

# Assertive Voices of Tamil Dalit Feminists: Tracing Dalit Aesthetics in the Select Works of Bama and Sukirtharani

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 12

Special Issue: 2

Month: April

Year: 2025

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

Citation:

Santhosh, D. "Assertive Voices of Tamil Dalit Feminists: Tracing Dalit Aesthetics in the Select Works of Bama and Sukirtharani." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 12, no. S2, 2025, pp. 122–28.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15307885>

**Santhosh D**

*Ph.D. Scholar, Department of English  
Pondicherry University, Puducherry, India*

## Abstract

*The paper focuses on the Dalit Feminist discourse in South India (Tamil Nadu), emphasizing the writings of prominent Dalit Feminist Activists/writers Bama and Sukirtharani. The paper explores the ideological underpinnings of their poetry and its importance. Lella Karunyakara states, "There is a need to create a positive, powerful brand image of Dalit identity; with the positive, powerful brand image, Dalits will certainly get social respect to gain. Since Dalit identity is not enough" (Karunyakara 159). The Dalit literature is coupled with aesthetics and joy. The paper tries to capture the hardships and humiliations faced by Dalit women in their day-to-day lives, as they are triply marginalized based on Caste, Class, and gender. Tracing the positive aspects of the Dalit lifestyle creates a new debate about Dalit personhood and asserts the Dalit identity, perhaps Pavitra (Pure/Positive) Dalit Identity. The paper tries to understand the Dalit aesthetics in the works of Bama and Sukirtharani and the emergence of Dalit assertion in their literary works. The paper views the works of the above writers through the lens of Dalit Aesthetics advocated by Sharankumar Limbale. Bama and Sukirtharani are not just writers but also firebrand Dalit feminist activists who articulated the rights of the depressed, disadvantaged female Dalits and actively participated in working for the upliftment of the downtrodden.*

**Keywords:** Dalit literature, Tamil Nadu, Dalithood, Dalit Aesthetics, Assertion.

## Introduction

The term "Aesthetics" refers to the study of art, beauty, and taste. Indian aesthetic theory contradicts Western aesthetic theory in various aspects—the conceptualization of Indian aesthetic theory has evolved, becoming a highly sophisticated body. However, when applied to Dalit Cultural production, it becomes an act of resistance and reclamation of self-respect and social recognition by endorsing or asserting their identity in the caste-ridden society. Dalit literature and art reflect not only their continuous struggles for social justice and equality. Dalit Aesthetics is very political, highlighting the role of Caste, Class, Gender, and social exclusionary practices prevailing in society. It emphasizes the idea that caste is not simply a social or cultural phenomenon, but a deeply ingrained, systemic condition that shapes every aspect of life. The aesthetics of Dalit literature contradicts the existing principles of Aesthetics in the Indian context. Perhaps

questioning the whole premise of Indian aesthetics lays importance on *Satyam*, *Shivam*, and *Sundaram*, which is translated to truth, holiness, and beauty. SharankumarLimbale counters this by the lived experiences of Dalits in the country as it acknowledges caste as an inescapable reality but also contemplates possibilities for its transcendence to dismantle the rigid social structure. Dalit Aesthetics completely neglects the narratives or literature considered pure and endorses spirituality in mainstream literature, presenting the Dalit life as it is. Some of the claims levelled at Dalit writers or subaltern writers are casteist. Just because they are dealing with caste does not mean they are casteist. The ultimate objective of the Dalit writers is the annihilation of caste or abolition of caste, which is a big project taken up by the Dalit Activists, not just in Tamil Nadu but all over India.

There is a general view or stigma associated with Dalit writings in India, jumping to the conclusion that Dalit literature talks about nothing but the pain and suffering of the oppressed. Some of the prominent critics in the area of literature premised upon the classic Aesthetics, do have an aversion to the Aesthetics of Dalit literature. Kavi Anil and Vidyadhar Pundalik assert that Dalit literature can be forged through the imaginative faculty of the artist and writer. Thus, articulating the anguish of Dalits and translating it into a literary form. Meanwhile, scholars like Nirmalkumar Phadkule and NarharKurundkar contend that the creation of Dalit literature is not contingent upon the writer's social background or caste identity, suggesting that even a Savarna who belonged to the upper strata of society can contribute to literary tradition and brilliance. This will confront the perception that a writer must belong to a certain oppressed or marginalized community to produce works in this genre. "Dalit theorization of Dalit aesthetics that challenges the way upper-caste writers and theoreticians have understood and propagated Indian aesthetics. It also interrogates the notion of literature and particularly the way the Indian upper-caste writers propagate their worldviews through their art" (Rajkumar 71).

As the paper touches upon the Discourse on the subjects of Dalits presented by mainstream writers or by non-Dalit writers, it exposes the hypocritical/literary subjugation of the non-Dalit writers and their discourse by presenting the Dalit literature offering a harsh critique of caste mechanism and portraying the Dalit characters with Sympathy and Compassion which excludes the rich cultural and literary brilliance. Thus, it gives the picture that Dalit literature is nothing but social injustice, disability, pain, and suffering—for instance, the character Bakha from Mulk Raj Anand's 'Untouchable,' and Adi from Manu Joseph's 'Serious Men.' The genre of Autobiographies started to change the track of Dalit Discourse. There is indeed a strong base for literature and poetry in Tamil Nadu despite the subject from the very first Dalit autobiographical novel written by Bama that is 'Karukku', which energized the writers about the Dalit lifestyle and captured the joyful moments in their mundane lives. According to Lenin's dictum of the "concrete analysis of the concrete condition." The progressive Dalit writers are trying to portray that the concrete conditions in India are entirely different compared to other nations.

### **Methodology**

The paper tries to understand the aesthetic sense of selected literary works through Limbale's aesthetic framework: Artists must be motivated by their own experience. Limbale's conception of aesthetics is tied to the socio-political realities of the depressed, disadvantaged, and marginalized communities. The mode of artistic expression reflects the harsh realities of caste-based, gender-based patriarchy. Artists must socialize their experiences. Artists' or writers' experiences must be able to cross provincial boundaries, leading to a quest for social justice. The artist's experience must seem relevant at all times.

### **Assertion of Bama**

Bama Faustina Soosairaj is a Dalit feminist, teacher, and novelist hailing from Pudupatti, Chennai, Tamil Nadu. A prominent active Dalit feminist poet critiques the caste system in India and, at the same time, asserts the Social Identity, be it caste or gender. Bama was the central figure in the rejuvenation of Tamil Dalit literature. Bama, in her interview, says, “Annihilation of Caste is the ultimate aim and intention of my writing. Because we, the Dalit people, have the responsibility and duty to do that.” Bama’s writing is a form of resistance and agitation against the caste-based patriarchy. Politics plays a huge role in this fight for Self-respect, dignity, Dalit assertion and the upliftment of the Dalits in India. Bama takes up writing as she believes arts can also help create a change and a just society through her literature.

“Arts can enable us to contribute to the movement a great deal. The movement that benefitted from decades of work that Periyar and Ambedkar did” (Neelam Social 48:56).

The mainstream literary critics relegate the writings produced by the Dalits. Bama was no exception, as she was critiqued for her language. Bama uses the everyday language of the people in her Novel and short stories. Mainstream literary critics such as P.S. Rege and BalkrishnanaKawthekar believe that the Indian literary tradition is rich enough to appreciate and evaluate Dalit literature. It does not need any separate and distinct yardstick to evaluate its artistic expression. Bama deconstructs the concept of Aesthetics in the Indian context by exposing the exclusive, condescending, and hegemonic nature of the so-called “Indian Aesthetics”. According to Indian Aesthetics, the texts that touch upon the theme of truth, holiness, and beauty are considered aesthetical or, in other words, the literary sources that preach spirituality, which is metaphysical and abstract. The Dalit writers critiqued or, in other words, revolted against this way of perceiving the text. They took up their quills and pens to document the experience of human lives in the Indian context and the ongoing discriminatory, exclusionary, and evil practices in society.

The growing readership among the progressive youth and Dalits celebrated the writings of Bama. Which in turn made her Debut Autobiographical Novel *Karukku* a grand success despite all the criticism. In the book’s very first chapter, she gives a vivid image of her village. The Autobiographical Novel *Karukku* talks about the Dalit lifestyle and the difficulties they face because of their caste, especially the womenfolk. Bama knew that education was the only way to bash the social hierarchies, and that could uplift the downtrodden. Bama envisioned that conversion to Christianity could help us gain self-respect. She and her friends faced caste-based discrimination by the Nuns. “It struck me overwhelmingly that these nuns collectively oppressed Dalit children and teachers so very much; why should I not become a nun too and truly help these people who are humiliated so much and kept under strict control?” (Bama 23).

Bama believed that education is very important for women to be independent. She learned from her experience and she wanted to educate the disadvantaged lot in society. She made up her mind to work for society and found that becoming a nun as a sister (nun) would be appropriate. Since it would be an excellent opportunity to engage with children and God. Bama wants to raise awareness about education for children, especially the disadvantaged lot. Teach children English and mathematics, but also about society. She was first assigned to work in Columban’s Anglo-Indian School in Chennai in 1988. That is when Bama understood that educational institutions, especially run by missionaries, are a luxury for the downtrodden. Bama thought that she made a fool out of herself by becoming a nun. That is when she came to know that caste discrimination is very prevalent, even among the sisters or the missionary congregations. She felt dejected by her decision and that the religion she believed had betrayed her. Bama then decided to come out of the bogus religious institution and get away from any form of religion that was structured or systematic. Bama uses or employs the language of the people, which is deeply rooted in the land. Thus, she

made sure that she was not cutting away from people and their problems through her scholarship, thus being a part of the lifestyle and reflecting it through her literature. Throughout her novel, she sounded rustic and rural. “They sang teasing songs to the prospective bride and groom, who were usually cross-cousins; As I was grinding the masala and machan, you peeped over the wall. What magic powder did you cast on me? I cannot lift the grinding stone” (qtd. in Arockiamary P R, 63).

In her autobiographical novel, Bama aesthetically describes the geographical landscape with her rustic language and the demography at the very opening of the novel. The village and the ghetto, the ways they’ve been confined to their colony that is their ghetto, the only redemption or the faith the people had was their religion. Bama and her relatives were converted to Christianity to escape the caste and evil practices. However, the casteist mentality of the people, the so-called upper caste, has not let them slip out of rituals and traditions so easily.

### **Triumph of *Karukku***

Bama’s *Karukku* was opposed by her community people as she had exposed the reality of the people without their consent. Bama’s *Karukku* was heavily criticized by mainstream writers and critics, arguing that the book failed to follow any one literary category (neither a novel nor an autobiography) distinctly. Writer Yakkan says “*Karukku* is a book that introduced plenty of root words of the Tamil language. Since the book was written by a woman who had spoken the very language, lived the very life detailed in it herself, *Karukku* documented that word accurately and truthfully.” (Neelam Social 20:28). The language and form of Dalit literature often incorporate elements of oral, folk traditions. The subversive imagery to capture both the pain and the resistance that define the Dalit experience. It redefines what is considered ‘realism’ and what is worth representing as it is. Though sanitization and romanticization of caste that is common in mainstream literature.

I believe a bad word is always subjective and contextual. If you think it’s a bad word, then it is a bad word; if you think it is a good word, then it is a good word. Moreover, profanity is the most accessible weapon of Dalits. What else could we do to defend ourselves in the instant moment? Many bitter things happen to Dalits at our workplaces and while we travel in public. How do you expect us to defend ourselves with no physical strength or weapons or political power or financial muscle. When you have deprived us of everything? Words become our only weapon then. Hence, I don’t believe that profanity is a faulted approach in writing. No matter what the elite writers say, I don’t agree to that view. (Neelam Social 22:15 – 22:58)

The writings of Bama challenge the very conception of Purity. Over time, people started to perceive the text without caste or gender prejudices. Thus, *Karukku* became one of the most celebrated texts in the 21st century. In 2000, *Karukku* won the Crossword Book Award. The people of Pudupatti village gave a grand welcome to Bama when she returned to her village after all the harsh criticism. The 25th Anniversary of *Karukku* was celebrated by the village people, like a festival in Madurai. Bama’s *Karukku* triumphs as it stands the test of time. She silenced the critics through her successful literary career. Some excerpts of *Karukku* had been included in the school syllabus. It is important to note that Delhi University removed *Karukku* from their syllabus, coming up with an argument that the language of the writer is foul and provocative. This very action taken by the mainstream academic circle hints at silencing the writings or literary techniques used by Bama. However, that only widened the readership and the audience for Bama. Students and scholars who were not even aware of Bama and Sukirtharani started reading their works, which led to a new discourse in understanding the daily lifestyle of a Dalit. They gave a different perspective to the students, especially the non-Dalits, that completely shattered the image of the same old Dalit or, in other words, Bakha. The conventional, traditional way of portraying a Dalit character and his

lifestyle is filled with pain, sorrow, and evoking sympathy for the readers. Scholars working in the area of Subaltern literature or who want to probe into the lives of Dalits through literary texts will take *Karukku* as their Handbook.

### **Aesthetics of Sukirtharani**

Sukirtharani is a poet hailing from Ranipet District, Tamil Nadu. A prominent active Dalit feminist poet critiques the caste system and Brahminical patriarchy in India and, at the same time, asserts the Social Identity, be it caste or gender. Like Bama, Sukirtharani comes from a family that follows the Christian faith. She wanted to rebel against the concept of aesthetics and to counter that, she took up the genre of poetry. Through her poetry, she tries to dismantle the existing twin oppressive structure of caste and patriarchy in contemporary Indian society.

Sukirtharani does not believe in the conception of art for art's sake but art for people, which could be reflected in her poetry.

Our bare feet are drenched  
by the pain of caste that drips from our lips  
as we drink tea from palm-leaf cups,  
standing at an untouchable distance,  
while the portrait of our village  
frames itself at a place of double existence,  
always vigilant (Sukirtharani 82).

In this poetry, she describes the geographical location with a tint of joy, piercing the readers with pain. She starts with a melancholic way of going back to the days when the people (workers) lost their jobs and resorted to working in the fields of their landlords for their livelihood. Where they have been stripped of their dignity and degraded, discriminated against in the name of caste. The hard labour of the oppressed in the field was disregarded by the Landlords and was treated almost as bonded labour. Moreover, people who were against the system of working under a boss or living as bonded labour took up menial work (labour) for little pay, like spreading the news in the village and carrying the cadavers of both Animals and Humans of the so-called upper caste. Since being at the lowest rung in society, they were forced to take up these works to survive in society. So, here we could observe the indignity of labour, which makes them completely subjugated or, in other words, jammed with the social structure and framework in which the Indian society lives. This eventually leads the people (marginalized/ oppressed) to succumb to the evil practices as they do not have any option. She comes up with a realistic viewpoint in the ending, how the caste system had intoxicated the villagers not by any Rum or brandy but by the Tea, which is served in palm leaf cups and from an untouchable distance, she says, "Our village frames itself as a Double existence" (82).

### **Dalit Aesthetics**

Sharankumar Limbale, a Marathi Dalit writer, fostered the framework of Dalit Aesthetics in the contemporary "Ambedkarite thought is the aesthetics of Dalit literature.... this literature cannot be evaluated based on either Sanskrit aesthetics or Western aesthetics. The aesthetics of this (Dalit) literature can only be based on the thinking of Ambedkar and Phule". (qtd in Mondal 192). This humanistic approach and emphasis on human values are the fundamental aesthetic standards of Dalit literature. Dalit Aesthetics is very political in itself, as it use of art and literature not just reflect the society but make the readers aware about the situation provoking a common being to transform or challenge the society. Therefore, the real beauty of Dalit literature lies in its vision of social reform, emancipation, freedom, justice, equality, brotherhood, and, above all, humanism.

Aesthetics or sense of aesthetics differs from person to person. The aesthetics appealing to a non-Dalit could or might not appeal to a Dalit. Thus, the violation or questioning the aesthetics of non-Dalits can be considered as aesthetics, according to Sukirtharani.

But now  
If anyone asks me  
I speak up bluntly:  
I am a Paraichi(Sukirtharani 79).

In the poem *I Speak up Bluntly*, Sukirtharani deals with the humiliation and her experience of eating the leftovers from the upper caste people. In this poem, she vividly describes her father coming back home with his Parai on his shoulders, which is considered to be an instrument to make noise by the upper caste villagers. They are economically dependent as her father's income depends upon the village people. Later, she starts asserting her identity because there is no option left for her to write down her pain and suffering. The poem ends with the radical touch of the poet proclaiming herself, asserting her Dalit Identity "Paraichi" (a woman belonging to the lower strata of the society) to the very common question in the village, that is "WHO ARE YOU", which can be decoded as which caste do you belong to. Though radical, the poem can be considered an aesthetical piece of literature, given Limbale's framework of Aesthetics, as it is based on reality and contemporary society.

In their minds  
I, who smell faintly of meat,  
my house where bones hang,  
stripped entirely of muscle,  
and my street  
where youths wander without restraint  
making loud noise  
from coconut shells strung with skin,  
are all at the furthest point of our town.  
I assure them  
We stand at the forefront (Sukirtharani 80)

In this piece of poetry titled *A Faint Smell of Meat*, here the poet geographically asserts her place in the village and a community of production despite everything that is considered to be a sin or a pollutant by the so-called people in her village hamlet. For instance, the very aspect of writing 'loud music' shows her angst against the dominant caste, who doesn't consider the loud music as a piece of music but rather a noise. It does not deal with cultural differences or, in other words, a historical note on the word 'loud music' as Cultural oppression or subjugation. She also talks about the youth of her village being free, unlike those restrained by any customs or traditions. The mention of Youthhood represents the collective consciousness of the oppressed people and their entry into eminent or dignified Institutions, schools, colleges, and universities. That can be interpreted as a revolutionary phrase like the oppressed people who were not allowed to walk on the public roads as an Indian citizen and had no access to education. It can be understood that the oppressed people have now gained access to education and have academically equipped themselves. The poem is written in a very simple and playful manner, but instills a very powerful impact in literary society.

## Conclusion

Toral Jatin Gajarawala observes,

Dalit texts, like many other texts, contain elements of the traditionally realist and the utopian, the magical, the pedagogical. But they rhetorically insist on the reading of those elements within

the framework of a realist epistemology rather than their narrative sequestering as subjectivist, fabulist, “agitational” or “perspective”. To agree to this would be to grant to the Dalit realist text the privileges the realist text has accrued elsewhere. The Dalit text has to be necessarily concerned with caste status as immutable and fixed, as well as with its transcendence, without which the Dalit text could not be. This is less utopian or melodramatic than it is the product of a modern subjectivity. Dalit writing, reorganizing the world according to caste, is using the old categories of realist referentiality to make certain political claims, the elaboration of which require triangulation, circumvention, bifurcation. Rajkumar (19-20).

In this paper, *Karukku*, the Autobiographical Novel by Bama, and the three poems of Sukirtharani, namely *The Portrait of My Village*, *I Speak up Bluntly*, and *A Faint Smell of Meat*. Being critical of the works and their ideological underpinnings to understand the aesthetics and the call for Dalit assertion in their works. It is evident from the paper that Dalit writers can produce aesthetic literature while critiquing the caste-based hierarchies prevailing in society—the literature coupled with literary aesthetics and political ideologies. Limbale’s concept of Dalit Aesthetics emphasizes raw, honest portrayals of Dalit experience, evading the elitist notions of beauty. The works of Bama and Sukirtharani are examined through Limbale’s aesthetics as their writings break away from traditional literary structures, subverting the established norms of storytelling. Providing a pivotal dialogue about the intersectionality of literature, art, politics, and social justice. It is important to understand that the writers assert their existence through their societal identity and question the Brahminical hegemony that is relevant in contemporary times.

## References

1. Arockiamary P R, Amutha and Dr. EuginiFathimma Mary L. “Language of Resistance and Aesthetic Appeal: Bama’s Linguistic Activism - An Analysis of the Subaltern Aesthetics in *Karukku* and *Sangati*.” *International Journal of Innovative Research and Development*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2016, pp. 138- 141. *International Journal Corner*, [https://www.internationaljournalcorner.com/index.php/ijird\\_ojs/article/view/136053](https://www.internationaljournalcorner.com/index.php/ijird_ojs/article/view/136053)
2. Bama. *Karukku*. Translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom, Oxford University Press, 2012.
3. Dabhade, Neha. “Do the Dalit Lives Matter InIndia?: Reflecting on Condition of Dalits and Apathy”. *Centre for Study of Society and Secularism*, 2020, <https://csss-islam.com/secular-perspective/do-the-dalit-lives-matter-in-india-reflecting-on-condition-of-dalits-and-apathy/>
4. Karunyakara, Lella. *From Dalit to Pavitra Dalit History of Dalit Identity*. Dalwis Publishers, 2018.
5. Kumar, Raj. *Dalit Literature and Criticism*. Orient BlackSwan, 2019.
6. Limbale, Sharankumar. *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies, and Considerations*. Translated by Alok Mukherjee, Orient BlackSwan, 2004.
7. Mondal, Arup Kumar. “Dalit Literature: Interpreting Theory and Aesthetics”. *Literary Herald*, vol.7, no. 2, 2021, pp.189-196.
8. Paswan, Chhotu. “The Significance of Dalit Aesthetics in Bama’s *Karukku* and *Sangati*.” *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)*, vol. 8. 11, 2020, pp. 123-124. IJCRT <https://ijcrt.org/papers/IJCRT2011179.pdf>.
9. Ravikumar, D. and R. Azhagarasan. *The Oxford Indian Anthology of Tamil Dalit Writing*. Oxford University Press, 2012.
10. Sukirtharani. *Wild Word: Four Tamil Poets*. Lakshmi, Holmstrom (Trad.)(pp. 77–93). Harper Perennial, 2015.
11. “‘The Direction of Tamil Literature’” Documentary | Pa Ranjith | Vijay | Neelam Cultural | #neelamsocial” *YouTube*, uploaded by Neelam Social, 15 May 2024, <https://youtu.be/ZTk0lC6l6DQ?si=IE2ZnZ5mWyrDNNtD>