VERNACULAR THEOLOGY, ECOCRITICISM, AND LINGUISTIC RESISTANCE IN BAMA'S KARUKKU AND SANGATI

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INTRODUCTION

Bama Faustina Soosairaj's victorious emergence as a Dalit feminist author in the 1990s marked a radical intervention in Indian literature, that subverted the expectations of the literary landscape in the Indian paradigm. Two of her autobiographical narratives, *Karukku* (1992, trans. 2000) and, *Sangati* (1994, trans. 2005) forged radical solidarities, intersectional criticisms, and unapologetic indictments. She did so by articulating the triple oppression faced by Dalit Christian women, the convergence of caste, gender, and religious marginalization. Earlier literary canons had been mainly split between Dalit writing by men (foregrounding caste but often eliding gender) and feminist writing by upper-caste women (foregrounding gender but often eliding caste). Bama's work thus filled a crucial gap, as she writes, "Dalit women are the most vulnerable of the lot. They are prey to the desires and despotic authority of upper-caste men and Dalit men alike" (Bama, *Sangati* 113). This lived reality of intersectionality, anticipated by Black feminist theorists like Kimberlé Crenshaw, is theorized in Bama's narrative from an embodied Dalit woman's standpoint. In doing so, Bama's texts exemplify what scholar Susie Tharu calls the *"epistemological advantage"* of the oppressed, wherein marginalized standpoints generate new insights into social power.

Recent scholarship on Bama underscores the need to move beyond surface thematic readings toward deeper theoretical engagement. For instance, Sharmila Rege argues that Dalit women's life narratives like *Karukku* function in a literary mode as *"testimonio,"* They do so by blending personal and as well as collective voices to challenge both patriarchy and caste hierarchy (Rege 45). In the same vein, M. S. S. Pandian observes that Bama employs a particular technique where she "verbalizes her own life story and she does do radically [in a way that] depletes the autobiographical 'I'," . It has the effect of transforming the individual experience into a communal assertion. Gopal Guru contends that Dalit women must "talk differently," forging an autonomous feminist voice that interrogates intra-Dalit patriarchy and mainstream feminist neglect alike (Guru 2549). Building on these foundations, this paper integrates and critiques the latest scholarship to argue that Bama's oeuvre represents a multifaceted resistance project along three analytic axes: vernacular theology and subaltern Christianity; ecocritical and environmental feminism; and linguistic agency as political resistance. Each of these multiple axes engages key theorists and frameworks, from Pandian's notion of *vernacular theology* and Meena Kandasamy's eco-feminist poetics, to Gopal Guru's insights on language and R. Azhagarasan's writings on Tamil orality – to illuminate how Bama destabilizes multiple layers of hegemony. Methodologically, the study interweaves close readings of *Karukku* and *Sangati* with Dalit feminist theory, subaltern studies, liberation theology, eco-criticism, and linguistics. In doing so, it situates Bama's work within both its specific Tamil Dalit Christian context and a transnational discourse of oppressed peoples' literatures (drawing comparative resonance with Latin American liberation theology, Black feminist thought, and ecofeminism). The sections in the paper explore each axis in turn, and followed by a conclusion that reflects on Bama's legacy and ongoing challenges in Dalit as well as global feminist discourse.

VERNACULAR THEOLOGY AND SUBALTERN CHRISTIANITY

Bama's engagement with Christianity in *Karukku* exemplifies what M. S. S. Pandian terms a *"vernacular theology,"* a localized and liberative reimagining of faith. Unlike the institutional Church;s doctrines that often-mirrored caste and gender hierarchies, Bama develops a *subaltern Christian* perspective rooted in Dalit women lived experiences. In *Karukku*, she recounts her youthful hope that converting to Catholicism or becoming a nun would escape caste oppression, only to discover that *caste permeates the Church itself* (Bama, *Karukku* 23). She recalls, for example, how as a novice nun she was disturbed to learn she would be sent to beg in upper-caste neighborhoods: "when I discovered that I would be compelled to go about in the upper-caste streets… and beg for donations to run our institutions, I gave up the idea [of becoming a nun]" (Bama, *Karukku* 119). Bama's pensive disillusionment is underscored scathingly by unfolding scenes of caste segregation in church: during communion, the upper castes "sat separately, refused to take the communion bread directly from the priest's hands… they would take it only from the plate" (Bama, *Karukku* 88). Such anecdotes, drawn from her village in Tamil Nadu, reveal how even the sacraments became *sites of caste performance*, with dominant castes obsessively avoiding "pollution" even in the act of worship.

What distinguishes Bama's critique is that she does not simply reject Christianity as irredeemably oppressive; instead, she *reclaims and reinvents* its core symbols through a Dalit feminist lens. Her narratives perform a liberation theology from below that aligns Jesus with the Dalit struggle. See how Bama reflects, "For me, Jesus was a revolutionary: he took sides with the poor, women, and lepers." In the interview, she stressed that her faith in Christ endures precisely because she interprets Christ as a figure who "lived and struggled with ordinary people… touched and healed the segregated" and allowed himself contact with those deemed impure (Bama, *Karukku* 95). By centering such narratives, Bama constructs a Dalit vernacular theology that sees God on the side of Dalit women. This move destabilizes both the casteism of the church and the patriarchy within Christianity.

Crucially, Bama's theological reinvention is also a feminist intervention. She challenges the patriarchal bent of church authority by foregrounding women's experiences and leadership. *Sangati* depicts village women organizing a communal celebration of Our Lady during which Dalit women take on roles of prayer leaders and decision-makers, subtly subverting the male-dominated church hierarchy. The scholarship of Archana Venkatesan also aligns with this framework, who with critical acuity notes that Tamil women's spiritual expressions often entwine the *female body and local environment* with devotion, thereby democratizing religious experience (Venkatesan 140). Bama extends this tradition into a contemporary Dalit context: the bodies of Dalit women – scarred by manual labor and abuse – become, in her writing, sacred sites of knowledge and grace. Indeed, Bama suggests that Dalit women's capacity to endure and nurture life amid suffering reflects a *Christ-like* capacity for sacrifice and love. In one poignant scene, she compares a Dalit farmworker woman to Christ carrying the cross, as the woman carries a heavy load of firewood after being unjustly beaten by an upper-caste man (Bama, *Sangati* 76). Such imagery inverts the usual power dynamic: holiness is found not in the convent, but in the Dalit woman's everyday toil and endurance.

Through these narrative strategies, Bama's *Karukku* enacts a dual critique and reconstruction: it exposes how Christianity in India often failed Dalits – "they said we are all equal in church, but they welcomed only the rich and upper caste" as Bama recounts – yet it *refashions Christian ethics* as a rallying cry against caste and gender oppression. The result is a subaltern theology that speaks to broader liberation theologies worldwide. Bama's vision parallels Latin American liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez's *"preferential option for the poor"*: she insists that true Christianity must side with society's outcasts, much as Latin American

peasants did in reimagining Christ as a proletarian comrade. Her work also converses with Dalit theologians in India who have proclaimed Christ as "Dalit" – for example, James Massey's and A. P. Nirmal's Dalit theology – though Bama's approach is more narrative and experiential than doctrinal. In sum, along the axis of vernacular theology, Bama offers a *radical re-reading of Christian symbols* that empowers Dalit women. By doing so, she destabilizes the authority of both upper-caste clergy and male-centric interpretations of religion, articulating a new *spiritual counter-narrative* from the margins.

ECOCRITICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL FEMINIST ANALYSIS

Embedded in Bama's narratives is a keen awareness of environmental context, the land, water, and agrarian labor that form the matrix of caste and gender oppression in rural Tamil Nadu. Far from treating nature as a mere backdrop, Bama configures environmental conditions as both the stage and instrument of social power. Her works thus invite an ecocritical feminist reading: one that examines how ecological realities (the use and control of land, access to resources, degradation of the environment) intersect with the subjugation of Dalit women. In this, Bama's writing aligns with what Meena Kandasamy has termed the *"eco-caste nexus,"* wherein environmental exploitation and caste exploitation are mutually reinforcing. Kandasamy's novel *The Gypsy Goddess* is concerning and revolves around the 1968 Kilvenmani massacre of Dalit farmworkers, and vividly illustrates this nexus, narrating how upper-caste landlords' control of land and grain led to horrific violence, thus intertwining ecological injustice with caste atrocity. Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati* portray the quotidian side of this dynamic: the slow violence of everyday environmental deprivation that Dalits endure.

One telling example is the politics of water. Bama describes how the better-off caste households in her village "owned wells and pump sets in their walled fields," while the Dalit colony *"depended for their water needs on a single public pump."* This structural denial of equal access meant that Dalit women often spent hours queuing for water or were forced to trespass into upper-caste fields for streams, at risk of abuse. In *Sangati,* she recounts Dalit women labourers having to "*escape from the landlords' watchful eyes just to drink water or to go to the lavatory*" while toiling in the fields. Something as elemental as quenching thirst becomes an act of subversion for these women, illustrating how *caste hierarchy is inscribed on the landscape.*

Bama also connects environmental conditions to health and bodily integrity. The Dalit colony in *Karukku* is built on inhospitable terrain – often the village's low-lying, flood-prone, or arid outskirts. She notes that the Dalit *cheri* (quarters) would flood during the monsoon and become a breeding ground for disease, while the higher-caste streets remained comparably safe. In summer, the *cheri*'s single pump would run dry, forcing women to walk miles to a distant well. These vivid details underscore how environmental degradation disproportionately harms Dalit women, whose traditional duties include securing water, fuel wood, and food for the family.

Notably, Bama portrays Dalit women not just as victims of environmental oppression but also as agents of ecological knowledge and care. You see this in *Sangati,* when the grandmother figures impart indigenous wisdom about plants and their healing powers. How do they know which wild herbs reduce fever or how to use neem leaves as insect repellent. This traditional knowledge is a quiet form of resistance, asserting the value of Dalit women's intimacy with the land. P. Sanal Mohan's studies at the intersection of Dalit Christianity and environment similarly note that Dalit converts often imbued Christian practices with local ecological sensibilities – for instance, praying for rain or a good harvest in church gatherings. Bama extends this fusion of *faith and ecology*: one scene in *Karukku* shows Dalit women in a procession carrying a cross through drought-stricken fields, singing Tamil hymns to invoke rain and justice. The implication is that

spiritual redemption and ecological sustenance are intertwined for the oppressed.

Furthermore, Bama's *imagery and metaphors* are deeply ecological, reinforcing her themes. The title *Karukku* refers to the serrated *palmyra leaf*, invoking a hardy plant that is ubiquitous in Tamil Nadu's dry regions and has edges that can wound and heal. The palmyra's double-edged quality metaphorically represents Dalit life: the double-edged existence of Dalits who simultaneously face wounds and develop resistance. Bama uses this natural metaphor to encapsulate an entire philosophy of suffering and survival. The landscape of her childhood, the rocky ridges, the thorny karuvelam trees, the scorching sun is not just a setting but a symbol. By personifying nature or drawing analogies to it, Bama collapses the divide between social and environmental oppression. Dalit women's relationship to the environment is one of deep intimacy marred by injustice: they love the land as their mother, yet the motherland has not loved them back, having been appropriated by oppressors.

In connecting these dots, Bama's work anticipates a burgeoning scholarly interest in Dalit ecocriticism. Through an environmental feminist analysis, we see that *Karukku* and *Sangati* are as much about land and nature as they are about caste and church. In Bama's vision, social emancipation for Dalits is inseparable from reclaiming their rights to the earth – to live on it with dignity and benefit from its fruits. This insight aligns her with global indigenous and ecofeminist movements, which assert that the liberation of oppressed people goes hand in hand with stewardship of the environment.

LINGUISTIC AGENCY AND POLITICAL RESISTANCE

Perhaps the most immediately striking feature of Bama's writing is her language – a vibrant Dalit Tamil idiom that departs sharply from conventional literary norms. In *Karukku* and *Sangati*, Bama writes in the colloquial dialect of Tamil spoken by Dalits in her region, peppered with working-class slang, village expressions, folk songs, and even taboo words. This linguistic choice is a deliberate political act of resistance. As Bama herself has recounted, upon the publication of *Karukku,* many in Tamil literary circles were scandalized: *"They said, 'She is an educated lady. Why has she written in dialect? Why do her characters speak in abusive, filthy language?"(Dutta)*

Bama responded defiantly: *"Who are they to judge my language? The Brahminical language is used everywhere… They are proud to speak in their language. Then why not I? My language and that of my people are beautiful to me. So, I deliberately used it in all my novels after that (Dutta)"* This anecdote encapsulates the politics of linguistic agency in Bama's project and she make sure that this is achieved by valorizing the dialect historically branded "ugly" or "impure," Bama challenges the cultural hegemony of high-caste (and predominantly male) language in literature.

In the preface to *Karukku*, Bama explicitly reflects on her linguistic choice, *"The language of our people came to me spontaneously… our grammar is different, and our usage of words is different too… So, our language is considered ugly and crude… I wanted to prove that our language was original and beautiful."* (Bama, 115). This remarkable statement serves as a manifesto of linguistic resistance and Bama positions *Karukku* as a challenge to what she elsewhere calls the *"paraiyar Mozhi"* stigma, the prejudice that Dalit speech is vulgar. Instead, she demonstrates through literature that Dalit Tamil has its own rich aesthetics and narrative capacity.

From a linguistic perspective, Bama's texts are notable for code-switching and polyvocality. She switches between standard Tamil (especially when describing institutions or formal Church settings) and dialect (when voicing Dalit characters or inner thoughts). This code-switching itself highlights the social duality Dalits navigate – a formal register imposed by schooling and church, versus the home language of the *cheri*. In effect, Bama *bends the rules of syntax and diction* to fit Dalit sensibilities: her narrative might abruptly break into a bawdy folksong

or a fiery expletive-laden rant by a Dalit woman character, jarringly interrupting the expectation of a polite, "civilized" autobiographical voice. These shifts are not random; they are strategic acts that *jolt the reader* into recognizing the dissonance between elite and subaltern worlds.

The content of Bama's language is as revolutionary as its form. She boldly includes what might be considered "uncouth" speech: women in *Sangati* joking about men's impotence in raunchy terms, villagers using caste names as slurs to show internalized oppression, children inventing irreverent rhymes about landlords, etc. Such uses of humor and satire are crucial to Bama's resistance. In *Sangati*, for instance, a group of Dalit women, after suffering a day of indignities, gather in the evening and engage in *"laughter therapy"* – they mimic the haughty walk and affected Tamil accent of an upper-caste lady employer, sending each other into peals of laughter. This scene illustrates how Dalit women carve out a sphere of solidarity and psychological liberation *through language – specifically through story, joke, and colloquial banter*. Their laughter itself becomes an act of defiance, a refusal to internalize the demeaning language that others use for them.

Bama's foregrounding of orality ties her work to a larger tradition of oppressed peoples using language as liberation. Bama elevates oral narrative forms, *Sangati* is structured as a series of episodes or anecdotes relayed in a conversational tone, almost as if the narrator were speaking to us over an evening fire. Such a structure resists the Western/upper-caste literary norms of a tight linear plot or refined "objective" narration. Instead, it embraces the *polyphonic* reality of Dalit community life. By writing *as a Dalit woman speaks*, Bama asserts her identity and forces academia and critics to engage with her on her terms.

Moreover, Bama's linguistic resistance has a gendered dimension. In many Indian languages, the acceptable literary idiom was historically shaped by male usage; women's speech, especially if frank or vulgar, was marginalized. Dalit women's speech, doubly so. In *Sangati*, the narrator pointedly celebrates the fact that *"our women have so many other strengths as well"* in how they speak and express emotion.

She contrasts Dalit women's uninhibited talk – which can be loud, straight-talking, and unafraid to curse injustice – with the self-censoring "modesty" expected of upper-caste women. This celebration of Dalit feminist speech echoes the sentiment of Gopal Guru's "Dalit women talk differently" thesis: that Dalit women's articulation of their oppression is distinctive and cannot be subsumed under mainstream discourse (Guru 2549). Bama provides the literary embodiment of that idea. She allows her female characters to verbalize anger and desire in ways rarely seen before in Tamil literature. For example, in one *Sangati* story, a young woman publicly scolds and abuses an upper-caste man who harassed her, using choice epithets that shock the village – it is a linguistic revolt against both caste and gender subordination. By recording this, Bama breaks the polite silence imposed on women's tongues.

The political impact of Bama's language extends beyond the texts themselves. It has influenced a generation of writers and sparked debates in Tamil literary forums about the validity of dialect in serious literature. R. Azhagarasan and Ravikumar, in their anthology of Tamil Dalit writings, highlight Bama as a pioneer whose success legitimized Dalit Tamil as a literary medium (Ravikumar and Azhagarasan 12). Today, many Tamil Dalit authors write as they speak, without feeling compelled to Sanskritize or Anglicize their prose – a direct legacy of Bama's choice. In the field of translation studies, Bama's work has also become a key case for discussing as to how to carry over the "untranslatable" cultural specificities of subaltern language. As S. Shankar notes, *Karukku* in English still "carries the accent" of the Tamil original, deliberately retaining honorifics, kinship terms, and even some Tamil words to convey the texture of Bama's world (Shankar 90). This pushes English-language readers to confront the content and form of Dalit oppression, rather than receiving a pre-digested, gentrified version.

In summary, along the axis of linguistic agency, Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati* demonstrate how language itself becomes a battlefield for equality. By asserting the legitimacy, beauty, and power of Dalit women's speech, Bama resists cultural domination and heals a community's fractured identity. Words that were used to wound (slurs, derisive labels) are reappropriated and transformed in her narrative into badges of survival or tools of satire. This linguistic empowerment and subversion thoroughly complement the other forms of resistance in her work – theological and ecological, creating a comprehensive strategy of subversion. M. S. S. Pandian observed, Bama's intersectional resistance operates at every level, including the level of language, thus constituting a "politics of the possible" that imagines new realities through the act of speaking and writing.

CONCLUSION

Through the foregoing analysis and evauation it becomes sufficiently evident that Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati* are not merely autobiographical accounts but manifestos of Dalit feminist liberation that operate on multiple, intersecting fronts. Along the theological axis, Bama develops a vernacular theology that re-centers Christianity around the Dalit woman – casting Jesus as a revolutionary ally of the oppressed and transforming faith into a weapon against caste and patriarchy. In doing so, she joins a broader subaltern Christian tradition that resonates from Tamil Nadu to Latin America, where the marginalized claim ownership of spiritual narratives. Along the environmental axis Bama intertwines ecological insight with social critique, depicting how control of land and nature underpins caste-gender domination and how Dalit women forge a relationship with the environment that sustains their resilience. This ecofeminist thread in her work expands the scope of Dalit literature to engage with global conversations on environmental justice and gender, aligning her with figures like Meena Kandasamy and ecofeminist theorists who insist that environmental and social liberation are one. Along with the linguistic axis and also Bama's radical employment of Dalit-Tamil dialect asserts cultural self-determination, and dismantling elitist language hierarchies. Thus, proving that oppressed communities can "weave the world with words" on their own terms.

The confluence of these three axes in Bama's writing yields a thoroughly intersectional text – it attacks casteism, sexism, and economic exploitation not in isolation, but as mutually reinforcing systems. This integrated critique is one of Bama's radical accomplishments. It also situates her firmly within global feminist and subaltern discourse. Bama's insistence on telling her story in her voice parallels African-American feminist Audre Lorde's famous dictum, of "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." (Lorde 110) Bama rejects the master's tongue and theology, crafting new tools from the vernacular idiom and lived reality of Dalit women. Her work engages in a silent dialogue with other subaltern literatures: one can draw lines from Bama to Black women's narratives of navigating racist patriarchy, or to Indigenous narratives of land dispossession and cultural resurgence. In the field of postcolonial theology, Bama's portrayal of a Dalit Christ adds an important feminist dimension, reminding us that any liberation theology must contend with gender as well as class/caste.

At the same time, Bama's project is not without ongoing challenges and complexities. One challenge is representation: as a personal narrative that speaks for a community, *Karukku* had to negotiate the fine line between individual voice and collective testimony. Scholars have debated whether Bama's "I" truly becomes a "we" – Pandian argued that she de-bourgeoisifies autobiography into a *testimonio*, yet some critics ask if specific Dalit experiences (e.g. those of non-Christian Dalits, or of Dalit men) fall outside her purview. Another challenge is how Bama's work is received in the mainstream. While widely celebrated, there have been attempts to co-opt or sanitize her narrative, especially in translations and academic interpretations. The coarse edges of her dialect, the full force of her anger at the Church, or the sexuality

of her female characters might be toned down in some retellings, which is an important concern that future scholarship – especially Dalit scholars – continually raise (Shankar 88). Moreover, as Bama herself has noted, caste oppression in India has evolved in the decades since her books – from overt exclusion to more insidious forms of discrimination – requiring ever-new modes of resistance. The axes of her analysis might need expansion: for instance, how does technology or urbanization affect Dalit women's struggles today? *Karukku*, confronting new environmental crises like climate change or new forms of Christian institutional power? Bama's pioneering frameworks lay the groundwork, but succeeding writers will need to build on them in changed circumstances.

Nonetheless, the legacy of Bama's work is undeniable. She carved out a space in Indian literature for Dalit feminist voices, influencing writers such as Kutty Revathi, Sivakami, and others to speak unabashedly about body and society in their own languages. Internationally, her work has been studied in comparative contexts – for example, alongside Black American literature on intersectionality, or alongside Latin American women's *testimonio* – demonstrating the universality of its resonance through the particularity of its context. Bama's voice, rooted in a small Tamil village, echoes global questions about how the most oppressed can narrate their truth to power. In *Karukku*'s concluding pages, she envisages her shattered self (the broken *karukku* palm leaf) becoming a tool that can scrape away injustice. That vision has materialized: her books themselves have become tools – taught in universities, discussed in movements – to scrape away ignorance and indifference about caste, gender, and poverty.

In conclusion, Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati* stand as seminal texts in Dalit and feminist literature, offering a model of how storytelling can merge with theory to drive social critique. Her vernacular and accessible theology destabilizes religious and social orthodoxies, her ecofeminist consciousness links human and environmental liberation, and her linguistic daring reclaims the right to define one's own reality. In a country where the world is still riven by casteist, sexist, and neo-colonial structures, Bama's writing remains fiercely relevant, a testament to the power of the subaltern woman not only to speak, as Spivak questioned, but to sing, shout, and ultimately, to be heard on her own terms. Bama has woven her marginalized world with words, and in doing so, she has changed the landscape of literature and the possibilities of resistance for those who come after her.

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