



Original Article

Echoes of the Earth: Folk Customs and Cultural Sustainability in Bama's Karukku

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Abstract

This paper attempts to show the relationship between original folk customs, oral traditions, and cultural sustainability as described in Bama's autobiographical novel, Karukku. Bama's use of "Echoes of the earth" that is the traditional practices and stories of her Dalit Christian community, is a powerful means to preserve culture and identity. The study's theoretical framework is drawn from postcolonial theory, subaltern studies, Dalit feminist criticism, and cultural studies. Bama made use of Karukku ritual details, proverbs, folk songs, and the local language. She defies established literary conventions in an effort to preserve collective memories and to combat oppression based on gender and caste. This essay aims to illustrate how Bama's autobiographical novel Karukku describes the connection between oral traditions, original folk customs, and cultural sustainability. A powerful tool for preserving culture and identity is Bama's use of "Echoes of the earth," which are the customs and tales of her Dalit Christian community. The theoretical framework of the study is derived from cultural studies, Dalit feminist criticism, postcolonial theory, and subaltern studies. Bama used the local language, proverbs, folk songs, and specifics of Karukku rituals. In an attempt to combat caste and gender-based oppression and preserve collective memories, she defies accepted literary conventions.

Keywords: Karukku, Bama, folk customs, cultural sustainability, oral traditions, Dalit literature, Tamil Nadu, Dalit feminism, postcolonial theory, subaltern studies, identity, cultural memory, resistance

Introduction

Bama (Bama Faustina Soosairaj), is most important figure in Dalit literature. Karukku is her autobiography written in 1992, and translated into English in 2000 is a key work in Dalit feminist writing. The book describes the story of Bama's life. She was a Dalit Christian woman facing both caste and gender discrimination in rural Tamil Nadu. This powerful book blends oral storytelling and folk traditions to express the shared memories, struggles, and identity of the Dalit community. Bama's Karukku presents how culture helps marginalized communities survive. Dalit protect their unique identity and fight against through their folk customs and oral traditions. The title "Echoes of the Earth" suggests that these deep-rooted practices and stories are passed on through generations, which gives people strength and a sense of belonging. Bama's writing is not just about her personal struggles—it also shows how cultural traditions, often dismissed as unimportant, become strong tools for survival, resistance, and renewal.

This paper shows how Bama uses oral traditions and folk practices in Karukku to preserve culture and assert identity. It places the text within the social and political context of Tamil Dalit Christianity and argues that these folk elements act as tools of empowerment. They question mainstream narratives and empower Dalits to regain their voice and agency. The discussion draws on postcolonial theory, subaltern studies, Dalit feminist criticism, and cultural sustainability to show how cultural memory in Karukku highlights the lasting power of indigenous traditions in building resilience and resisting oppression

Main ideas and structure

We need to look at Karukku, through different theoretical viewpoints to understand the deeper meanings and resistance in Karukku. Cultural sustainability relates with a community's ability to keep its cultural identity values, practices alive across generations. This is an act of survival and a way to fight against cultural removal.

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Orality—is the way that Dalits passed on knowledge and memory through storytelling, songs, proverbs, and rituals since longer times. They were often denied writings for expression. Folk customs are traditional, informal, and learned behaviours, beliefs, and practices passed down within a specific ethnic or social group, serving as components of its cultural identity and folklore. These practices are important ways of producing knowledge and resisting oppression. They offer alternative ways of understanding the world. Dalit literature is the voice of the Dalit community expressing their struggles and hopes. It began in the 1960s. An autobiography is a powerful genre within Dalit literature serving as a crucial platform for the oppressed to voice their experiences of discrimination and assert their identity and agency. In Colonialism Brahmins have dominated lower caste community in India Subaltern Studies is to rewrite history from the perspective of the marginalized and oppressed. Dalit feminism highlights the unique exploitation of Dalit women who are "doubly oppressed" by their caste identity and gender. All these views help us understand Karukku that comments on the issues of power, identity, and cultural survival in meaningful ways.

Bama's Karukku: A Realistic Experience

Karukku is Bama's true story about her life as a Dalit Christian woman. It talks about the unfair treatment and discrimination she faced because of her caste. She portrays the real experiences and injustices affecting the Paraiyar caste in Tamil Nadu's rural region through her writing. The title *Karukku*, which means the sharp-edged palmyra leaf, symbolizes both the pain of caste oppression and the strength and resilience of her people. In the book, Bama talks about the humiliation her family faced, the hardships of untouchability in education, and the economic struggles of Dalits. Hoping to escape caste prejudice and gain education, she chose to become a nun. But she soon discovered that even Christian institutions were full of discrimination. This painful realization made her question both religious and social power structures. What makes *Karukku* special is its unique storytelling style. Instead of a straight timeline, Bama writes in short, fragmented episodes, similar to oral storytelling traditions. She uses simple, direct language filled with the local dialect, giving her people an authentic voice. In doing so, Bama turns her personal story into the story of her entire community.

Karukku is more than an autobiography—it is a powerful testimony of Dalit women's struggles, exposing both caste and gender oppression, and stands as a landmark text for understanding their fight for dignity and justice.

Folk Customs: Sustaining Culture through Everyday Life

In *Karukku*, Bama describes the folk customs in everyday life of her community and attempted to show how these traditions keep their culture alive. It serves to shape the identity, strengthen community bonds. The activities like cooking, dividing work, raising children, and gathering together express the life style of Dalit community. In this community people share foods. It is not just about eating; it is a moment of attachment, exchange stories, and strengthen relationships. Even the women carrying water or singing while they work carry cultural legacy. They pass down knowledge through lived experience — by watching, listening, and doing. Through these signs, Bama shows us the self-respect and depth of a culture. Communal celebrations and Festivals also help to keep traditions alive. Bama's community continues to celebrate their local festivals even after converting to Christianity. It is often blending them with Christian rituals. Such a merging of faiths is not just about adaptation; it is a powerful medium of cultural expression. It makes strong community relations and keeps inherited customs alive and emphasizes a communal identity. It is essential to carry on these traditions. Old generation share knowledge and visions through songs, storytelling, and active participation in rituals and customs. Everyday conversations, jokes, proverbs, become aids for teaching the coming generation to navigate the harsh realities of caste-based society.

The Voice of the Earth

Bama uses oral traditions to tell her story in *Karukku*, showing that spoken words can be both political and cultural statements. By using oral forms, she lets the "voice of the earth"—the spoken, unwritten stories of her community—be heard with honesty and strength. Instead of following a straight, linear storyline, *Karukku* is written in fragments, like episodes, much like oral storytelling. This style breaks the usual rules of autobiography and mirrors how memory and performance work in oral traditions. The non-linear structure highlights the repeated cycle of oppression and survival, drawing readers in as if they are listeners to a shared story. The conversational tone and use of inclusive words strengthen this oral feel, creating a sense of community and resisting colonial literary forms. Bama incorporates colloquial Tamil enriched with regional dialects, idiomatic expressions, and traditional proverbs. This is a strong act of resistance because it lifts Dalit speech, usually dismissed or ignored, into the space of literature. By doing this, she proves its cultural richness and legitimacy. Oral storytelling becomes a tool of resistance in *Karukku*. Bama tells stories of humiliation, exclusion, and violence in the form of anecdotes and parables, echoing the way stories are shared within her community. These are not simply her own experiences, it was a part of her long history of trauma. Their power lies in how they show real emotions and lived realities, pushing back against false accounts of caste. By telling these truths in her community's authentic voice, Bama directly challenges dominant narratives and reclaims the right to define reality. Folk songs and proverbs in the text also act as carriers of wisdom, emotion, and lessons. For Dalit women especially, whose stories are often ignored, these forms express feelings, survival strategies, and shared cultural values. They pass on moral lessons, resilience, and solidarity across generations.

Folk and Oral Traditions: As Resisting Oppression and Identity Assertion

Bama skillfully employs oral traditions and folk customs to highlight Dalit identity and resist tyranny. By doing this, she regains the ability to speak for her group and challenges the prevailing narratives propagated by society. By making use of folk customs and oral stories Bama points out caste prejudices exist not only in Hinduism but also within Christianity. Her community's mixed religious practices show the resistance against unyielding, one-sided ideas of religion. It proves that they have the power to practice their faith in their own way. Through oral traditions, Bama exposes the stories of everyday humiliation, and hypocrisy of society. For centuries, Dalit people were in silence, but Bama's autobiography proves their right to tell their own stories,

define who they are, and explain their experiences. The act of writing Karukku turns Dalits from being seen only as victims into active creators of their own history and culture. It also shows that the everyday experiences of marginalized people is treasure of true knowledge. Bama's traditional styles of writing are a political act. She used fragmented structure and simple, spoken language that challenges the forms of writing that often misrepresented Dalits. This was a way of "decolonizing" literature, which proves that there are different different ways expressing truth are valid. Karukku is especially important from a Dalit feminist point of view because it focuses on how caste and gender intersect. Dalit women faced double discrimination. Bama brings out their strength, hard work, and cultural wisdom through oral stories and folk practices, what others may see as "ordinary" daily activities. Bama shows it as powerful cultural practices that keep the community's identity alive. It challenges both caste and patriarchy, proving that women are central to cultural survival and resistance.

Symbolism and Metaphor

The title *Echoes of the Earth* is symbolic and reflects the profound thought explored in Karukku. The palmyra leaf is a strong symbol in her story; it connects her community's survival and culture with nature. It has a sharp healing power. It represents the Dalit experience of pains of caste discrimination and the strength to heal them. This healing comes from their folk customs, oral traditions and collective spirit, which turn suffering into strength. The word "echoes" symbolize the voices and traditions that keep Dalit's life alive, even though people have tried to silence them. These voices come from the very land that supports the community. "Echoes" also points to the struggle between sound and silence. For a long time, Dalit voices were suppressed. But through everyday speech, sayings, folk songs, and oral stories, their voices have continued. By writing down these echoes, Bama makes them louder, showing how Dalit voices can break silence, claim space, and demand recognition.

Folk Traditions as Acts of Resistance

Folk customs and oral traditions help keep culture alive in Bama's Karukku. By preserving and articulating their traditional customs, the Dalits add up to a larger social and political movement. Telling and celebrating her community's culture instills pride in one individual who creates consciousness about fighting feelings of shame that has been internalized among the Dalit masses. Meanwhile, for an outsider or non-Dalit reader, it is a glimpse into this rich cultural world, thereby breaking existing stereotypes and building empathy. Karukku throws up a challenge to the traditional impression of Dalits as passive victims. It shares the vigor, creativity, and resilience of their traditions, proving their cultural wealth and human dignity. Bama's oral narrative style fused with folk elements has transformed the face of Indian literature by creating space for new forms and modes of writing as resistance. Her book belongs to a wider Dalit literary movement that is reclaiming silenced subjectivities and epistemologies. It can be observed that resistance is not limited to protests or politics, but is also demonstrated through culture and art as well. Karukku is an example of enabling and empowering cultural survival, preserving traditions through active, continuous engagement. It also cautions us that what is often considered "primitive" are, in reality, crucial elements of identity, power, and agency. In a contemporary society where a culture of equality and justice is desired, Karukku exemplifies the force of narration that holds the "earthly echoes" of silenced voices and aims for a more just and ecologically balanced tomorrow.

Conclusion

Bama's Karukku demonstrates the significance of oral storytelling and folk traditions in preserving Dalit culture and identity. Bama challenges and opposes the authority of prevailing literary, cultural, and religious systems through her distinctive writing style. Her writing demonstrates how oppressed communities persevere and find strength in their customs. This essay makes the case that Karukku is a reflection of the Dalit community's enduring cultural voices, or the "echoes of the earth." Festivals, daily rituals, and a variety of religious traditions serve as powerful pillars for cultural survival, enabling people to stay in touch, exchange knowledge, and fight against oppression. The community's true voice is found in oral traditions, such as the book's non-linear storytelling, local speech, proverbs, and folk songs, which enable them to share their own tales and

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The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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