

Breaking Boundaries: Dalit Resistance and Revival in Bama's Writings

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51583/IJLTEMAS.2026.150300110>

Received: 05 March 2026; March: 14 April 2026; Published: 22 April 2026

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the transformation of Dalit identity through the literary contributions of Bama, a pioneering Dalit feminist writer in Tamil literature. Her works, including *Karukku*, *Vanmam*, *Ponnuthayi*, and *Those Days*, chronicle the social, emotional, and political journey of Dalits from subjugation to assertion. Drawing from lived experiences and oral histories, Bama's narratives provide a platform for voices long silenced by caste and gender hierarchies. This paper examines how Bama uses storytelling as resistance, portraying education, collective unity, and the awakening of self-worth as keys to liberation. It also evaluates how her female characters challenge patriarchal norms and contribute to the broader Dalit movement, reflecting a powerful shift from caste-based slavery to human dignity.

Keywords: Dalit literature, caste oppression, resistance, identity, Ambedkar's ideology, feminism.

INTRODUCTION

India's rigid caste system has deeply fragmented society, marginalizing Dalits—historically known by various names such as Tirukulattar, Adithravidar, Harijan, Pallar and Paraiyar. Despite constitutional protections, Dalits remain at the receiving end of systemic discrimination: economic exploitation, religious ostracism, cultural marginalization, and political invisibility. Denied access to land, education, and social respect, generations of Dalits were relegated to the bottom rung of the caste ladder.

The term "Dalit", meaning oppressed or broken, has emerged not just as a social category but as a symbol of resistance and collective assertion. Derived from Marathi and resonating across Indian languages, it reflects the pain and defiance of those crushed under centuries of casteist oppression. Bama, a prominent Dalit Christian woman writer from Tamil Nadu, reclaims this identity in her works not as a victim but as a badge of resistance. She asserts that the term "Dalit" should not signify a caste, but a political identity grounded in justice and equality.

While India's economic growth and political modernization promised inclusion, the lived realities of Dalits remained largely unchanged. Segregated living areas, untouchability in religious and social spaces, and limited access to dignified employment were the norm. Reformers such as Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, Periyar, and B.R. Ambedkar ignited the early flames of resistance. Ambedkar, particularly, inspired millions by declaring that Dalit emancipation were not about power, but about reclaiming the human personality. Bama continues this legacy through her pen.

Education as Emancipation

One of the central themes in *Karukku* is the emancipatory potential of education. For centuries, Dalits were kept illiterate as a means to maintain social hierarchy. Bama's journey, from a rural Dalit girl to an acclaimed writer and educator, exemplifies the transformative power of knowledge. She recalls how her brother, after completing

a postgraduate degree, was addressed as “Sir” at a public library. This moment of reversal highlights how education can challenge the caste order.

Bama writes:

“Education expels the Dalit people from slavery.”

Her success as the first Dalit SSLC topper in her district proves that systemic oppression can be broken through intellectual empowerment. However, she also notes the contradictions—how even educated Dalits face discrimination in schools and workplaces. Thus, while education is essential, it must be coupled with socio-political awareness.

Bama’s characters, especially the younger generation, view education not merely as a means to employment but as a tool of resistance. They learn to ask questions, reject superstition, and demand their rights. The classroom becomes a battlefield where silence is replaced by speech, and shame is replaced by pride

Resistance through Literature and Assertion

Dalit literature is a form of political expression—a weapon against silence. Bama uses realism, regional dialects, and oral storytelling to bring marginalized experiences into mainstream discourse. Her works challenge literary norms, opting instead to reflect the everyday brutality and beauty of Dalit life.

In *Vanmam*, she portrays the inner conflicts within Dalit communities and the dangers of internal division. While mainstream literature often romanticizes rural life, Bama exposes its violence—both from upper castes and within oppressed communities. Literature, for her, is not ornamental; it is revolutionary.

Bama once said:

“Literature must disturb the comfort of the oppressor.”

Her stories blend fact with fiction to show how literature becomes a site of resistance. Whether it is a schoolchild confronting her teacher, or a village woman rejecting marriage norms, each narrative asserts human dignity. The use of local idioms, food habits, customs, and dialect gives her stories an authenticity that literary elitism had long ignored.

Unity and Political Mobilization

Political unity among Dalits is a recurring theme in Bama’s works. In *Vanmam*, she showcases how characters like Anthony, inspired by Ambedkar’s slogan “Educate! Organize! Agitate!”, mobilize communities. These efforts lead to visible changes, such as statues being erected, meetings being held, and caste power being directly challenged

The fictional Kandampatti Panchayat election reflects real-world scenarios where, for the first time, Dalits contest and win due to community solidarity. The rift between Pallars and Parayars is overcome in the face of greater oppression. A character exclaims:

“This is our first victory. This unity of ours must stand forever.”

Through such narratives, Bama critiques internalized caste divisions among Dalits and calls for intersectional solidarity. She envisions a Dalit political consciousness that not only challenges the oppressor but heals internal fractures.

Caste within Churches

Bama, a devout Christian, does not spare the Church from criticism. In *Karukku*, she recounts how Dalit

Christians face casteism within the Church hierarchy. Priests from upper castes treat Dalits with disdain, and religious rituals replicate Brahminical dominance.

She observes:

“They have realized that they have been made slaves in the name of God, the Pusai, and the Church.”

This critique is powerful because it exposes how even institutions claiming universality are not free from caste. The hypocrisy of preaching love while practicing exclusion is sharply addressed. Bama’s call is not for abandoning faith but for reforming faith-based institutions to align with justice.

Emerging Voices: From Submission to Defiance

Characters like Ammasi from Annachi embody a new Dalit masculinity—proud, assertive, and fearless. When an upper-caste landlord demands Ammasi’s seat on a bus, he refuses:

“I’ll keep sitting till I get down. You can sit after that.”

This defiance shocks both upper-caste passengers and elders from Ammasi’s own community. The story reveals how deeply caste conditioning runs, even within oppressed groups. Yet Ammasi’s actions signal a shift: Dalits no longer apologize for their existence. They occupy space with confidence and demand respect as equals.

Dalit Women Breaking Barriers

Women in Bama’s works are not passive sufferers; they are agents of change. In Ponnuthayi, the titular character walks out of an abusive marriage, telling her husband:

“Why leave the children here? They are your children, you take care of them. I want neither you nor the children I got from you!”

Ponnuthayi’s decision to sell her thali (marriage chain) to start a business is symbolic—she is not defined by traditional roles but by self-worth. Such narratives challenge both patriarchy and caste, showing how Dalit feminism differs from mainstream feminism by focusing on survival, dignity, and autonomy. Bama’s feminist lens is intersectional. Her women fight domestic violence, poverty, and social stigma simultaneously. They are mothers, workers, thinkers, and fighters—redefining womanhood beyond victimhood.

Assertive Youth, Changing Attitudes

In *Those Days*, older generations reflect on how submissive they once were. But now, educated Dalit youths walk with pride, dress well, and question authority. Characters like Masanam embody this transition:

“Those days, our people lived worse than dogs. Now, we’re educated and move around in white clothes.”

This change is not superficial—it marks a psychological revolution. Dalit youths no longer accept insults or injustice. When an upper-caste man, Maruthappan, sexually assaults a girl, the community retaliates by tying him to a tree. Lokamma shouts:

“People like you should be thrown into a lime kiln to roast!”

This collective rage reflects newfound courage. Dalits are not just resisting—they are demanding accountability.

Transformation of the Submissive

In *Pongal*, Madasami is initially loyal to his upper-caste landlord. But his son, Esakkimuthu, refuses to offer lavish gifts to the landlord during Pongal. Shamed, Madasami finally throws the food meant for the landlord into a cow’s trough.

This act, though small, symbolizes generational transformation. The younger Dalits are unwilling to participate in rituals that reinforce inferiority. Resistance is no longer dramatic; it's often quiet, firm, and irreversible.

Resistance through Women's Defiance

Stories like *Single* and *The Ancharaimanipoo Tree* offer powerful portraits of female resistance. Illamalli, disabled yet defiant, attacks a man who tries to molest her. Her self-defense earns her community respect.

In another tale, the ghost of an upper-caste man declares:

"Don't talk about caste! Only those who are alive have caste, ghosts don't have caste!"

This is Bama's way of mocking caste rigidity—it is meaningless in the face of mortality and humanity. Her women characters don't wait for saviors; they save themselves.

A New Consciousness

Across her works, Bama illustrates that Dalits have moved from fear to pride. When a landlord insults Masanam for sitting on a chair, he replies:

"We are all human beings! If that's how much you respect me, well and good!"

Dalits no longer want charity or pity. When an oppressor offers money to cover up abuse, the community retorts:

"Ten thousand is equal to one hair on our legs!"

Dignity, not compensation, is what they seek. Bama's writing marks a turning point—Dalits are no longer whispering; they are roaring.

Conclusion: A Future Forged in Unity

The emergence of Dalits from slavery is not only a socio-political shift but a spiritual and cultural awakening. Through education, solidarity, literature, and fearless activism, they are rewriting history. In her novel *Manusi*, Bama imagines Ambedkar saying:

"Even now, there are so many people who fight for an equal and free society... One day each drop will together become a flood."

That flood is rising—made of voices like Bama's, stories like *Ponnuthayi's*, and revolts like *Ammasi's*. Dalits are no longer victims; they are visionaries. Bama's work is not just literature—it is a movement toward a just and humane future.

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