



Literature by Dalit and Non-Dalits: A Study of Understanding the Gap between Two Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that while Bama's *Karukku* and Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* both condemn caste oppression, the difference in authorship fundamentally alters the epistemology of suffering. Bama's narrative constructs caste as an internalized, everyday knowledge produced through lived experience, whereas Anand's representation translates Dalit pain into a moral spectacle for reformist consumption, thereby limiting Dalit agency. Unlike existing studies that focus on thematic similarities of caste oppression, this research interrogates how authorship determines the authority to narrate Dalit suffering, examining narrative epistemology, reader positioning, and ethical representation.

Introduction

Dalit literature has emerged as a powerful response to dominant literary traditions that either silenced caste oppression or represented it in incomplete and biased ways. While mainstream Indian literature often spoke about Dalits, Dalit literature speaks from within Dalit life, giving voice to lived experiences of humiliation, exclusion, poverty, and resistance.

Among the most significant works in this tradition is Bama's *Karukku* (1992), an autobiographical narrative that articulates everyday caste violence through the voice of a Dalit Christian woman. In contrast, Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), one of the earliest Indian English novels addressing caste, presents the life of Bakha, a Dalit sweeper, through a sympathetic yet external narrative lens.



Although both texts critique caste oppression, they differ significantly in narrative voice, agency, and epistemological grounding due to the authors' social positions. Bama writes as a Dalit woman with lived experience, while Anand writes as an upper-caste observer. This paper argues that authorship determines the epistemology of Dalit suffering: **Karukku** presents caste as lived reality, whereas **Untouchable** frames it as a social problem for reformist sympathy.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and comparative literary methodology based on close textual analysis. The primary texts—Bama's *Karukku* and Anand's *Untouchable*—are examined to analyze narrative voice, representation of suffering, agency, and reader positioning.

Secondary sources from Dalit studies, caste theory, and postcolonial criticism support the analysis. The approach is interpretative, focusing on language, perspective, and meaning rather than statistical data. The methodology emphasizes epistemology rather than thematic repetition.

Literature Review

Scholarly studies on *Karukku* and *Untouchable* often focus on shared themes such as caste oppression, realism, and social reform. *Karukku* is widely recognized as a foundational Dalit autobiographical text grounded in lived experience. Critics highlight Bama's direct and unpolished style as a reflection of authenticity.

Sharan Kumar Limbale argues that Dalit literature derives its strength from lived experience rather than aesthetic refinement. Feminist readings further emphasize how *Karukku* connects caste, gender, and religion, particularly in its critique of the Church.

Studies on *Untouchable* typically focus on Anand's humanism and Gandhian influence. While appreciated for exposing untouchability to English readers, critics also note its limitations as an outsider representation of Dalit life.

However, few studies examine how authorship shapes the epistemology of suffering. This paper addresses that gap by focusing on voice, authority, and representation.

Epistemology of Suffering: Insider Voice and Outsider Gaze



The key difference between the texts lies in who speaks and how suffering is known. In *Karukku*, suffering is presented as an everyday condition, internalized and normalized. Bama's narration reflects lived knowledge rather than explanation for an external audience.

In contrast, *Untouchable* presents suffering as visible and episodic, designed to evoke sympathy and moral response from readers. This distinction highlights how insider and outsider perspectives shape narrative truth.

Insider and Outsider Voices in Representing Caste

Karukku is a first-person autobiographical narrative rooted in lived experience. Bama narrates real incidents of humiliation, making caste a continuous presence in daily life.

Untouchable, written in third person, follows Bakha's life over a single day. While Anand portrays Bakha sympathetically, the narrative remains observational. Bakha becomes a figure representing social injustice rather than a fully autonomous voice.

Thus, *Karukku* is a text of assertion, whereas **Untouchable** is a text of observation and reform.

Caste as Everyday Experience vs. Social Problem

In *Karukku*, caste is embedded in daily practices and internalized identity. It shapes behavior, self-worth, and social interactions.

In *Untouchable*, caste appears through dramatic incidents meant to shock the reader. It is framed as a social evil requiring reform rather than an internalized system.

This difference influences reader perception: *Karukku* creates experiential understanding, while **Untouchable** generates sympathetic distance.

Agency and Resistance

Agency is central to *Karukku*. Bama resists caste and religious oppression, and her writing itself becomes an act of resistance.

In *Untouchable*, Bakha's agency is limited. He hopes for change through external forces such as Gandhi or technology. He listens but does not actively resist.



This contrast highlights how insider narratives empower, while outsider narratives often rely on reform from outside.

Language, Tone, and Reader Positioning

Bama's language is direct, emotional, and rooted in everyday speech. Her tone challenges the reader and demands confrontation with uncomfortable truths.

Anand's language is descriptive and controlled, guiding readers toward sympathy. The reader becomes a moral observer rather than an active participant.

Thus, **Karukku** demands recognition, while **Untouchable** seeks reform.

Conclusion

Both *Karukku* and *Untouchable* expose caste oppression, but their differences lie in authorship and perspective. *Karukku* represents Dalit self-writing, where lived experience becomes knowledge and resistance.

Untouchable, though progressive for its time, reflects the limitations of outsider representation. It generates sympathy but cannot fully capture lived experience.

This study concludes that Dalit self-representation plays a more powerful role in challenging caste oppression. It demonstrates that who tells the story fundamentally shapes how suffering is understood.

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