-person perspective, even here the "I" is porous, frequently absorbing the experiences of others. By the time we reach *Sangati*, the narrative has decisively shifted to a choral mode, where multiple voices speak, interrupt, and reinforce one another.

This movement responds to the problem posed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: if the subaltern is structurally muted within dominant discourse, how can she speak? Bama's answer is not to recover a singular, authentic voice but to multiply voices, thereby resisting co-optation into a single narrative.

Voice here is also situated—rooted in place, labor, and community. It emerges through dialogue, gossip, song, and anecdote. These forms, often dismissed as informal, become vehicles of critique. The result is a democratization of authorship, where the text becomes a site of collective enunciation.

5.12 Memory, Affect, and the Ethics of Witnessing

Memory in Bama's texts is not a neutral repository of the past; it is an affective practice that carries anger, shame, humor, and hope. The recollection of humiliating incidents in *Karukku*—for instance—does not merely document injustice; it reanimates it, compelling the reader to confront its persistence.

In *Sangati*, memory circulates through storytelling, often mediated by older women who function as custodians of community history. Their narratives challenge official histories that erase or distort Dalit experience. Memory thus becomes a form of counter-historiography, one that foregrounds everyday life rather than grand events.

There is also an ethics at work here: to remember is to bear witness, to refuse the erasure of suffering. At the same time, the presence of humor and irony prevents memory from becoming purely tragic. It allows for a complex emotional register where pain coexists with resilience.

5.13 Everyday Resistance and the Micro-Politics of Survival

Bama's texts insist that resistance is not limited to spectacular acts of rebellion. It is embedded in everyday practices: refusing humiliation, mocking authority, sharing resources, and sustaining relationships. These acts may appear minor, but they accumulate into a micro-politics of survival.

In *Sangati*, for example, women's conversations often subvert dominant norms through satire and critique. Laughter becomes a weapon that deflates authority and creates space for alternative values. Similarly, small refusals—declining to accept degrading treatment, asserting dignity in interaction—mark the boundaries of what is tolerable.

This focus expands the concept of resistance beyond confrontation to include persistence, care, and creativity. It acknowledges that in contexts of structural constraint, survival itself can be a form of defiance.

5.14 Reimagining Dalit Identity: From Stigma to Solidarity

Across *Karukku*, *Sangati*, and *Vanmam*, Dalit identity undergoes a significant transformation. Initially marked by stigma—pollution, inferiority, exclusion—it is gradually reclaimed and re-signified. Education, collective memory, and shared struggle contribute to this shift.

However, Bama resists a simplistic reversal where stigma is merely replaced by pride. Instead, identity is presented as dynamic and contested, shaped by ongoing negotiations with structures of power and internal differences. *Vanmam* is crucial here, reminding us that solidarity is fragile and must be continually produced.

The reimagined identity that emerges is relational rather than essentialist. It is grounded in community, informed by history, and oriented toward transformation. It does not deny pain but converts it into a resource for political action.

6. Conclusion

This study has argued that Bama's *Karukku*, *Sangati*, and *Vanmam* collectively reconfigure Dalit identity through the intertwined processes of embodiment, gendered experience, and collective agency. By foregrounding the body, Bama reveals how caste is materialized in everyday life—through labor, touch, space, and discipline—while also demonstrating how these same sites can become grounds for resistance.

The analysis has shown that gender intensifies caste oppression, producing a distinct Dalit feminist standpoint that cannot be subsumed under either mainstream feminism or general Dalit politics. Through *Sangati*, Bama constructs a collective voice that challenges individualistic models of authorship, while *Vanmam* complicates the narrative of solidarity by exposing intra-community divisions and the labor required to overcome them.

Formally, Bama's use of fragmentation, orality, and colloquial language constitutes a critique of dominant literary paradigms, expanding the boundaries of what counts as literature. Thematically, her emphasis on memory, labor, and everyday resistance produces a rich account of how marginalized communities survive and resist within constraining structures.

Ultimately, Bama's work does more than represent Dalit life; it produces a counter-discourse that redefines identity as embodied, relational, and politically transformative. In doing so, it contributes not

only to Indian literature but also to global conversations on subalternity, feminism, and the politics of representation.

Reference

1. Ambedkar, B. R. (2014). *Annihilation of caste*. Navayana. (Original work published 1936)
2. Bama. (2000). *Karukku* (L. Holmström, Trans.). Macmillan.
3. Guru, G. (1995). Dalit women talk differently. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30(41–42), 2548–2550.
4. Holmström, L. (2009). Introduction. In Bama, *Karukku*. Oxford University Press.
5. Nayar, P. K. (2013). *The postcolonial studies dictionary*. Wiley-Blackwell.
6. Omvedt, G. (1994). *Dalits and the democratic revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit movement in colonial India*. Sage Publications.
7. Pandian, M. S. S. (2008). Writing caste, writing gender: Reading Dalit women's testimonios. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 43(17), 45–52.
8. Rege, S. (2006). *Writing caste/writing gender: Narrating Dalit women's testimonios*. Zubaan.
9. Satyanarayana, K., & Tharu, S. (Eds.). (2013). *No alphabet in sight: New Dalit writing from South India*. Penguin.
10. Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.
11. Zelliott, E. (2001). *From untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar movement*. Manohar.

