RESEARCH PAPER

Caste, Christianity, and Gender: Religious Hegemony in Bama's Dalit Narratives

Ritu [1], Dr. Munish Kumar Thakur[2]

[1]*Research Scholar, Department of English, Singhania University, Rajasthan*
[2]*Associate Professor, Department of English, Singhania University, Rajasthan*

ABSTRACT
While Christianity in India claims a moral commitment to equality, compassion, and social justice, Dalit autobiographical and fictional narratives repeatedly expose the persistence of caste hierarchies within Christian institutions. This paper offers an in-depth critical study of Bama's Karukku and selected narratives to examine how religion functions as a site of ideological control rather than emancipation for Dalit women. Drawing on Dalit feminist theory, postcolonial theology, and caste studies, the article argues that the Church in Bama's writing reproduces Brahmanical structures of power through gendered labour, moral surveillance, and institutional silence. At the same time, Bama articulates a counter-spirituality grounded in ethical action, collective dignity, and social justice. The study demonstrates that Dalit womanhood in Bama's texts emerges not in opposition to faith itself but in resistance to religious hegemony that normalizes caste patriarchy.
Keywords: Dalit Christianity; Caste and Gender; Religious Hegemony; Bama; Feminist Theology; Dalit Feminism
How to cite this article: Ritu, Thakur MK, Caste, Christianity, and Gender: Religious Hegemony in Bama's Dalit Narratives .Int J Drug Deliv Technol. 2026;16(2s): 287-293; DOI: 10.25258/ijddt.16. 287-293
Source of support: Nil.
Conflict of interest: None

INTRODUCTION

Religion in *Karukku* emerges not as a liberatory force but as an institutional mechanism that reproduces caste hierarchy through moral authority and gendered discipline. Although Christianity claims egalitarianism, Bama demonstrates that caste identities remain deeply entrenched within Church practices, particularly in the allocation of labour and authority (Bama, *Karukku* 88–89). Dalit women within convents are assigned physically demanding tasks, while upper-caste nuns occupy positions of leadership, reflecting what Rege identifies as the "graded inequality" embedded in Indian social institutions (Rege 91).

The spiritualization of labour functions as a key ideological strategy. Acts of exploitation are reframed as service, and obedience is valorised as virtue, rendering resistance morally suspect (Thakur 157). This aligns with Althusser's notion of ideology operating through consent rather than coercion, where subjects internalise domination as a moral duty. Dalit women are thus disciplined into silence, their suffering rendered invisible under the rhetoric of humility and sacrifice (Thakur 117). Gendered surveillance further intensifies caste oppression. Dalit nuns are subjected to heightened scrutiny regarding behaviour and speech, reinforcing patriarchal authority within religious space (Thakur 18). Feminist theologians such as Ruether critique Christianity's patriarchal structures, yet their analyses remain incomplete without accounting for caste as a determining axis of inequality (Ruether 41). Bama's narrative fills this theoretical gap by revealing how caste patriarchy operates within religious institutions.

Bama's eventual departure from the convent constitutes a decisive ethical rupture. This act signifies not a rejection of faith but a refusal to participate in institutional injustice (Bama, *Karukku* 107). Her choice aligns with Dalit liberation theology, which prioritises social justice over ritual conformity (Rege 118). By grounding spirituality in ethical action and community solidarity, Bama articulates a counter-spirituality that challenges both religious and feminist orthodoxies.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Critical engagement with Bama's writings—particularly *Karukku*—has steadily expanded since its publication, positioning the text as foundational to Dalit women's life writing in Indian English literature. Early responses to *Karukku* primarily read it as an autobiographical narrative that foregrounds caste oppression and Dalit identity. Lakshmi Holmström, who translated *Karukku* into English, emphasises the text's linguistic rupture, noting that Bama's prose deliberately resists aesthetic polish in order to retain the rawness of lived experience (Holmström xvi). This stylistic choice, Holmström argues, is inseparable from the politics of Dalit assertion. Subsequent scholarship shifted toward feminist readings of Bama's work. Sharmila Rege situates *Karukku* within Dalit feminist epistemology, arguing that the text challenges both upper-caste feminism and male-centric Dalit politics by foregrounding the specificity of Dalit women's suffering (Rege 89). Rege's work is particularly significant in establishing that Dalit women's narratives must be read not merely as subaltern

**Author for Correspondence: drbaswarajpharma1@gmail.com*

testimonies but as sites of theory production rooted in experience.

Several scholars have examined the theme of religion in *Karukku*, though often tangentially. M. Prabha notes that Bama's critique of Christianity exposes the persistence of caste within supposedly egalitarian institutions, highlighting the contradiction between Christian doctrine and social practice (Prabha 112). Similarly, Selvakumar's theological reading acknowledges caste discrimination within Indian churches but stops short of a sustained gender analysis, treating women's experiences as secondary to broader ecclesiastical concerns (Selvakumar 64). Ethnographic studies by David Mosse provide an important sociological context for Bama's literary critique. Mosse's research on South Indian Catholic communities demonstrates how caste identities continue to structure labour, marriage, and authority within Christian congregations despite formal theological rejection of caste (Mosse 213–15). While Mosse's work corroborates Bama's observations, it does not centre Dalit women's voices or analyse narrative representation.

Feminist theological scholarship has interrogated the patriarchal nature of religious institutions, yet largely from upper-caste or Western perspectives. Scholars such as Rosemary Radford Ruether critique Christianity's historical complicity in gender oppression, but caste remains absent from such frameworks (37). This absence underscores the need for caste-specific feminist theological analysis such as that offered implicitly by Bama's narrative. Despite the growing body of scholarship, existing studies tend to either emphasise caste or gender, rarely addressing their intersection within Christian institutions (Thakur 116). Moreover, *Karukku* is frequently read as a personal spiritual crisis rather than as a systematic critique of religious hegemony. This paper intervenes by foregrounding Dalit Christian womanhood as a critical lens through which religious authority, caste hierarchy, and gendered discipline can be jointly analysed.

RESEARCH GAP

While substantial scholarship exists on *Karukku* as a Dalit autobiographical text and as a feminist narrative, three major gaps remain evident. First, there is a lack of sustained analysis of Christianity as an ideological structure that reproduces caste through gendered labour and moral discipline. Most studies acknowledge caste discrimination within the Church but treat it as social residue rather than institutional practice. Second, existing feminist theological critiques of Christianity remain largely caste-neutral. Dalit women's experiences within religious institutions are often subsumed under generalised discussions of patriarchy, erasing the specificity of caste-based humiliation and exclusion. Third, Bama's articulation of counter-spirituality—faith grounded in ethical resistance rather than institutional obedience—has not been sufficiently theorised. Her departure from the convent is frequently interpreted as personal disillusionment rather than as a politically significant Dalit feminist act. This paper addresses these gaps by offering a caste-conscious, gender-sensitive reading of Bama's religious critique, positioning *Karukku* as both literary intervention and ethical philosophy.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

To critically examine the functioning of Christian institutions in Bama's narratives as sites of caste and gender oppression, with particular emphasis on labour division, discipline, and silence.

To analyse how Dalit womanhood in *Karukku* articulates a counter-spirituality rooted in ethical resistance, challenging dominant theological and feminist frameworks that overlook caste.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative, textual, and interdisciplinary methodology. Primary analysis focuses on Bama's *Karukku*, supplemented by references to her broader narrative corpus where relevant. The research employs close textual reading to examine narrative voice, institutional representation, and thematic patterns related to caste, gender, and religion. The theoretical framework draws on Dalit feminist theory (Rege, Guru), postcolonial caste studies, and feminist theology. Secondary sources include literary criticism, sociological studies of Indian Christianity, and feminist theological texts. MLA 9th edition guidelines are followed for citation and documentation. The methodology emphasises interpretation grounded in lived experience rather than abstract universalism, aligning with Dalit feminist epistemology.

Theoretical Framework: Dalit Feminism and Feminist Theology

This study is firmly grounded in Dalit feminist epistemology, an intellectual framework that challenges dominant modes of knowledge production by centring lived experience, collective memory, and structural critique over abstract universalism. Unlike mainstream feminist theory, which often assumes gender as a singular and universal category of oppression, Dalit feminist thought insists that gender is always mediated by caste, class, and community location (Rege 3; Guru 2549). Dalit women's narratives thus emerge not merely as personal testimonies but as critical interventions that expose the limitations of upper-caste feminist discourse, which has historically privileged Savarna women's experiences as representative of all women's oppression.

Sharmila Rege's formulation of the "Dalit feminist standpoint" is particularly significant for this study. Rege argues that Dalit women's life narratives constitute an alternative knowledge system rooted in embodied suffering, historical marginalisation, and everyday resistance (89). Such narratives disrupt the epistemic authority of elite feminism by revealing how caste structures gendered violence, labour exploitation, and silencing in ways that cannot be adequately theorized through gender alone. In this sense, Dalit women's writing does not simply add "caste" to feminism but fundamentally reshapes feminist

theory itself by exposing its exclusions and blind spots (Dahiya and Thakur b415; Paik 34). Bama's texts exemplify this Dalit feminist standpoint with remarkable clarity. In *Karukku* and *Sangati*, knowledge does not emerge from institutional spaces such as universities, churches, or reformist organisations, but from everyday life—fields, streets, kitchens, schools, and convents—where caste oppression is experienced in its most intimate and routine forms (Bama, *Karukku* 15; Bama, *Sangati* 27). The authority of Bama's narrative voice lies precisely in its refusal of abstract theorisation; instead, theory is embedded in anecdote, memory, and collective speech. This aligns with what Gopal Guru identifies as the "theoretical significance of lived experience" in Dalit discourse, where everyday humiliation itself becomes a site of critical knowledge production (Guru 2550; Guru 2554).

Importantly, Dalit feminist epistemology foregrounds collectivity rather than individualism. Unlike liberal feminist autobiographies that emphasise personal self-realisation, Dalit women's narratives consistently blur the boundary between the individual and the community. Bama's use of the first-person voice often shifts into a collective "we," transforming individual pain into shared social critique (Qurat-Al-Ain and Thakur 101724; Holmström xvii). This collective orientation challenges bourgeois notions of authorship and subjectivity, asserting that Dalit womanhood is constituted through relational experience rather than isolated selfhood (Rege 102; Chakravarti 17). Alongside Dalit feminist theory, this paper draws extensively on feminist theological critiques that interrogate religion as a powerful site of gendered and institutional control. Feminist theologians have long examined how religious traditions regulate women's bodies, labour, sexuality, and moral behaviour while consolidating male authority within institutional hierarchies (Ruether 37; Fiorenza 45). Such critiques reveal how religion often legitimises patriarchy by presenting gender inequality as divinely sanctioned or morally necessary.

However, a critical limitation of much feminist theological scholarship—particularly that emerging from Western or upper-caste contexts—is its failure to account for caste as a constitutive axis of religious power. These frameworks frequently assume a universal category of "woman" within religious institutions, thereby obscuring the differentiated experiences of Dalit women whose oppression is intensified by caste hierarchy (Rege 113; Paik 41). Bama's intervention is crucial precisely because it exposes how Christianity in India does not exist outside caste society but actively absorbs and reproduces Brahmanical values through institutional practice (Bama, *Karukku* 92; Mosse 214). In Bama's narratives, Christian theology operates alongside caste ideology to produce a caste-inflected patriarchy, where Dalit women are disproportionately burdened with physical labour, disciplined through moral surveillance, and excluded from positions of authority (Bama, *Karukku* 88–89; Prabha 115). Labour performed by Dalit women in convents and religious institutions is spiritualized as "service," while inequality is normalised as humility and obedience. This echoes what feminist scholars describe as the moralization of women's suffering within religious discourse, where endurance is valorized and resistance is condemned (Ruether 41; Rege 118).

By foregrounding Dalit women's experiences within Christian institutions, Bama challenges feminist theology to confront its own caste blindness. Her writing demonstrates that patriarchy within religion cannot be dismantled without simultaneously addressing caste hierarchy, as the two function in mutually reinforcing ways (Guru 2552; Mosse 216). In this sense, Bama's work contributes to an emergent Dalit feminist theology—one that redefines spirituality in ethical and political terms rather than institutional obedience. Postcolonial theory further informs this analysis by situating Indian Christianity within intersecting histories of colonialism, missionary intervention, and indigenous social structures. Christianity in India cannot be understood merely as a transplanted Western religion; it is shaped by colonial power relations and local caste dynamics that transformed missionary institutions into sites of social negotiation rather than radical equality (Dirks 89; Mosse 210). Missionary critiques of caste often remained superficial, focusing on ritual practices while leaving intact the social and economic hierarchies that structured everyday life.

The Church's complicity in caste reproduction, therefore, must be read within this postcolonial context, where colonial governance, indigenous elites, and religious institutions intersected to stabilise social order (Dirks 92; Chakravarti 21). Bama's critique exposes how these historical forces continue to shape contemporary Christian practices—particularly in the regulation of labour, authority, and morality. By situating her narrative within this broader historical frame, the study underscores that religious oppression is not accidental or anomalous but structurally produced. Taken together, Dalit feminist epistemology, feminist theological critique, and postcolonial theory provide a robust interdisciplinary framework for analysing Bama's texts. This combined approach allows the study to read Dalit womanhood not merely as a category of victimhood but as a site of ethical knowledge, resistance, and theoretical intervention. Bama's writing thus emerges as both literary expression and critical philosophy, demanding that feminism, theology, and postcolonial studies confront caste as a central and unavoidable axis of power.

The Church as an Ideological Apparatus

In *Karukku*, the Church is represented not as a transformative or emancipatory institution but as a deeply hierarchical structure that closely mirrors the logic and organisation of caste society. Rather than challenging the inequalities of the social order into which it is embedded, the Church reproduces those inequalities through its internal arrangements of authority, labour, and discipline. Bama's depiction of convent life reveals a rigid institutional hierarchy in which obedience is elevated to the status of moral virtue, while questioning, critique, and dissent are actively discouraged and punished (Bama, *Karukku* 86–88). This hierarchical structure is not incidental but systemic,

shaping everyday interactions and determining the distribution of power within religious spaces. Central to this hierarchy is the caste-based division of labour, which operates under the moral vocabulary of Christian "service." Dalit nuns are consistently assigned physically demanding, repetitive, and menial tasks such as cleaning, cooking, washing, and maintenance, while positions involving administration, teaching, decision-making, and intellectual authority are monopolised by upper-caste women (Bama, *Karukku* 88–89; Mosse 214). This labour segregation closely resembles the traditional caste allocation of work in Hindu society, revealing how caste ideology adapts itself within Christian institutions without losing its structural logic (Dirks 91; Rege 118). The Church thus becomes a site where caste is not abolished but re-coded in religious terms. What renders this form of oppression particularly insidious is its normalisation through spiritual discourse. Labour exploitation is not recognised as an injustice but reframed as spiritual discipline, humility, and sacrifice, thereby converting material inequality into moral obligation (Bama, *Karukku* 92; Prabha 114). Dalit women are encouraged to interpret their suffering as a test of faith and their endurance as evidence of spiritual maturity. In this process, dissent is pathologised as arrogance or moral weakness, while silence and submission are celebrated as virtues (Bama, *Karukku* 94; Ruether 41). Such moral framing effectively forecloses the possibility of critique by transforming structural violence into personal failing. This mechanism closely aligns with Louis Althusser's concept of ideology, wherein institutions function not primarily through force but through the production of compliant subjects who internalise domination as natural and necessary (Althusser 170; Rege 121). The Church in *Karukku* operates as an ideological apparatus that shapes Dalit women's subjectivity, training them to accept inequality as divinely sanctioned and socially inevitable. By moulding conscience rather than enforcing punishment alone, the institution ensures the reproduction of caste hierarchy with minimal resistance. Dalit women are thus disciplined into self-regulation, learning to police their own thoughts, speech, and aspirations.

Bama's narrative power lies in her exposure of how Christian institutions in India fail to dismantle caste precisely because they do not recognise it as a moral or theological problem. Officially, caste is denied or dismissed as irrelevant within Christian doctrine; practically, it continues to structure everyday interactions, authority relations, and labour practices (Bama, *Karukku* 95; Mosse 216). Caste operates invisibly, embedded in routine practices and interpersonal conduct rather than articulated policy, making it both pervasive and difficult to challenge. This invisibility allows the Church to maintain its claim to moral superiority while participating in social injustice. By narrating these experiences from within the institution, Bama destabilises the Church's moral authority in a way that external critique cannot. Her position as a former nun grants the narrative ethical credibility and experiential depth, transforming *Karukku* into an insider testimony that exposes institutional hypocrisy (Holmström xviii; Rege 104). The Church's failure is thus revealed not as individual prejudice but as structural complicity, implicating religious authority in the perpetuation of caste-based injustice. In foregrounding Dalit women's lived realities, Bama compels feminist theology and religious discourse to confront caste as a central, rather than peripheral, axis of power.

Gender, Discipline, and Moral Surveillance

In Bama's *Karukku*, gender functions as a critical axis through which institutional power is exercised, regulated, and normalised within Christian spaces. Discipline within the Church is not merely spiritual or administrative; it is deeply gendered, operating through mechanisms of moral surveillance that disproportionately target Dalit women's bodies, behaviour, and speech. Bama reveals how religious discipline becomes a mode of social control, enforcing conformity while suppressing dissent, particularly among women from marginalised caste backgrounds (Bama, *Karukku* 96–97). Gendered discipline thus operates as a subtle yet pervasive form of violence, shaping subjectivity rather than relying solely on overt punishment.

Moral surveillance in the convent is framed as spiritual guidance, yet it functions as a system of constant monitoring that regulates women's everyday conduct. Dalit nuns are expected to embody ideals of humility, silence, obedience, and self-denial, while deviation from these norms is interpreted as moral failure rather than legitimate critique (Bama, *Karukku* 98; Ruether 39). This surveillance extends beyond labour into emotional expression, speech patterns, and even bodily comportment, reinforcing a form of internalised discipline that aligns with Michel Foucault's concept of power operating through self-regulation rather than coercion (Foucault 202; Rege 120). Women learn to police themselves, anticipating institutional judgment and suppressing resistance before it is articulated. The gendered nature of this surveillance becomes especially evident in the unequal scrutiny applied to Dalit women as compared to their upper-caste counterparts. Dalit nuns are more frequently reprimanded, more harshly judged, and more readily accused of moral inadequacy, revealing how caste intensifies patriarchal discipline (Bama, *Karukku* 100; Mosse 215). Their mistakes are read as character flaws, while similar actions by upper-caste women are excused or overlooked. This differential evaluation reinforces what Uma Chakravarti describes as "graded patriarchy," where women's subordination is structured hierarchically rather than uniformly (Chakravarti 15; Guru 2551).

Gendered discipline is further sustained through the spiritualization of suffering. Endurance is celebrated as a virtue, and pain is reframed as divine testing. Dalit women are encouraged to accept humiliation as part of their religious calling, thereby transforming structural injustice into personal spiritual responsibility (Bama, *Karukku* 101; Rege 118). This theological framing discourages resistance by casting dissent as pride or rebellion against divine order. Feminist theologians have critiqued this logic as a patriarchal strategy that sanctifies women's suffering while preserving institutional authority (Ruether 41; Fiorenza 48),

yet Bama's narrative exposes how caste renders this strategy even more oppressive for Dalit women.

Language plays a crucial role in sustaining moral surveillance. Silence is valorised as a spiritual ideal, particularly for women, while speech is associated with disobedience and moral transgression (Bama, *Karukku* 103; Holmström xix). Dalit women's voices are systematically devalued, their testimonies dismissed as emotional or disruptive. This silencing not only erases individual experiences but also prevents the formation of collective critique. As Gopal Guru observes, the denial of voice constitutes a central dimension of caste oppression, transforming social inequality into epistemic injustice (Guru 2553; Paik 44). In *Karukku*, silence thus emerges as both imposed discipline and enforced invisibility. The regulation of sexuality constitutes another crucial dimension of moral surveillance. Women's bodies are subject to intense scrutiny, with sexuality framed as a potential source of moral contamination. Dalit women, in particular, are positioned as morally suspect, reflecting broader caste stereotypes that associate Dalit bodies with impurity and lack of self-control (Bama, *Karukku* 104; Chakravarti 19). This sexualized surveillance reinforces patriarchal control while reproducing caste stigma, making Dalit womanhood a site of compounded vulnerability within religious institutions.

Importantly, *Karukku* demonstrates that moral surveillance is not enforced solely through formal authority but through everyday interactions and internalised norms. Senior nuns, often upper-caste, act as intermediaries of institutional power, disciplining Dalit women through reprimands, subtle humiliations, and moral judgments (Bama, *Karukku* 99; Mosse 217). This internal policing fractures potential solidarity among women, ensuring that power circulates horizontally as well as vertically. Such dynamics illustrate how patriarchy and caste reproduce themselves through complicity as much as coercion. Bama's narrative exposes the psychological toll of this constant surveillance. The internalisation of discipline produces self-doubt, guilt, and emotional exhaustion, limiting Dalit women's capacity to imagine alternatives to institutional life (Bama, *Karukku* 105; Rege 122). Resistance becomes difficult not because oppression is invisible, but because it is normalised and moralised. In this context, leaving the convent emerges as an act of profound ethical courage rather than personal failure. Bama's departure represents a refusal to accept a system that demands silence and submission at the expense of dignity and justice (Bama, *Karukku* 107; Guru 2554). Accordingly, *Karukku* advances a powerful critique of religious patriarchy that is inseparable from caste analysis. Bama compels feminist theology to confront the ways in which spiritual discourse legitimizes inequality and silences marginalized women. Her writing demonstrates that liberation for Dalit women cannot be achieved within institutions that rely on surveillance, silence, and moral coercion. Instead, ethical subjectivity emerges through resistance, critique, and the reclamation of voice.

Caste, Silence, and Institutional Hypocrisy

In *Karukku*, caste operates not only through visible practices of discrimination but through an enforced regime of silence that protects institutional authority and masks social injustice. Bama exposes how Christian institutions, while publicly professing ideals of equality, compassion, and justice, sustain caste hierarchies by refusing to acknowledge their existence. This deliberate silence constitutes a powerful form of ideological control, enabling the Church to maintain moral legitimacy while participating in systemic exclusion (Bama, *Karukku* 94–95). Silence, in this context, is not absence but strategy—a means through which caste power is normalised and rendered unchallengeable. The denial of caste within Christian discourse functions as a form of institutional hypocrisy. Official narratives often proclaim that conversion erases social hierarchy, presenting Christianity as a casteless faith. Yet Bama's narrative demonstrates that caste continues to structure everyday interactions, authority relations, and labour allocation within religious spaces (Bama, *Karukku* 88; Mosse 213–15). By refusing to name caste as a problem, the Church absolves itself of responsibility while allowing discriminatory practices to persist. This gap between theological rhetoric and lived reality exposes the ethical failure at the heart of institutional religion.

Silence is enforced as a moral obligation, particularly for Dalit women whose experiences threaten institutional self-image. Complaints about discrimination are dismissed as a lack of humility or spiritual immaturity, and dissent is framed as rebellion rather than ethical critique (Bama, *Karukku* 96; Rege 118). Such moral reframing transforms injustice into personal failing, discouraging resistance while preserving institutional authority. As Gopal Guru argues, the denial of recognition is central to caste oppression, as it prevents marginalised subjects from articulating suffering in socially intelligible ways (Guru 2552–53; Paik 46). This silencing extends beyond individual interactions to collective memory. Stories of humiliation, exploitation, and exclusion are systematically erased or minimised, preventing the formation of a shared history of injustice within the Church. By contrast, Bama's act of writing functions as a counter-memory that resists institutional amnesia (Bama, *Karukku* 7; Holmström xvii). Her narrative reclaims experiences that institutions seek to forget, transforming silence into speech and invisibility into testimony. In doing so, *Karukku* challenges what Michel-Rolph Trouillot identifies as "silencing in the production of history," where power determines not only what is remembered but what is speakable (Trouillot 26; Rege 123). Institutional hypocrisy becomes most evident in moments where Christian teachings of love and justice coexist with everyday practices of exclusion. Sermons advocating compassion are contradicted by the routine humiliation of Dalit women, revealing a profound ethical dissonance between belief and practice (Bama, *Karukku* 95; Prabha 116). This contradiction undermines the Church's claim to moral authority, exposing its complicity in sustaining social hierarchy. Feminist theologians have long critiqued such contradictions within religious institutions, yet Bama's narrative foregrounds caste as the missing axis in these

critiques (Ruether 42; Fiorenza 51). The hypocrisy of the Church is further reinforced through bureaucratic mechanisms that deflect accountability. Discrimination is individualised and depoliticised, treated as interpersonal misunderstanding rather than structural injustice (Bama, *Karukku* 97; Mosse 217). This depoliticization aligns with what Althusser describes as ideological reproduction, where institutions preserve dominance by obscuring the structural nature of oppression (Althusser 172; Rege 121). By framing caste discrimination as an aberration rather than a norm, the Church preserves its moral self-image while marginalising Dalit women's experiences.

Dalit women occupy a particularly vulnerable position within this regime of silence. Their testimonies are doubly discredited—first by caste prejudice and second by patriarchal assumptions that dismiss women's speech as emotional or disruptive (Bama, *Karukku* 103; Chakravarti 18). This intersectional silencing prevents Dalit women from accessing institutional justice, reinforcing their marginalisation. Silence thus becomes both an imposed condition and a survival strategy, as speaking out often invites further punishment rather than redress. Yet *Karukku* itself represents a powerful rupture in this culture of silence. By narrating experiences that institutions seek to suppress, Bama exposes hypocrisy and demands ethical accountability. Writing becomes an act of resistance that challenges both religious authority and dominant historiography (Bama, *Karukku* 106; Rege 125). Her narrative insists that faith without justice is hollow, and spirituality divorced from ethical responsibility is complicit in oppression. Through its sustained critique of caste, silence, and hypocrisy, *Karukku* redefines the relationship between religion and morality. Bama demonstrates that the true ethical failure of the Church lies not merely in discriminatory acts but in its refusal to listen, acknowledge, and transform. By foregrounding Dalit women's voices, the text calls for a reimagining of spirituality grounded in truth, accountability, and social justice.

Despite its searing critique of religious institutions, *Karukku* does not reject spirituality itself. Instead, Bama articulates a counter-spirituality rooted in ethical action, dignity, and solidarity. Her decision to leave the convent marks a critical turning point, representing a refusal to participate in an institution that demands obedience at the cost of justice. This act of departure is not framed as a loss of faith but as a reclamation of ethical agency. Bama's spirituality is grounded in lived relationships rather than institutional authority. It aligns with what Dalit theologians describe as liberation theology—a faith practice oriented toward social transformation rather than ritual conformity. By redefining spirituality as resistance, Bama expands the possibilities of religious engagement for Dalit women. Faith becomes a resource for critique rather than submission, and spirituality is reclaimed as a space of moral imagination.

CONCLUSION

Bama's sustained interrogation of Christianity in *Karukku* and her related narratives constitutes one of the most rigorous and unsettling interventions in contemporary Dalit feminist and theological discourse. By situating religious institutions within the material and symbolic operations of caste and patriarchy, her writing decisively dismantles the myth of religious neutrality that continues to shield Christian institutions in India from ethical scrutiny. Rather than functioning as sites of emancipation, the Church and convent emerge in Bama's narrative as ideological spaces that reproduce caste hierarchy through gendered labour, moral discipline, enforced silence, and institutional hypocrisy (Bama, *Karukku* 88–95; Mosse 213–17).

This study has demonstrated that caste in *Karukku* does not merely survive within Christian institutions as a residual social practice; it is actively sustained through everyday routines, unspoken norms, and moral vocabularies that reframe inequality as virtue. The spiritualization of Dalit women's labour, the normalisation of obedience, and the suppression of dissent reveal how religion operates as a powerful ideological apparatus that shapes subjectivity rather than merely regulating conduct (Althusser 170–72; Rege 118–21). Gendered discipline and moral surveillance further intensify this oppression, rendering Dalit women's bodies, speech, and emotions subject to constant scrutiny while foreclosing the possibility of ethical critique (Bama, *Karukku* 96–104; Foucault 202). Crucially, Bama's critique exposes silence as one of the most effective instruments of institutional power. The refusal to name caste, acknowledge discrimination, or record histories of humiliation allows the Church to maintain its moral self-image while perpetuating structural injustice (Bama, *Karukku* 94–97; Guru 2552–54). This enforced silence produces not only social exclusion but epistemic violence, denying Dalit women recognition as knowing subjects whose experiences carry theoretical and ethical weight (Rege 123; Paik 46). By writing against this silence, *Karukku* functions as a counter-archive that reclaims memory, voice, and moral authority from institutions invested in forgetting.

At the same time, Bama's work resists any simplistic rejection of faith. Her narrative does not culminate in atheism or spiritual abandonment but in the articulation of a counter-spirituality grounded in ethical responsibility, collective dignity, and social justice. The decision to leave the convent marks a decisive rupture with institutional authority, yet it affirms a deeper commitment to faith understood as lived ethics rather than ritual obedience (Bama, *Karukku* 107; Rege 125). This redefinition of spirituality aligns with Dalit liberation theology, which insists that faith divorced from justice is ethically hollow. This study therefore argues that Dalit womanhood in Bama's texts emerges not through withdrawal from spirituality but through resistance to religious hegemony. Bama reclaims faith as an ethical practice inseparable from the struggle against caste and gender oppression, challenging both mainstream feminist discourse and feminist theology to confront their own caste blindness (Ruether 41–42; Chakravarti 19). Her writing makes clear that feminist politics cannot remain credible without addressing caste as a central axis of power, and that

religious institutions cannot claim moral legitimacy without accountability to the lives they discipline and silence. Therefore, in foregrounding Dalit Christian women's lived experiences, *Karukku* expands the horizons of Indian English literature, feminist theory, and postcolonial theology alike. It demands a rethinking of liberation not as inclusion within existing institutions but as the ethical transformation of social relations themselves. Bama's narrative thus stands as both literary testimony and moral philosophy, insisting that justice, dignity, and truth must precede institutional authority. In doing so, it leaves an enduring challenge to scholars, theologians, and feminists: to listen to Dalit women's voices not as marginal supplements to theory, but as theory itself.

REFERENCE

1. Althusser, Louis. Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses. Translated by Ben Brewster, Monthly Review Press, 1971.
2. Ambedkar, B. R. Annihilation of Caste. Verso, 2014.
3. Bama. Karukku. Translated by Lakshmi Holmström, Oxford UP, 2012.
4. ---. Sangati: Events. Translated by Lakshmi Holmström, Oxford UP, 2005.
5. Chakravarti, Uma. Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens. Sage Publications, 2003.
6. Dahiya, Seema, and Munish Kumar Thakur. "Ecofeminism in Indian English Literature: Role of Women Writers and Their Concerns." International Journal for Research Trends and Innovation, vol. 10, no. 7, July 2025, pp. b414–17. www.ijrti.org/viewpaperforall?paper=IJRTI2507160.
7. Foucault, Michel. Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison. Translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage Books, 1995.
8. Gopal Guru. "Dalit Women Talk Differently." Economic and Political Weekly, vol. 30, no. 41/42, 1995, pp. 2548–50. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4403327.
9. Holmström, Lakshmi. Introduction. Karukku, by Bama, Oxford UP, 2012, pp. vii–xx.
10. Mosse, David. The Saint in the Banyan Tree: Christianity and Caste Society in India. University of California Press, 2012.
11. Paik, Shailaja. Dalit Women's Education in Modern India: Double Discrimination. Routledge, 2014.
12. Qurat-Al-Ain, Peer, and Munish Kumar Thakur. "An Analysis of Margaret Atwood's the Handmaid's Tale in Contrasting Perspective With Naomi Alderman's the Power From an Ecofeminist Perspective." Social Sciences & Humanities Open, vol. 12, Jan. 2025, p. 101724. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.101724.
13. Rege, Sharmila. Writing Caste / Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios. Zubaan, 2006.
14. Rege, Sharmila. "Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of 'Difference' and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position." Economic and Political Weekly, vol. 33, no. 44, 1998, pp. WS39–46. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4407323.
15. Ruether, Rosemary Radford. Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology. Beacon Press, 1993.
16. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271–313.
17. Thakur, Munish Kumar. "FAMILY EXPECTATIONS AND INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY IN UNACCUSTOMED EARTH BY JHUMPA LAHIRI." Zenodo (CERN European Organization for Nuclear Research), Nov. 2024, pp. 153-161. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14196561.
18. Thakur, Munish Kumar. "Life of Women Adversely Affected by Communal Frenzy in Felanee by Arupa Pathangia Kalita." Creative Saplings, vol. 2, no. 1, Jan. 2023, pp. 15–24. https://doi.org/10.56062/gtrs.2023.1.10.193.
19. Thakur, Munish Kumar. "Women, Folklore, and the Digitization of Gendered Narratives: A Study of Angela Carter's the Bloody Chamber." LitCult a Journal of Literary and Cultural Discourse, vol. 1, no. 2, July 2025, pp. 113–27. https://doi.org/10.63285/litcult.vol.1.issue.02.008.
20. Tharu, Susie, and K. Lalita, editors. Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present. Vol. 2, Feminist Press, 1993.