2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit we will be studying the Tamil Dalit writer, Bama, which is the pseudonym of Faustina Mary Fatima Rani. This is also meant to introduce you to Dalit writing from Tamil Nadu in particular and Dalit writing from across India in general. By the end of this unit, you would have thought deeply about the nature of Dalit life and writing, about the relationship between activism and literature. You would also have learnt to complicate issues by looking at them from different perspectives — here, because of the nature of Bama’s work as a Christian Dalit as well as a woman writer, both of which give a tangentially different understanding of Dalit experiences. (You will also have learnt to appreciate a different style of writing, both in terms of language and technique. The testimonial form of writing (about her own life and that of her community in this instance) creates a generic challenge — is this fiction or not, or is it an autobiography? The answer to that would be to treat this work as autobiographical fiction, a literary work that is an offspring of both genres, its value truly dependant on its perceived truth of expression, its complete fidelity to lived experience. (Perhaps, this is why you find this work in a block on non-fictional prose!)

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit we will look at Dalit Literature(s), and then at the entirety of Bama’s work. We will then summarize all the chapters of Karuku, look at the work as a whole, and then look closely at the two chapters that are prescribed in order to see her theme as well as technique. I will give you a few comments about her use of language but only to give you an idea of what she does in Tamil. Otherwise, it makes very little sense to talk of her use of language when we are reading a translation, but a major creative strategy among Dalit writers in all languages is to work on the language itself, to go against both established form and established literary language. But first, we will also look briefly at the category of Dalit literature(s) and see how Bama fits into it.
We have in the course two excerpts, Chapters 4 & 8 from her work, *Karukku* translated by Laxmi Holmstrom. L.H. was born in 1935 in Salem and holds degrees in English from Madras and Oxford universities. She has translated *Karukku* from the Tamil original to English. Her critical articles have found acclaim in a number of journals in India, Europe and the U.S. Her translations of Tamil novels and short stories have been published by Katha, East-West Books, Virgo, Heinemann and Cambridge University Press.

2.2 A NOTE ON DALIT LITERATURE(S)

While it would be difficult to talk of all Dalit writings or the complexity of issues involved in such a brief introduction, it is important that you know some of the issues involved and the aims of this movement in various literatures in our languages. The first question to ask is if we know the meaning of the word “dalit” and if we know who used it first and why it was adopted by the people.

“Dalit” means “ground”, “crushed” or “broken into pieces”, and is a Marathi word with a Sanskrit root. The term refers to those who fall outside the Hindu caste system, the “outcastes” or the “untouchables”. Dalits have been referred to by different names, the most famous being “Harijan” or children of God, which was coined by Mahatma Gandhi. However, Dalits prefer to call themselves by this name, acting out the oppression and the rebellion in the very term that refers to them.

“Dalit” may have been used for the first time in this manner by Jotiba Phule (1827-90) in the nineteenth century, but its more famous use was by Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956), the father of the Indian constitution and the greatest of Dalit leaders. It was in his journal, *Bahishkrut Bharat*, that Ambedkar first defined dalithood as “life conditions which characterize the exploitation, suppression and marginalization of Dalits by the social, economic, cultural and political domination of the upper castes’ Brahmanical ideology”. It is interesting to note that Ambedkar used different terms for Dalits in different contexts — “Scheduled Castes” was the term he used in politics and is the term used in the Constitution of India; “Depressed Classes” was what he used when addressing the British rulers; “Bahishkrut” (outcaste) was what he used to upper-caste Hindus, and “Pad Dalit” (crushed underfoot) was the term he used with fellow-Dalits.

The term “Dalit” found favour with activists, and the manifesto of the Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra, published in 1973, defines Dalits as “members of scheduled castes and tribes, neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion”. In other words, this broad definition includes all the oppressed. What is important to note is that this broadening takes the term beyond the Hindu fold to embrace Dalits who have converted to Buddhism, and in later years this would also embrace those who converted to Islam or Christianity.

The Dalit literary movement was born in Maharashtra in the 1960s and slowly spread to the rest of India. This movement made a late start in Tamil, coming to the fore only in the 1990s after the celebrations of the birth centenary of Dr
Ambedkar. This was because of many reasons, some of which are the collapse of the communist bloc and disaffection with the policies of Dravidian parties. For a long time communism was seen to represent the interests of lower castes who were almost automatically lower class, but this was now felt to be untrue. The same was the case with the Dravidian anti-brahmin movement for self-respect, which seemed to address the inequities that Dalits had been subjected to, but the material realities of their lives convinced the Dalits that their welfare issues were not being addressed by those in power. Perhaps, the most influential reason was the publication and circulation in Tamil of the writings of Dr Ambedkar as part of the centenary celebrations.

Raj Gautaman, a Tamil Dalit critic, assigns two major tasks for Tamil Dalit literature: to awaken the Dalit in every reader (i.e. to make every reader share the Dalit experience), and to be the Tamil, Indian link in the chain of worldwide literatures of the oppressed. Interestingly, the Tamil Dalit writers did not come only or even majorly from the Hindu fold (if being outcastes can be called that). Bama, whom you are studying in this unit, is a Christian, as are other writers like Vidivelli (who was also a nun for a while), and Markku (who is a backward caste Christian, accepted by Dalit critics as a Dalit writer). Some of the other prominent Dalit writers are novelists Sivakami, and Imayam, and the poet Raj Kumar and the dramatist Gunasekaran. Mention must also be made of Dalit critics and theoreticians like Raj Gautaman, Ravi Kumar, and Tirumaalavan.

### 2.3 INTRODUCTION: BAMA AND HER WORKS

![Bama: Karukku](image)

Bama is perhaps the most prominent of Tamil Dalit writers and also figures among the best known Dalit writers from across India. She shot to fame with her autobiography novel, *Karukku* (1992). It won the Crossword Award for the best fiction in Indian languages available in English translation in 2001. This translation by Lakshmi Holmstrom is what you are expected to read. Do read the original Tamil if you can, for it is always interesting and instructive to read the original along with the translation.

Bama is the pen name of Faustina Mary Fatima Rani, who was born in a Roman Catholic family in 1958, in the village of Puthupatti in Tamil Nadu. It may not be apparent in English but her pseudonym, Bama, is made up from
the different sounds from her Christian name. Hers was a Dalit Christian family, her grandfather having converted to Christianity. The status of the family did not change much and they remained landless labourers, working for upper caste landlords. However, Bama’s father was in the army and this made some difference to their lives. Like all children, Bama played many games with her four siblings, her favourite game being “Kabaddi”. Her reason for liking the game was typical of her attitude to life and writing — “I liked the whole business of challenging, crossing over and vanquishing the opponent”, she explained in an interview.

If her father, an Indian army personnel was instrumental in educating her and her siblings, her brother, Raj Gautaman, who is a leading Dalit theoretician, literary critic, encouraged her to read. While Bama read Jayakantan, Akhilan, Mani and Parthasarthy — all Tamil writers — she also read Kahlil Gibran and Rabindranath Tagore. Bama also wrote poetry when she was in college. After finishing her college, Bama became a schoolteacher because she wanted to educate very poor girls. However, at the age of 26 she decided to enter the church, and took the vows to become a nun. This was a well thought out decision to pursue her mission to educate poor Dalit children. It was also an attempt to further herself from bonds of caste which were invidious in social life. “I felt that at the seminary I would be able to carry forward my work with the poor”, she says. However, her experience in the convent disillusioned her and she walked out in 1992, after seven years. She felt that she had lost everything. Her only good memories were those of childhood. One of her friends, Father Mark, who listened to her laments, suggested that she write her childhood memoirs. Almost as therapy, Bama began to write Karukku and completed it in six months.

Her next work, Sangati (1994), a novel, dealt with her life as a Dalit woman. This is further explored in her collection of short stories Kisumbukkaaraan (1996). In her next novel, Vanamam, Bama writes of the rivalry between two Dalit communities, the Pallars and the Paraiyars. As the writer C.S. Lakshmi (who writes under the pen-name of “Ambai”) writes, Bama is more than a writer, she is “a chronicler and recorder of Dalit life and struggle in Tamil Nadu”. (The Hindu Literary Review, August 3, 2003, p. 6).

2.4 KARUKKU

By now, you must have read the excerpts from Karukku that have been prescribed for you. Even the excerpts would have revealed to you that this is no ordinary piece of fiction. This autobiographical narrative, which gives you testimony about a life, has to be treated as a different literary genre — to be seen as both an attestation of truth, a social critique, as well as a carefully structured and written literary narrative, to be appreciated as you would any powerful work of fiction. I wonder if you have read any Dalit literary work other than those prescribed for you in this course. If you have read any other prose work, this is the time to pause and reflect. What was your experience of reading it? Were you shocked? Did you like reading the work? Wherein lay its importance to you? And this for even those who haven’t read any other prose work written by Dalits: what did you expect from Karukku? What were your initial reactions? Disbelief? Shock? Do you consider this a powerful and significant work of literature? What does the book actually do?
Since you may not have read the entire book (though I strongly urge you to) at this point, I will attempt a summary of the work.

2.4.1 Summaries (Chapters 1-9)

_Karukku_ is divided into nine chapters and also has a preface (both in the Tamil and English versions) and an afterword (only in the English version). The introductions to the book are also worth reading (Lakshmi Holmstrom’s in the English, and Markku’s and Jayaratne’s in Tamil).

“Preface”

Bama begins the preface by comparing _Karukku_ (palmyra leaves, whose serrated edges make them like double-edged swords) to her own life. The word _Karukku_ also contains the word “karu”, which means embryo or seed. So the very oppressive life that she had to face, carried within the seeds for her literary work. Bama tells us in the preface that she was the difficulties she faced and her desire to break free of oppressive bonds that led to her writing the book. Bama refers to “The Epistle to the Hebrews” (New Testament) where the Word of God is described as a two-edged sword. The reference is to this statement: “The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart”. (Hebrews, 4:12) She feels that people’s hearts are hardened and non-responsive to God now. She feels that Dalits must speak up now, function as God’s word, and pierce the hearts of the oppressors.

Chapter 1

“Our village is very beautiful”. Thus begins the first chapter of _Karukku_. However, the village is not named, nor is the narrator. Chapter 1 sets the scene and alerts you to Bama’s narrative strategy (about which we shall talk later). In the very first paragraph, which is only four sentences, she lets us know that the village has seen no progress and that there are many different communities who live there but that she would come to the issue of castes and communities only after she tells us about her village. But the description of the village cannot escape references to castes and communities because the very names of various places point our attention to ownership or use by people of different communities. While she seems to be nostalgic about the past, and painting a romantic picture of her village, a close reading will reveal that she constantly looks at the natural surroundings as sites of work and scenes for acts of discrimination. If she describes the rocks that are “round about” her village, we see that one of them was named after washer men, actually “boys [who] would wash clothes there, steaming and whitening them” (1). After describing some fields that belong to a Naicker, Bama mentions that her people are labourers. If they could not find work, the beautiful woods on the mountains would beckon them to gather firewood (1). This is not the fate of upper castes. Even when it rains and her village gets more beautiful and the fish is plentiful, in her street they bought and cooked the “cheapest we could get”, while the upper castes ate all sorts of fish (2). While she continues to describe the natural beauty of her village, she moves on to share anecdotes about a person called Bondan, who used to live by his wits, stealing from the landlords. She sketches a life of superstition, belief in spirits, and of almost unquestioning acceptance of the oppressive caste system. The landless labourers knew every
field in their village (fields which were owned by Naickers) and would unavailingly turn up for work at the right field at the right time. This caste system is written into the social geography of her village — “I don’t know how it came about that the upper-caste communities and the lower-caste communities were separated like this into different parts of the village”. The Dalits would go to the other side when they had work to do there. “But, they never, ever, came to our parts”. They had no reason to since all institutions like the post-office, school, the church stood in their part of the village (6). Bama gives a critique of village life even as she seems to describe it with nostalgia and yearning. She tells us the nicknames of people, their eccentricities, and then ends the chapter with the recounting of a local legend — of a younger sister who is resented by the brother’s wife and who is finally forced to commit suicide along with her seven children when her sister-in-law turned them all out. The brother killed his wife and built a temple for his good younger sister (named Nallathanga — meaning precisely that, good younger sister) and her children. Bama says that the temple exists till date.

Chapter 2

Bama mentions untouchability for the first time in the opening sentence of the second chapter. She says she saw it in practice and was humiliated by it when she was a young child, walking back from school. In her usual fashion, she describes her walks back from school, how she used to dawdle and watch the goings on around her. She gives us a view of what all used to happen in the market place those days. But one day when she entered her street she saw that a threshing floor had been set up and the Naicker was overseeing the work. She saw with amusement an elder from her community walking towards the Naicker carrying a small packet of “vadai or green banana bhajji”, “holding out the packet by its string, without touching it” (13). The child Bama wanted to laugh at such an antic by an elder, but her elder brother explained to her about untouchability. It is then that she burst out against caste practice and oppression. She recalls that both her grandmothers worked as servants for Naicker families and recounts their routine humiliations. They worked hard for the Naickers, from dawn till dusk, with almost no reward. Even the food that they got was leftover food from the Naicker home, food which was given almost as a favour. It is her elder brother, who was already studying at the university, who educated her about caste practices and exhorted her to study, demonstrating through his own life that education broke down caste barriers and practices.

Bama shows how prejudices and caste practices are so much a part of the system that lower caste children are discriminated against almost naturally even in institutions like the school and the church. The school and the church sided with the upper castes in their very physical locations in the Nadar Street. Harijan children, Bama says, were treated as contemptible but used as cheap labour (16). She gives us an anecdote about when she was labelled a thief unjustly, because a coconut had fallen when they were playing. The headmaster’s caste, as a Chaaliyar, becomes important here since the Chaaliyars and the Parayars (Bama’s community) were locked in a battle at the time over a cemetery. Even the priest to whom she goes for justice, tells her that she must be a thief because she is a Paraya. She says things were no better in the high school she attended in the neighbouring town. The lower caste children were discriminated against and humiliated in very many ways.
She found even the governmental policy of identifying and helping Harijan children as humiliating. The only time she found some pride in it was when she was marked out as the best Harijan student in the district. Even in college, she felt the pricks, especially when a lecturer asked all Scheduled Caste students to stand and identify themselves since the Government wanted them to have special tuition. She refused this offer in anger since she felt that this only continued to identify her by caste. She found that she gained the respect of her peers and her teachers by studying well. Even when she finished her B. Ed and joined a (convent) school to teach, she found that the nuns disdained her as well as the Dalit students who made the majority in the school. After five years of teaching, Bama was filled with a desire to become a nun herself in order to help Dalit children. So, she joined an order against the wishes of her family and friends who warned her that caste discrimination was rampant within the church. Soon enough she realised that there was a disjunction between her and the order; and that the nuns looked down on Tamilians to begin with and that Tamil Parayas were the lowest of the low. The very first convent that she was sent to, after acceptance into the order, was a shock. Catering to the rich, it had Dalits doing all the menial jobs and being treated as less than human. Bama was full of anguish because she could not bring herself to tell the other nuns that she too belonged to a lower caste when she heard them speak insultingly about lower castes.

Bama ends the chapter on a poignant and anguished note about the status of Dalits and calls for action to “crush all these institutions that use caste to bully us into submission”, and to bring about a “just society where all are equal” (25).

Chapter 3

This chapter delineates the conflict between Parayars and Chaaliyars over the cemetery that Parayars had traditionally used in Bama’s village. This cemetery was next to a Chaaliyar community school. The upper-caste Christians had a different cemetery. The Chaaliyars wanted the cemetery so that it could become a playground for their school. Hence, there were frequent skirmishes between the two communities. Bama recounts an incident that blew into a major clash and brought forth unjust police action against the Dalits, when she was eleven years old. She details police brutality and the resilience of the women of her community. She remembers how even the Church sided against them, with the priest even refusing to loan some money for the court hearings. She ends the chapter by commenting that there are often such frequent clashes between Pallars (another lower caste) and Parayars. This leads to killings and court cases. Bama’s lament is that the upper-caste men are having the last laugh here — “Instead of uniting together in a village of many castes, if they keep challenging each other to fights, what will happen to all these men in the end?” she asks (41).

Chapter 4

This chapter is in your course. It is about work — about the hard labour that constitutes the life of lower castes, and about the exploitation and the little reward they get. The chapter begins with a seemingly simple straightforward statement: “From the time that I was a small child, I saw people working hard; I grew up amongst such people” (41). This is the beginning of an astute and damming critique of caste practices and their relationship to labour and
ownership of resources in our country. She details various kinds of labour — agricultural, construction, working with leaves or at the brick kilns, and foraging for firewood — that constituted the life of her community in her village. The lands are owned by Naickers, and the Parayars are bonded labourers. She says that in her village only the Pallars and Parayars had to work so hard in order to be able to eat and survive. Only the families of teachers “lived with any degree of comfort” (42).

Bama’s grandmother “was a true and proper servant” (42). She worked hard from dawn to dusk, six days a week, and even seven when called for. All this for a little gruel. Even Bama, as a schoolgirl, had to do manual labour to help out. She describes her experiences of harvesting the groundnut crop — hard work for a maximum of five rupees a day. Shelling the groundnuts was equally hard work and paid about the same amount. She would also collect thorny twigs or go with other children to collect firewood in the jungle after bribing the forest guard. This was again very hard work for very little money or for a little fuel. Bama recollects that even her mother used to collect firewood and that in one instance, she brought home a bundle of firewood and “began vomiting vasts gobs of blood” (45). Bama comments that “it was only by toiling like this, without taking any account of their bodies as human flesh and blood, that people of my community could even survive” (45). Children began to work as soon as they were ten or twelve. The girl children would look after the home in the absence of their mothers who had to go out to work. Boys would graze sheep or cattle and then go off to work when they were older. Bama says that they would very often be paid in kind for their work and then the Nadar shopkeepers would cheat them. So, their “hard work was exploited half the time by ... [the] Naicker employers. The rest of the time ... [they] were swindled by these tradesmen” (46). So used was Bama to this hard work that she enjoyed it. Such hard work should have enabled the community to prosper, but exploitation has kept them in exactly the same place for centuries. The discrimination extended further to women, who were paid even less. She says that this is a community that enjoyed life and was born to work. But work was their lot. It is even worse now. No longer do tiny tots do small chores at home, leave alone go to school, they go off to work in a match-box factory where they work from dawn till dusk. This is the life of labour that Dalits are born into.

Chapter 5

This chapter deals with the recreation and pastimes available to Dalits in Bama’s village. She tells us of the pretence games they used to play as young children and about dolls they used to make. The world of reality dictated the contours of their pretence games — e.g. when they played at being married, the husband would come home drunk and beat the wife and the police would arrive and beat him up, or when they played at working, some boys would become Naickers and humiliate the rest!

Only boys could go to the cinema. And, when they grew up, girls could not go out to play any longer. She then describes the pastimes of the adult men — from silambam to cards to kabaddi. She speaks of how they would celebrate festivals by singing and dancing and taking out processions. Hunting was rewarding pastime as well.
In the next section of the chapter, Bama tells us how the festivals are celebrated differently now. She begins with the disjunction between the Church and the community, and also how the community is now more interested in the cinema than prayers at the church. At New Year, the Dalits had to give presents to the priest and the Mother Superior and they would buy them expensive fruits that they had never tasted themselves — all for receiving the sign of the cross on their foreheads. She notes that people no longer remembered the hymns, and an incident involving an infant and a nun makes her realise afresh how little of Christ’s love and forbearance there is in the Church. People complain that earlier priests would give them sweets and calendars in return, but now the priest wants them to buy the calendar. Even the Mother Superior acts superior and her gifts of small drawstring cloth bags only rouses ill-feeling among the community. And finally, instead of going to evening mass, the people are keener to see the movies that have been promised to them. No longer do the youth put up plays — it is cinema and toddy or arrack that provides the pastime now.

Chapter 6

It is in this chapter that Bama mentions her father for the first time. He was in the army and this ensured that, at least when he came home, the family had plenty to eat. Bama describes their daily diet and how poor she felt when she went to the hostel to study in high school and how supportive her parents were. But they did not believe in sending her to college. They preferred her to train as a teacher. But a nun who had taught Bama in the eleventh standard made a fuss and sent her to college after forcing Bama’s mother to pawn the earrings she was wearing! Her father washed his hands off her and she had to live in the same clothes for a week. Her performance brought her the respect of her classmates and teachers once again. She speaks of her sense of deprivation which was balanced by her sense of achievement. She had enough money after finishing her B. Ed and joining a school as a teacher. She realised that if only Dalit children could be given a decent education they too could live a life of moderate comfort like her. This was the impulse which made her enter a convent. It is only later that she came to know that the convent did not care for the poor and that the vow of poverty that the nuns took had no relation to reality. But life wasn’t easy for Bama when she left the order. Everything had changed. She had no money or job either. She began to share the same difficulties as all other Dalits. Even the poor of upper castes have a tough time she says. Poor Parayyas have it even tougher because there can be no hope for them. Children can only work in such a climate, not seek an education. She speaks with despair about how the wealthy live off the work of the poor. She even wonders how one can fight for justice in this situation “when one is hungry and thirsty” (69). She says that even the Church has let the Dalits down.

Chapter 7

In this chapter, which is the longest in the book, Bama speaks of her bhakti and belief in God, and how it has changed over the years, and of forms of worship and the changes they have undergone. When she was young she used to pray exactly as her family and the priests had taught her. Prayers punctuated their daily life and attendance at church was enforced by the beatings delivered by teachers at school. She remembers an incident when a visiting white priest was pleased by her recitation of prayers — he lifted her up and
kissed her and gave her five paise. What pleased her most was “that the priest touched me and lifted me up” (71). Bama says that she used to be afraid to be in a church alone. This was because the Sisters had told the children at school that the Devil kept a list of all their sins and that if they committed too many sins they would peel the skin off their backs! She says that the nuns never told them any cheerful stories. Thus, Bama obeyed the Sisters in all things, in order to be less sinful. Even in confession, and even though she may have had nothing to confess, Bama repeated what had been taught to her. Slowly, Bama lost faith in what the nuns told her. The nuns acted like a brutal supervisory force keeping order in the ranks. The children would be beaten (or pinched when they were older) to keep them awake during church services. Bama talks of how repressive and frightening it was. Also, they had to walk some distance to and from the church, which was in the streets of the upper castes.

Bama says that she used to come first in all Scripture tests and that she was full of devotion for Jesus even if she too told prayers only out of a sense of duty. Her belief was strong, so strong that when she received a shock while inserting flowers into the holes of a plug point, she thought that God was punishing her for stealing the flowers! She then recounts how the church at Chinnamalai came to be built because of a miraculous vision granted to the local priest. On the first Friday of every month, there would be a prayer at the church there and children would go off on Thursday evening itself, spending the night in the church. A festival was also celebrated every May. She describes the festival scene in all its animated detail. While the festival still takes place, Bama feels that “the devotion to Our Lady is manifested chiefly in choosing and wearing new clothes, and feasting on a newly slaughtered chicken or goat” (84). She hears now that people arrive drunk and start brawls. She says that she enjoyed herself in these pleasures in Chinnamalai till she grew up and commonsense told her that it was preferable to worship at home. Bama then describes the Easter celebrations. She ends this section by saying that no one seems to realise the significance of these festivals any longer. Devotion now “is merely a matter of doing things out of a sense of duty” (87).

It was when she left her village and joined the boarding school in her IX class that her devotion underwent a change. She lost her “bhayam” (fear) for God, and began to feel “paasam” (love) instead. She wanted to enter the convent right after school, but one of the Sisters told her to consider it only after completing her college education. However, in college her devotion began to wane. She did not believe any longer that God came to her through the priests and nuns. She began to question all forms of ritual and worship. But her faith in God did not diminish. She felt that ritual was sham, and that God should be felt directly through the mind’s eye. She no longer had the desire to become a nun. When she began to teach in a school, the behaviour of the nuns repulsed her. The nuns ran a boarding school, which was nominally for the sake of destitute children. However, they made the poor children do all the menial tasks. On top of this, there were caste, class, and linguistic divisions amongst the nuns themselves. Bama feels that the nuns should have taught the Dalit children more than what the curriculum called for, made them aware about their situation in the world. Instead, “everything they said to the children, everything in the manner in which they directed them suggested, that this was the way it was meant to be for Dalits; that there was no possibility for change” (89). This only forced the children to accept their unjust situation as their fate. The result of this was to make Bama want to become a nun so that she could
bring some difference to the way these children were taught and treated. She
continued to have love and devotion towards Jesus and Mother Mary. When
she read the Old Testament and the New Testament through once again, she
realised that God had “shown the greatest compassion for the oppressed” (90).
Jesus Christ had mainly associated himself with the poor. However, the
Church did not emphasise this. She makes the important point that the God
they were told about was one who “is loving, kind, gentle, one who forgives
sinners, [is] patient, tender, obedient” (90). Whereas, God is also “just,
righteous, is angered by injustices, opposes falsehood, never countenances
inequality”. This God no one ever spoke about. Bama says that the “oppressed
are not taught about him, but rather, are taught in an empty and meaningless
way about humility, obedience, patience, gentleness” (90). This inspired her
further to become a nun, to take the true Jesus to the Dalit children. Even
though every one advised her against it, even though she knew that no convent
was going to allow her to act the way she wanted, she entered an order —
“like one who was falling into a well, blindfolded” (91).

Bama says that the three years of training were not bad. They discussed
various issues and thought with some urgency about what they should do to
alleviate suffering. She thought constantly of the oppressed people and was
convinced that “it was meaningless to repeat prayers in beautiful and
decorative language, and to live without that correspondence and connection
between prayer, worship and life”. She waited for her chance to serve the
poor. However, she was sent to a prestigious school and asked to teach there,
to serve the rich. She felt that there was no love for the poor and the humble in
the convent. She felt that the convent said one thing and practiced another,
that there was no true love in the Church, nor forgiveness. There was injustice
and there was punishment for those who did not obey. She found that instead
of practicing poverty, there was a lot of importance given to material wealth
and food. She critiques the order strongly, calling them hypocrites who were
“so habituated to their play-acting that they can no longer distinguish between
the role and the reality” (93). She feels that the priests and nuns have lost
touch with what Jesus stood for, and would not understand his questions if he
were to appear before them to castigate them as they deserved. She feels that
the Church is made of the upper castes while the laity, the believers, are
mostly lower castes and Dalits. The clergy imposes blind belief and devotion
on the lower castes to propagate the caste power structures. She says strongly
that “in the name of God they actually rob from the poor who struggle for
their very livelihood” (94). They do not allow the lower castes to open their
eyes or to stand tall. She feels that all this will end sooner than later. Dalits
have begun to understand the way the world works — “They have realized
that they have been maintained as the stone steps that others have trodden on
as they raised themselves up” (94). Dalits have realized that this is not God’s
message. They know “that they too were created in the likeness of God”. She
ends by saying that there is an urge amongst Dalits “to begin to live again with
honour, self-respect and with a love towards all humankind”. This, she says,
“alone is true devotion” (94).

Chapter 8

This is the second chapter that is prescribed for you (Chapter 4 being the other
one). This chapter is about Bama’s experiences in the holy order, in the
convent in which she became a nun. She begins with a one-sentence summary
of her previous life:
I was born in a small village as a Dalit girl. I grew up, I studied, I worked for five years, and then, as I have said before, I entered a convent.

The order she joined had been founded by a woman who had loved the poor and the lowly and had educated the children of the poor and helped them in their lives. Once inside the convent, she realized that her family members who had warned her about the conditions in the convent were right. She found herself in a different world in the convent. While they talked of Jesus and Mary, they lived in great comfort, eating lavish meals, with dishes whose names Bama did not know, or, if she did, could not pronounce! She says that the convent was so big it could have accommodated all the people from her community in her village. She felt as out of place there as she would have in an upper-caste home. Nor could she go about her work in peace, for convent life was full of politics and intrigue. The convent was about enjoyment, not about alleviating the suffering all around. Even your status within the convent was dependent on how rich your family was. The school attached to the convent was no better. They took only four or five poor children as a token and these children were discriminated against by all. The vows of poverty, chastity and obedience that nuns had to take “became a means of control and enslavement”, according to Bama (97). There was no sense of poverty within the convent, Bama says that the nuns were “within … luxurious cages, trapped in comfort” (97). The love that the Church professed was only for the rich — if challenged, the authorities would say that God’s love was not only for the poor and that God had said, “The poor are with you always” (98). The vow of obedience was what kept people like Bama in check. The nuns could hardly lift their heads, so submissive had they to be. Bama was forced to serve the rich, not the poor as she wished, because she was told to learn obedience and faith. The training that the nuns received had no connection to the lives they had to live later. If the nuns found it hard to fit in, they were told that they did not have the calling. Bama feels that the Church had no connection with the lived reality in India; the authorities had been “indoctrinated during their studies in Europe and in America” (99). Not only did the convent have no idea about Dalits, they spoke disparagingly of them. Bama served for three years in the first place. Then, she was transferred five times within a month. At the end, they again placed her in a big school for rich children. Bama couldn’t stand it and, after five months, she left the holy orders. Neither was it easy to leave, nor was life outside the convent any easier.

Chapter 9

The convent, in spite of all Bama’s contentions, was a secure and comfortable place. Outside, she had to endure hardships and work for the next meal. She felt out of place in the world outside. The first place where she was interviewed, she was told the salary was a paltry four hundred rupees a month. But even this job was denied to her because she was a Dalit and the school was run by the Nadar community and they wanted to appoint only Nadar women (101). Bama bemoans the existence of such caste-based schools and wonders where the Dalits are to go since there are no Dalit schools. Even Catholic schools do not take too many Dalits because they feel that standards would fall. Bama found it even more difficult to move around in the outside world, because she was not only a Dalit but also a woman.
But, Bama says, she has not regretted leaving the comforts and security of the convent. The convent was alienated from the suffering of the poor. But, Bama feels that she had been brainwashed at the convent, which is what made it difficult for her to adjust to life outside. She had changed so much in character that she was a stranger even to herself. However, she feels a contentment outside the convent, she is in her natural elements again, like a fish back in water. She ends the book with the thought that even if she is like a bird with broken wings, she is optimistic about the future, she is certain that “it is possible to live a meaningful life, a life that is useful to others” (104). She is no longer leading a hypocritical life.

“AFTERWORD”
In the “Afterword” to the English edition, Bama writes that many changes have taken place in the seven years since she wrote Karukku in Tamil in 1992. She says that “even though there are a thousand difficulties which beset a Dalit woman living on her own, yet the truth is that in my position as an independent woman, there are many opportunities for me to spend my life usefully, and especially, to work for the liberation of Dalits” (105). She has discovered strengths within herself, seen the progress of the movement for Dalit liberation, and been inspired by many other Dalit women. Thus, the “Afterword” confirms the validity of the optimism that the book had ended with.

2.4.2 Karukku: An Analysis
What is the first thing you noticed about my summary? If you thought that it was full of repetitions, then you were right. If you felt that I had struggled to summarise the book, you were right again. If you thought that my summary did not give you a sense of linearity of narrative, things happening one after the other in a certain order over various chapters, you were right again. Karukku as you would have realised by now, is a very different kind of book. Almost like chewing the cud, the narrator mulls over various events in her life again and again from different perspectives. As Lakshmi Holmstrom points out in her introduction, Bama groups the events in her life “under different themes, for example, Work, Games and Recreation, Education, Belief, etc.” (p. vii) It is almost like watching the ripples that result when a number of stones are hurled into the water of a pond. Every time that Bama thinks of her life new ripples form and speed across the surface of her life making her take stock of a large part of her life rather than the impact of a single incident in itself. Her life as a Catholic Christian girl and woman is mediated by the fact that she is a Dalit. On the other hand, her growing awareness of the Dalit identity marks her forays into the Church, and provokes her reassessment and reconstruction of what devotion to God means, of the role of faith and belief in her life. This then is a work that charts the growth and education of the narrator, a bildungsroman, from childhood and innocent faith to adulthood and understanding of the ways of the Church and the world. The narrator is taking stock of her life at a particular climactic moment of her life, after she has left the convent, and she reflects on various events and how they have shaped the contours of her life and impinged on her self understanding and socio-political awareness.

As a child, Bama grew up in an atmosphere imbued with faith and religion. Christian rituals punctuated the day and festivals marked the year. However, religion comes with a sense of duty and obedience (enforced with strict
punishment), as also an idea of class and caste identity. She learns very early what it means to be a Dalit in Indian society, and soon enough, what it means to be a Dalit in the Catholic Christian society. However, as a believing Christian, one who had chosen to become a nun even if one of her main aims was to make a difference to Dalit children, Bama does not give up on the vision or message of Christianity and, instead, critiques the Catholic institutions that preach one thing and practice another. The message and aim of Christianity, according to her reading of the scriptures, is love towards all, which implies equality, and social justice. She thinks that God chose to side with the poor. She entered the convent precisely because she thought she could work better for the poorer sections of society, especially Dalits, by working with the resources and the message of the Church. The convent fails her and she leaves the convent; but these reflections on her life make her understand the Church had always worked in this manner in her lifetime, and that social, political, and economic inequality had always marked all the internal boundaries of her beloved village life, from invisible boundaries that demarcated castes (and created rules of untouchability) to highly visible ones that marked out landed possessions. This awareness of injustice that permeates the life of our land does not bring despair, for Bama realises that her own experiences and the resultant awareness is part of a larger Dalit consciousness raising a larger movement. However, *Karukku* is first and foremost a work about life as a Christian Dalit, and about the hypocrisies and double standards of the Catholic Church, about caste discrimination within it. Even as she attacks the Church, she bemoans the rise of consumerism and lack of belief that marks contemporary life. *Karukku* is the story of a Christian Dalit woman who realises that her identity as a Christian is heavily mediated by her identity as a Dalit, and that she must fight the discriminatory practices both within the Church and outside, and that this is all the tougher as a woman.

**Analysis of Chapter 4**

I suggest that you read Chapter 4 carefully and write a summary. Re-read the summary I have already given of this chapter. Are we in agreement as to what Bama says in this chapter? If you were to give this chapter a heading, what would you choose?

I cannot guess your answer to the first question, though I hope that we are broadly in agreement. As to the second, again I cannot guess your title, but I can say with conviction that it would have something to do with work. It is a chapter that deals with the hard work that is the life of Bama's community in her village. As I said in my summary, this chapter is an astute and damning critique of caste practices and their relationship to labour and ownership of resources in our country. I suggest that wherever you live, you should look around and observe all kinds of physical labour, and try to estimate how much reward labourers get for their work. Do you think a worker at a construction site or one building a road can change their station in life easily? Do you think they earn enough money to live in comfort at some point of their lives? Do you think their caste has a role to play in their being confined to such lives? These questions are inevitable if you read Bama's work.

You will notice that Bama does not denigrate work. She talks of how people were surprised that she didn't hesitate to help her mother in carrying head loads of firewood even though she had finished her tenth class in a convent.
Her reaction is interesting: “I don’t know why they were so surprised. In those days, I really enjoyed that kind of hard physical labour” (47). Do you think this is a typical attitude of the educated? Does our education system take people away from and make them look down on physical labour, or does it encourage us to practice and appreciate it? The answer, in my opinion, is that our education system encourages us to look down on physical labour as the lot of those who have failed to improve themselves. So Bama’s reaction is interesting. She does not look down on the work that her community does, she is only aghast at the fact that society does not recognise or reward the importance of this labour. Re-read the first paragraph of the chapter – she starts off by saying that from the time she was young she has lived among hard-working people, like her own mother and grandmother who “laboured from sunrise to sunset, without any rest”. She then says that even today men and women in her village “can survive only through hard and incessant labour”. While labour is enjoyable, it is not paying, it is exploited by others who control the levers of power.

In her usual style, she then describes the work that is available in rural Tamil Nadu. However, she moves smoothly to the specific – she speaks of her village and her people who, if no other work is available, must “go up to the hills to gather firewood” or do other work “in order to eat”. She then describes the work done by other “backward” castes, and says that it is only people of her community who had “to work so hard”. Hard work is a way of life for her family, with her grandmother waking as early as two in the morning to do household chores before going to work at the Naicker household where she was a servant and coming back only after sunset. Notice her description of her grandmother: “Everybody said that my Paatti was a true and proper servant”. Her grandmother is not being described even in terms of her labour (let alone her individuality or character as a human being or in relationship to her family) but in terms of her carrying out her duties to her masters, to the family that she was bonded to.

This is why you must pay particular attention to Bama’s writing — more than most other writers, Bama’s writing thrives on simplicity and, curiously for someone who uses what has traditionally been seen as non-literary or even impolite language, she more often than not makes her points with a certain indirectness, almost without emphasizing them. You may remember that Bama talks of her grandmothers in Chapter Two as well, where she also describes the way this grandmother was treated by the family she worked for. It is in the reiteration, in the repetition of what I called the ripple effect, that emphasis and the strength of feeling emerge.

Bama’s method is visible again in the way she goes off to describe all the hard work she used to do as a young girl in order to augment the family’s meagre income. This is when she talks of exploitation by the Naicker employers and the Nadar tradesmen. She also talks once again about untouchability as a set of rules she had learnt to observe — “All the time I went to work for the Naickers, I knew I should not touch their goods or chattels; I should never come close to where they were, I should always stand away to one side”.

Another point that Bama repeatedly makes, as did Ambedkar, is that it is education that is the way out for Dalits, in it is their salvation. Notice how in this chapter, after speaking of her hard work and of untouchability, she talks about her convent school, where she didn’t have to do this kind of work — “I
ate my meals, and I studied; that was all”. Not that she learnt to look down on physical labour, during her holidays, she says, “I did all the chores that fell to me customarily”. She then says how much she enjoyed hard physical labour.

It is then that she talks of how this incessant labour does not improve the lot of Dalits; that this is what they have to do even to survive. She also points out how there is discrimination between men and women in terms of even these paltry wages. She points out that her community is still cheerful and seems to take this hard life uncritically, but then when do they have the time to stop and think? After quietly pointing out that upper caste society couldn’t survive without this labour, Bama finishes on a pessimistic note, since now even tiny tots are sent off to match box and fire-cracker factories and have no time to study.

Bama’s technique then reinforces her theme, the place of hard physical work (in this chapter) in the lives of Dalits from childhood till death and even the chance for education, their only hope to break free of the cycle of exploitation, receding with increasing work load on children.

Analysis of Chapter 8

Re-read my summary and compare it with your reading of the chapter. The beginning of this chapter demonstrates once again that the book is a series of reflections by Bama on her own life from childhood till a little after she left the convent. As I said in the summary, the focus of this chapter is on Bama’s experiences in the holy order.

The order she joined had been founded by a woman who had loved the poor and the lowly and had educated the children of the poor and helped them in their lives. However the convent functioned with very different values. As the first sentence of this chapter should have alerted you, Bama’s primary identity is as a Dalit and a woman from rural India (“I was born in a small village as a Dalit girl”). She judges the convent from this perspective and finds it wanting and insensitive. She finds a lavish lifestyle instead of the poverty that the church talks of and the poverty that she had experienced in her life — she speaks of the strange, rich, and lavish meals as also of the size of the buildings. The church seems far removed from the material reality of the life of her community that formed the largest part of the laity. She felt as out of place there as she would have in an upper-caste home.

On top of that, the convent was extremely hierarchical — almost like the society outside. Apart from the intrigue and politics that ruled the place, Bama points out that till she took her vows she “had to run about a young child, dance to everyone’s tune, take upon yourself every menial task they pushed at you with their feet”. She realized that service to the country and to the poor was the farthest from the minds of the nuns. The church valued wealth and influence among the upper castes. Bama says that even the school attached to the convent was no better. The token four or five poor children they took were a poor miserable lot, completely isolated from the rich brats.

Most importantly, Bama critiques the way the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience that nuns had to take actually separated them from “the reality of ordinary lives” and “put them at a great remove, as if they belonged to a
different world”. The convent was cut off from the social reality around and had no understanding of or sympathy for the poor. The nuns were “trapped in comfort”. Bama particularly chafes at the vow of “obedience” because this is used to keep nuns in check, to keep them submissive even in the face of injustice or insensitivity and their own commitments. Bama was forced to serve the rich, not the poor as she wished, because she was told to learn obedience and faith.

What Bama found in the Church was a disjunction between what was professed and what was practiced. As she says, the training that the nuns received had no connection to the lives they had to live later. If the nuns found it hard to fit in, they were told that they did not have the calling. As pointed out in the summary, Bama feels that the Church had no connection with the lived reality in India, the authorities had been “indoctrinated during their studies in Europe and in America”. Not only did the convent have no idea about Dalits, they spoke disparagingly of them. In fact, if they “had to speak about something unpleasant or ugly, they tended to categorize it as Harijan”. After serving in one school for three years, Bama was transferred five times within one month. Then, after another five months in a rich children’s school, Bama left the convent for the world of social inequity and difficulty that she had hoped that the Church would work to alleviate.

This chapter reads like a brief summary of what we have already been told in other chapters. However, we should note that this particular reflection is focused and speaks of the authority of the Church over its nuns and how the very Christian principles that are meant to motivate its good work among the people are used to coerce and govern those who have taken holy orders to serve the Church and the people. Also notice how it is in this chapter that she spells out some of the opinions of other nuns about Dalits, quoting five statements about Dalits that were common within the convent. This is a hard-hitting chapter on the vulgarization of values within the Church, and the impossibility of serving the people from within.

2.5 CONCLUSION

As we have seen, Bama’s Karukku is as much about her as it is about her community. Her gender and her religion are added factors in her sense of disenfranchisement as a Dalit. She writes as a Dalit woman about the experiences of Dalit women in her works. Her gender complicates her Dalit identity as much as her Dalit identity complicates her position as a woman and a feminist. Karukku is a path-breaking work that explores the various facets of exploitation of Dalits, specifically of Paraiyars in Tamil Nadu, even within and by the Church. One must remember a salient point about conversions to other religions by Dalits — they usually convert as an entire community, as a caste based in a certain location. Hence their identity as a caste is carried over, unfortunately, into the new religion. Equally unfortunately, converts from upper castes seem to carry their caste-attitudes into their new religious identity. Thus, caste practices, and prejudices are found in all religions in India. Neither religion nor legal, constitutional intervention seem to provide any answers to the Dalits.

In an interview with Suchetra Behal in The Hindu (March 6, 2003), Bama said that she began to write in 1992, the year she left the convent, because she felt
"a sense of total alienation from society because for seven years I was within the convent premises and the lifestyle was different" and she said that when she came out she was not "able to fit into society". She said that those "were terribly painful moments for me and even for the next day it was a question of how I am going to live" and that she felt that there "was no hope of a future". It was then that she was filled with a great sense of nostalgia for her "childhood days in the village" — "I wanted to lead that life again". It was then that she took her friend's advice and began to write, for herself and not for publication. She was initially hesitant to publish it because "it was not only about me, but my people, my family, my village". As a matter of fact, her own community was outraged for a while after the publication of the book.

_Karukku_ created quite a stir in Tamil literary circles after publication. According to Bama, _Karukku_ was radical because I have used the local dialect of the people and not the formalised text. This is a departure in Tamil literature". Critics have agreed with her and actually criticized her for it! One can do no better than to quote Bama's English translator, Lakshmi Holmstrom, on Bama's use of the Tamil language:

Bama is doing something completely new in using the demotic and the colloquial regularly, as her medium for narration and even argument, not simply for reported speech. She uses a Dalit style of language which overturns the decorum and aesthetics of received upper-class, upper-caste Tamil. She breaks the rules of written grammar and spelling throughout, elides words and joins them differently, demanding a new and different pattern of reading.

As you can see, this style is extremely difficult to translate into English and the major stylistic (perhaps even thematic, because the language performs the rebellion) device is more or less lost in the English translation.

According to Sharankumar Limbale, Marathi Dalit writer, critic, and historian, Dalit literature is characterized by the "three values of life — equality, freedom and solidarity" and these values "can be regarded as constituting the essence of beauty in Dalit literature". The literature of the oppressed is always a literature with a cause. As Bama says, the main aim of her writing is "to share with people my experiences. I use writing as one of the weapons to fight for the rights of the underprivileged". This is done in the language of the oppressed people, and in the language of the oral narrative, including turns of phrases and proverbs, folk songs and other ritual songs of the people being represented. Little wonder that Bama was accused of using a coarse language unbecoming of a woman. In Bama’s _Karukku_ the language has another interesting factor — the influence of the Catholic Church. As Lakshmi Holmstrom points out, Bama uses the language of popular Catholicism, not the language of theologians.

Much of Dalit writing that gets translated is testimonial in nature — it is the lived lives of the writers that seem to add truth value and hence literary worth in the eyes of translators and publishers. While it is true that the oppressed will write about their lives in order to assert their quest for "equality, freedom and solidarity", the autobiographical is not their only mode of writing. There may be a certain kind of politics at work here, in the visibility of the Dalit autobiography, in that upper caste readers, critics, and publishers may want
the Dalits only to give ethnographic information about their lives, not to create 
literature and hence may only be publishing (and translating) testimonial 
 writings. However, these testimonies are not simple straightforward life- 
 narratives (if there can be any) but usually well-crafted literary works, as in 
the case of Karukku. I urge you to read other Dalit literary works available in 
your language(s).

I must leave the final word to Bama herself who, in The Hindu interview I 
have been quoting throughout this section, says this about herself as a writer:

I identify myself as a Dalit woman writer ... There are many writers 
available to write about other issues but few for Dalits and there are 
many issues that have to be tackled. If and when Dalits are respected 
and treated as equal human beings then only can I write about other 

2.6 LET US SUM UP

This Unit is meant to sensitize you to what is means to be a woman and that 
too a Dalit in India today. It gives an account of the sufferings and indignities 
of a Christian Dalit woman — Bama. You might like to read Dalit literature 
further and if you do, we would like you to sample any of the Marathi Dalit 
autobiographies mentioned earlier or Omprakash Valmiki, Joohan in Hindi 
available in English translation also.

2.7 QUESTIONS

1. Write a short note on Bama’s views about the life of Dalits. Does she 
consider their lives to have become better or worse? Why?

2. Why did Bama leave the Church?

3. Comment on Bama’s stylistic techniques, as evident in your reading of 
 Chapters Four and Eight. Do you find any difference in the tone of the 
 two chapters?

4. What are the aims of Dalit writing and how well does Karukku achieve 
them?

5. Comment on Bama’s writing — is she sentimental, inflammatory, 
controlled, and/or realistic? Would you describe her writing 
differently? How and why?

2.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

Bama, Karukku, translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom, Macmillan India Ltd, 
2000.

Bama, Sangati: Events, translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom, Oxford University 


