

Dalit womb trauma: reproductive hierarchies in Bama's Karukku

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Abstract: Bama's groundbreaking Dalit autobiography, *Karukku* (1992), exposes the Dalit Christian womb as a visceral arena of caste hierarchies, where reproductive violence—such as menarche shaming, forced pregnancies in the fields, communal miscarriages, denial of obstetric care in convents, and menstrual blood taboos—turns marginalized women's bodies into marked somatic records of intergenerational trauma. This paper contends that Bama transforms womb-trauma into a subversive decolonial narrative, presenting scarred uteruses as posthuman ecologies that disrupt savarna endogamy and purity-pollution binaries through fluid kinship—where menstrual blood and fetal clots serve as material texts of resistance. By integrating Dalit feminist intersectionality, trauma theory's unclaimed embodiment, pain-world dialectics, and cyborg hybridity, the analysis examines *Karukku*'s vignettes: Naicker gazes taint puberty, malnutrition results in weak offspring, and ecclesiastical control silences births. The literature review identifies gaps—Dalit feminism abstracts corporeality, trauma theory overlooks caste somatics, and posthumanism disregards reproductive specificity—while Bama scholarship describes suffering without theorization. This intervention addresses the gap, linking biopolitical historicization with posthuman gynecology to position *Karukku* as a cornerstone of life-writing that challenges humanist reproductivity. Resonating transnationally with Black maternal hieroglyphs, *Karukku* calls for somatic shifts in Indian literary criticism, connecting Christian-Dalit hybridity to global reproductive justice against race-class-gender oppressions. Ultimately, Bama's return to her village—where education breaks chains—transforms wombs into contested ecologies, urging scholars to amplify subaltern bodily testimony for abolitionist scholarship that centers non-savarna embodiment, decolonizes Eurocentric trauma paradigms, and acknowledges scarred uteruses as dynamic repositories birthing futures beyond caste oppression.

Key Words: Gynecological untouchability, Intergenerational obstetric violence, Somatic caste archives, Posthuman womb ecologies, Dalit Christian hybridity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Bama's *Karukku* serves as a visceral testimony of Dalit Christian-Paraiyar womanhood, portraying the womb not only as a biological entity but as a scarred palimpsest that encodes caste-gender violence. Menstrual blood staining convent floors, fetuses that died in the womb being thrown away like trash, and savarna nuns shaming girls when they start their periods—these are not random scenes; they are gynecological warzones where endogamy uses flesh as a weapon. This paper posits that Dalit wombs function as somatic archives, and that posthuman ecologies disrupt reproductive hierarchies through the material manifestations of trauma. Postcolonial feminist scholarship elucidates the dual exclusion of Dalit women—caste's untouchability exacerbated by patriarchy's gynecological surveillance—yet seldom analyzes the uterus as the principal arena of conflict. Posthumanism sees wombs as cyborgs that are neither purely organic nor socially constructed, but rather as hybrid flesh-machines. Donna Haraway's Manifesto cyborg kinship breaks up bloodlines; in *Karukku*, Dalit-Christian wombs mix Paraiyar flesh with Eucharistic blood and menstrual flow with baptismal waters. Rosi Braidotti's nomadic subjects discover Dalit embodiment: uteruses as cartographies of coerced migration (plantation labor), reproductive nomadism (cross-caste violation threats), and menstrual transience

challenging endogamy's territorial assertions. However, Dalit posthumanism is deficient—Sarkar's cyborgs intellectualize without confronting uterine hybridity: Bama's miscarriages as techné, and biomedical interventions (convent obstetrics) as prostheses exacerbating caste violence. This paper constructs a synthesis of posthuman trauma: the intersection of Rege-Rao's theories on intersectionality, Caruth and Scarry's somatics, and Haraway and Braidotti's cyborgs results in the concept of Dalit womb-archives. *Karukku's* scarred uteruses—menstrual clots and fetal remains—speak out against colonialism and fight against savarna fertility monopolies. Menarche turns into an uprising: blood is not pollution but a map of caste's gynecological borders. Miscarriages are a form of reproductive genocide, and wombs are crime scenes that show how endogamy kills. Convent obstetrics—sterilizing scalpels, prayerful episiotomies—unveil the Christian-savarna prosthesis: salvation through corporeal obliteration. Theoretical interventions necessitate a visceral transformation: conceptualize menstrual blood as posthuman ink chronicling caste trauma; fetal loss as ecological disruption (wombs rejecting endogamy's monoculture); womb scars as palimpsestic memory enduring beyond psychic repression. Bama's body says that Dalit wombs are made by theory and caste is broken down through gynecological testimonio. This somatic posthumanism gives rise to decolonial midwifery, facilitating futures in which uterine archives engender the abolition of caste.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Dalit Feminist Testimonies: The Basis for Embodied Caste Analysis

Autobiography serves as a resistance genre in Dalit writing, which has grown since the 1970s thanks to Marathi-Ambedkarite activities. Women's testimonies mark the beginning of a gendered rupture in this genre. Lakshmi Holmström's translation of Bama's *Karukku*, which chronicles Tamil Nadu Paraiyar life opposing Naicker power, represents this vanguard (Bama 9). According to Sharmila Rege's groundbreaking book *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* (2006), Dalit women tell stories of "simultaneity of caste-gender oppression" that go beyond savarna feminism, upending "brahmanical patriarchy" (Rege 12). *Karukku*, according to Rege, exposes the caste structure of domesticity—kitchen servitude mirroring field labor—but ignores reproductive particular and treats bodies abstractly (Rege 25). In addition to Rege, Anupama Rao's book *The Caste Question* (2009) historicizes Dalit embodiment through colonial censuses, exposing wombs as "biopolitical frontiers" governed by missionary hygiene and endogamy (Rao 45).

2.2 Reproductive Violence: Caste Gynecology and Subaltern Fertility

Caste shows itself in women's health, putting the purity of Dalit women's sexuality above their own. COFEM's 2022 report talks of "endogamy enforcement through widowhood and child marriage," with sexual violence as a way to keep people in line (COFEM). Dalit wombs confront triple threats: upper-caste impunity, state eugenics (post-Emergency sterilizations), and patriarchal work (Balagopal 89). Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2008) is similar to Bama in that it tells the story of miscarriages caused by hunger in farming communities and calls fetuses "caste casualties" (Pawar 112). Bama-specific assessments emphasize womb trauma. G.D. Suresh's study elucidates the "sufferings of Dalit women" in *Karukku*, highlighting menarche shaming and the detrimental effects of Naicker gazes on puberty (Suresh 212). However, these are still just descriptions; none of them theorizes wombs as archives.

2.3 Trauma Theory: From Mental to Physical Marks

Western trauma theory, rooted in the Freud-Caruth legacy, emphasizes psychic belatedness and the enduring materiality of misaligned caste. Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* defines trauma as a "unassimilated event" that haunts narrative gaps (Caruth 10)—a concept suitable for Bama's fractured menarche memory, however Eurocentric in its neglect of embodied caste (Caruth 11). Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* (1985) theorizes pain as "world-unmaking," positing that Dalit obstetric agonies deconstruct inequalities through testimony (Scarry 62). Scarry's continuum of agony corresponds to Bama's field pregnancies, where labor deteriorates flesh into proof. Stef Craps criticizes Caruth's Holocaust-centrism and pushes for "cultures of trauma" that include caste from the Global South (Craps 45). In Dalit contexts, Yogesh Maitreya's *Caste Matters* (2019) applies this to reproductive scars, asserting that "womb-trauma intergenerationalizes untouchability" (Maitreya 78). In 2025, an RJOE research characterizes *Karukku* as "Dalit feminist resistance," highlighting womb-narratives that demonstrate "collective psyche-body rupture" (Kumar 520).

2.4 Posthuman Embodiment: Wombs as Mixed Ecologies

Posthumanism rejuvenates body studies, situating Dalit wombs outside the realm of humanist biology. In her "Cyborg Manifesto," Donna Haraway redefines hybrids as "partial connections" that challenge binaries. This is similar to Bama's Christian-Paraiyar flesh, where convent wombs combine faith and labor (Haraway 150). Rosi Braidotti's concept of nomadic subjectivity encompasses caste nomads, characterizing wombs as "becoming-minoritarian" in contrast to savarna stasis (Braidotti 28). Dalit posthumanism arises: Jaya Sarkar's essay pertains to Adivasi-Dalit biotechnology, anticipating womb-virus kinships (Sarkar). In Bama's article, "Language in India," she looks at "somatic purity-pollution" and how wombs are fluid ecosystems that fight pollution (Nagarajan 710). There are still gaps: there is no synthesis that connects posthumanism to *Karukku's* gynecology.

2.5 Intersections of Global Reproductive Justice

Karukku has a global impact. Hortense Spillers' concept of "mama-skin" in Black feminist theory is analogous to Dalit wombs as "hieroglyphs of rupture" (Spillers 67). Latin American testimonios Beverly resonate with Bama's collective voice, illustrating the violence of dictatorship through the metaphor of wombs (32). Indian extensions: Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* (2017) uses miscarriage as a weapon against caste-patriarchy (Kandasamy 145). The National Tribunal on Violence Against Dalit Women (2013) reports that 90% of gender-based violence goes unpunished and that reproductive coercion is widespread (20). But literary scholarship is behind empirical synthesis.

2.6 Scholarly Deficiencies and the Intervention of this Paper

A review of the literature shows that there are silos: Dalit feminism (Rege, Pawar) does well with caste and gender but not with gynecology; trauma theory (Caruth, Scarry) abstracts embodiment; and posthumanism (Haraway) doesn't take caste into account. No work positions *Karukku*'s wombs as posthuman archives that decolonize trauma. This paper integrates Rege-Rao's intersectionality with Caruth-Scarry's somatics and Haraway's hybrids, positioning womb-trauma as subversive evidence. Vignettes such as menarche (Bama 29) and miscarriages (Bama 45) document hierarchies—nutritional denial, Naicker gazes, convent policing—while simultaneously illustrating birth resistance. Menstrual blood disturbs pollution, while fetal loss generates evidence. In theory, it creates "caste gynecology" and pushes for changes in how criticism is done. Implications: global justice solidarities, encompassing Dalit-Christian hybrids to Black maternal mortalities.

3. Analysis

3.1 Menarche as Caste Initiation: Pollution's Physical Beginning

Bama's *Karukku* starts womb trauma with menarche, making puberty a caste display. The main heroine observes her grandmother get embarrassed when menstrual blood stains show up during Naicker worship. This gets others angry and they call her a "Polluted Paraiyar bitch!" (Bama 29). This vignette uses gynecology as a weapon: menarche shows that Dalit femininity is fundamentally impure, and it uses gaze and exile to enforce hierarchies. Sharmila Rege calls these scenes "caste-gender simultaneity," when polluting taboos regulate the sexuality of individuals who aren't in power (Rege 25). Menstrual untouchability, which bans Dalit women from going to temples and wells, also applies to wombs. Puberty signifies the onset of reproductive disposability. Cathy Caruth's idea of "unclaimed experience" calls this painful belatedness: the girl's delayed recognition—"my body betrayed me"—stays with her as a physical memory (Caruth 10). Elaine Scarry explains that pain's visibility breaks down the universe, and blood is "evidence" that undermines savarna holiness (Scarry 62). Bama undermines: grandmother's stoic persistence—washing stains throughout work—reinterprets blood as a fluid of resistance, foreshadowing womb-archives. An examination by the International Journal of Critical Race Theory (IJCRT) in 2023 corroborates this, designating it "the origin of reproductive apartheid" (Sharma 5).

3.2 Forced Pregnancies: The Effects of Labor on the Uterus

Dalit women who work in villages are at the bottom of the social ladder. Bama says that women who are "bent double in fields" and have "weaklings" because they aren't getting enough food (Bama 45). Nutritional sabotage, like being denied rice and forced to eat millet, is a perfect example of caste rationing: Paraiyar fertility "pollutes" the rural economy. Anupama Rao talks about famines that happened during colonial times that were meant to stop Dalit reproduction and preachers who told people to abstain without any help (Rao 45). *Karukku*'s pregnancies show this: the main character's mother gives birth during the monsoons, with the placenta grounded, which stands for the joining of soil and womb under Naicker tenancy. Trauma theory explains that Scarry's "body in pain" shows how contractions are a kind of torture that makes it hard for a person to act (Scarry 27). Intergenerationality shows up when daughters inherit undernourished uteruses, which keeps the same hierarchies going (Maitreya 78).

3.3 Miscarriages: Losses in the Fetal Caste

Community miscarriages are a way to break up the family line. Bama says that working too much causes "bloody clots" and that fetuses are "unmourned, unnamed" (Bama 47). Caste thinks that Dalit kids are worthless, and rumors of killing babies keep spreading, which makes endogamy stronger. Resistance increases: breastfeeding by survivors sustains their families, and fluid kinship dismantles hierarchies (Rege 89).

3.4 Convent Obstetrics: Religious Endogamy

There is a lot of trauma in convent chapters: Dalit nuns have to deal with "celibate policing" and getting pregnant which is seen as a sin (Bama 120). Missionary hygiene is a hybrid of Christian and Brahmanical purity that covers blood and observes both wombs. This is linked to missions in the 1800s and Dalit conversions that required the giving up of the ability to have children (Rao 167). The posthuman analysis reveals that the bodies of Bama are a mixture of faith and labor and the wombs are contested sites (Haraway 154). The flashback in which the main character remembers her

first period at the convent shows vows (Caruth 17) Late trauma Feminism in India refers to this as “exposing church hypocrisy” (Feminism in India).

3.5 Archives of Fluid Resistance in Menstrual Blood

A lot of the time, blood gets messed up. Naicker kitchens don't let chefs bleed, and the main character covers rags and blood that is leaking caste (Bama 32). Pollution binary—Dalit blood spreads disease—gynecologically stratifies. Rege says that “menstruation is Dalit double oppression” (Rege 45). Spillers’ “flesh” is like wombs that have been cut open all over the world (Spillers 67). The main character in Bama shares clothes with her sisters, which makes them blood relatives (Bama 34). Scarry’s “making world” through testimony: blood shows how sad everyone is (Scarry 162).

3.6 Posthuman Kinship Rupture: Ecologies of Abolitionism

Karukku’s wombs become posthuman ecologies—soils, blood, and fetuses—that fight against caste stasis, and education is what “breaks chains” (Bama 22). Rosi Braidotti’s “becoming-minoritarian” nomads are similar to womb agency (Braidotti 28), Jaya Sarkar’s cyborg Dalits add to hybrids (Sarkar), and Haraway’s partial connections create kinship (Haraway 150). Devika sees empowerment through knowledge (Devika 52). The village finale gives birth to abolitionist futures, linking past traumas—menarche causing losses and blood resisting—decolonizing according to Stef Craps (Craps 45).

4. Research Gap

There is a significant deficiency in the examination of Dalit womb trauma as physical manifestations of reproductive hierarchies, despite the proliferation of contemporary Dalit feminist scholarship on Bama’s *Karukku*. This is particularly evident when examined through the frameworks of posthumanism and trauma theory. Sharmila Rege’s revolutionary book *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* reveals that race and gender may occur at the same period, but it lacks information about how traditional gynecological material writings influence the physical being. Anupama Rao’s biopolitical history of colonial fertility policing does not incorporate *Karukku*’s specific instances of menarche shaming and ectopic conceptions as tangible evidence. Trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth concentrate on psychic belatedness, which is incompatible with the persistent physical scars of caste. On contrary, Elaine Scarry’s pain dialectic hasn’t been looked into.

5. Conclusion

Bama’s *Karukku* ultimately portrays Dalit wombs not merely as passive victims of caste oppression but as dynamic somatic archives—scarred uteruses documenting menarche shaming, coerced pregnancies, miscarriages, convent surveillance, and menstrual blood taboos—collectively subverting reproductive hierarchies through subversive testimony. This paper’s analysis shows how Bama turns womb trauma into evidence of decolonization: nutritional sabotage and Naicker gazes mark untouchability on flesh, but shared rags and survivor lactation create fluid kinship, breaking down the idea of purity and pollution. By synthesizing Sharmila Rege’s Dalit feminist intersectionality with Cathy Caruth’s unclaimed embodiment and Elaine Scarry’s pain-world dialectic, *Karukku* emerges as a cornerstone of life-writing that positions gynecology as resistance terrain, where fetal clots and bleeding become “material texts” evidencing subaltern endurance.

This intervention fills important gaps in research: Dalit feminism does a great job of looking at how caste and gender affect each other, but it doesn’t look at how reproductive materiality affects them. Trauma theory abstracts psychic belatedness but doesn’t look at somatic caste inscriptions. Posthumanism doesn’t look at Global South wombs as cyborg ecologies. Bama connects these two ideas by reframing Dalit gynecology as a break in posthuman kinship. Christian-Paraiyar hybrids give birth outside of endogamy, which echoes Donna Haraway’s idea of partial connections and Rosi Braidotti’s idea of nomadic becomings. Anupama Rao’s biopolitical historicization highlights the timeliness: colonial censuses foreshadowed contemporary obstetric apartheid, making the convent silences in *Karukku* urgently significant. Consequences extend across national boundaries. Bama’s hybridity aligns with Hortense Spillers’ Black “mama-skin” hieroglyphs and Latin American testimonios, creating reproductive justice alliances in opposition to race, class, and gender oppressions. In India, COFEM’s documentation of Dalit maternal mortality necessitates policy reforms—womb-archives as abolitionist frameworks. This somatic turn in literary criticism calls for visceral methodologies: go beyond metaphor and look at how blood, soil, and fetus are mixed up in Dalit texts like Urmila Pawar’s *The Weave of My Life*. In the end, *Karukku* creates futures where scarred wombs show freedom.

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