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Article

Narrating Memory, Bearing Trauma: Identity and Resistance in *Karukku* and *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract: This paper examines the intricate relationship between memory, trauma, and colonial identity in Indian literature, as explored in Bama's *Karukku* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. In *Karukku*, Bama recalls her experiences as a Dalit Christian woman in Tamil Nadu. She faces humiliation at school, during playtime, in church, on the streets, and in hostel life. She remembers being treated differently because of her caste and gender, even in places where equality was promised. Her memories reveal that postcolonial India is still marked by deep social inequality. In *The God of Small Things*, Roy tells the story of twins Estha and Rahel in Kerala, whose lives are marked by the death of their cousin Sophie Mol, caste discrimination, racial prejudice, and family restrictions. Their trauma comes from childhood incidents, broken family, falling apart, and silent suffering that continues into adulthood. The paper shows how both writers use memory to preserve truth, how trauma continues, and how the postcolonial struggle against oppression shapes identity.

Keywords: memory; trauma; identity after freedom; Dalit literature; social injustice; gender discrimination; racism

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Introduction

Literature is a way to express human perspective, feelings, and experiences through literary works. It reflects personal emotion and social norms while providing insight into society. In postcolonial societies, literature examines the effects of colonial rule and the changes it brought to identity, language, and power after independence. Postcolonial literature often explores injustice, discrimination, and rigid societal norms created by colonial and local authorities. In India, these issues are closely connected to caste, religion, skin colour, and the search for equality. Postcolonial theory explains how the colonial past continues to influence societal norms, cultural practices, and personal identities even after independence. It shows that oppression is not only political or economic but also psychological, shaping how people see themselves and how society treats them.

Early Dalit literature was sometimes written by non-Dalit writers. However, later Dalit authors began sharing their own experiences to reveal anti-caste struggles, demand justice, and protest economic and social oppression. Lakshmi Holmstrom describes Dalits as "All Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, neo-Buddhists, labourers, landless and destitute peasants, women, and all those who have been exploited politically, economically, and in the name of religion are Dalits" (Holmstrom 12). Dominant caste narratives become challenging issues for Dalit writers, and they aim to build solidarity among marginalized groups. By giving voice to experiences that were historically silenced, Dalit literature preserves memory as a tool to resist social injustice and to document trauma.

Bama's *Karukku*, first published in Tamil in 1992 and later translated into English, is a powerful autobiographical narrative that illustrates how memory and trauma shape identity. She recalls by describing her village with landmarks such as Markkapuuchi Malai, Perumal Saami Temple, Naripaara, Vannan Parra, Vattala Vittham Paara, Muniappasaami Temple, and numerous lakes. While showing the beauty and fertility of her village, Bama highlights social divisions along caste lines. Each community lives separately and interacts only when necessary. Schools, streets, and public spaces reinforce these boundaries, keeping Dalits on the margins and subjecting them to constant discrimination. Bama recalls that her community worked very hard to produce food and goods for the upper castes while remaining hungry themselves. Dalits ploughed fields, manured lands, separated seeds, harvested coconuts, collected firewood, and made bricks with little food or rest. These hardships caused early death. Even during festivals, Dalit children could not afford the best food. These memories show how labour, caste, and economic oppression were deeply connected. Bama realized that it is due to caste discrimination that the majority of the lower castes are condemned to live an unhappy life without any honour or self-respect. She criticizes the hypocrisy of Hindu society, which supports caste divisions and treats some people worse than animals.

Bama's observations on the Indian society are quite apt:

> In this society, if you are born into a low caste, you are forced to live a life of humiliation and degradation until your death. Even after death, caste-difference do not disappear. Wherever you look, however much you study, whatever you take up, caste discrimination stalks us in every nook and corner and drives us into a frenzy. It is because of this that we are unable to find a way to study well and progress like everyone else. And this is why a wretched lifestyle is all that is left to us. (Bama 23)

The Nadar men who had shops in the Paraiyar streets exploited them during their bartering sessions. School and hostel life brought further humiliation. One day, while playing in the school grounds, a coconut fell, and the headmaster accused Bama of stealing it because she was Dalit. The church pastor acted in the same way, suggesting her caste made her guilty. Even her church father and pastor did not defend her. Bama explains, "Although the Christian missionaries promised equality, caste prejudice still existed" (Bama 18). Dalit boys played freely in games like kabaddi, hide-and-seek, or cricket, while Dalit girls were kept busy with household chores and rarely played. Sometimes, boys involved girls indirectly by asking them to fetch things, but the girls themselves rarely got to enjoy playtime. This shows that gender hierarchies existed even within the Dalit community.

In the hostel, wardens watched Dalit girls closely, punished them unfairly, and restricted their participation. Although they were supposed to receive care and food, Dalit children faced verbal abuse. Bama recalls, "The wardens shouted at us and punished us for small mistakes, even when we tried to work hard" (Bama 23). Even in church, where equality was promised, caste hierarchy takes another ugly turn when it enters the church. Christianity in India is a more recent phenomenon when compared to America and other countries. In India, many Dalits converted to Christianity to escape the varna-based caste discrimination. However, even after conversion, Christians carry out the cultural values and caste practices of Hindus. This leads to discrimination in the name of caste within the church; Dalits were segregated during prayers and restricted in participation. Christian missionaries brought education but also converted some Indians, leaving Dalit Christians caught between religious promises and caste realities. These experiences left deep emotional trauma and shaped Bama's understanding of caste and gender inequality. Memories of false accusations, verbal abuse, and exclusion illustrate how caste-based oppression creates lasting psychological scars and a postcolonial identity marked by struggle and resilience.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, published in 1997, explores similar themes of memory, trauma, and postcolonial identity through the lives of twins Estha and Rahel in Kerala. Family tragedy, caste prejudice, social rules, and colour discrimination shape their childhoods. The death of their cousin Sophie Mol triggers false accusations and leads to the murder of Velutha, a Dalit man who had a relationship with their mother, Ammu. Ammu suffers for being a woman and breaking caste boundaries. Roy explains, "It is true that love and caste cannot go together in Ayemenem" (Roy 45).

In addition to caste, Roy highlights how colonial ideas of racial hierarchy influenced postcolonial Indian society. Before British rule, darker skin was considered normal in India, but after colonization, white skin became associated with power and social approval. For example, Margaret Kochamma, a white woman, is admired by society, and Chacko's marriage to her is socially accepted. In contrast, Ammu's love for Velutha, a Dalit man with dark skin, is condemned. Society refuses to recognize their relationship, illustrating how colonial notions of race combined with caste to reinforce oppression. Roy emphasizes this, writing, "Ammu's love for Velutha was forbidden, but the love for Margaret was celebrated" (Roy 78). This incident shows how postcolonial trauma is compounded by both caste and colour discrimination, affecting identity, social recognition, and personal freedom.

Estha experiences sexual abuse during a theatre visit and becomes withdrawn and silent, while Rahel struggles to find belonging after being separated from her brother. The narrative moves back and forth in time, reflecting how memory works in fragments. Childhood trauma, social rules, caste boundaries, and colourism leave lasting effects on identity, showing that remembering the past can also be a form of resistance. Roy vividly describes Velutha's murder and its effects on the twins. Estha becomes silent and emotionally detached, and Rahel becomes anxious and restless. Their trauma is compounded by the adults' inability to intervene. Roy writes, "Estha would not speak, Rahel would not ask, and Ammu's voice was lost in the weight of what had happened" (Roy 60). Through these fragmented memories, Roy demonstrates how childhood trauma, caste prejudice, and family tragedy combine to shape postcolonial identity.

The postcolonial context is evident in both works. In *Karukku*, Christian missionaries represent the colonial legacy. Dalit Christians faced a conflict of identity, belonging to a religion introduced by colonial powers while still experiencing caste discrimination. In *The God of Small Things*, colonial influence is reflected in the use of English, the family's admiration for British goods, lingering ideas of social superiority mixed with the caste system, and a preference for white skin. Both authors show that trauma is not a past event but a continuing presence that shapes identity and consciousness. Storytelling becomes a way to preserve truth, challenge injustice, and claim dignity.

These works are relevant to contemporary life because caste discrimination, gender inequality, and colourism persist in various forms. Education, legal protection, and awareness programs are crucial to addressing these problems. Encouraging marginalized communities to tell their own stories can promote solidarity and reduce social prejudices. By reading works like *Karukku* and *The God of Small Things*, society can understand the emotional and psychological impact of systemic discrimination and trauma, which is often invisible in daily life.

To put it in a nutshell, Bama's *Karukku* and Roy's *The God of Small Things* illustrate how memory and trauma shape postcolonial identity in India. They show that caste discrimination, racism, social inequality, and the effects of colonial rule continue to be problems for generations. Literature helps us understand these experiences and

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how they shape identity and trauma. By teaching historical events and caste discrimination, we can increase awareness, and providing mental health support from social workers can help people to heal. Laws, media, and policies should work to reduce discrimination and inequality, while giving space to marginalized voices in writing and media can create equality. By doing this in action, society can work toward overcoming these problems and building a pleasant future. It also acts as a mirror to reflect trauma, a tool to protest for equality, and a medium to imagine a society where all voices are registered. The detailed accounts of embarrassment, isolation, abuse, and family tragedy show that postcolonial identity is not only shaped by historical events but also by lived experiences of trauma. These narratives highlight the need for social change, justice, and empathy in contemporary society.

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