



Vernacular Resistance in South Asian Literature: Linguistic Authenticity and Subaltern Voice in Bama's *Karukku*

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Abstract

Faustina Soosairaj Bama's *Karukku*, first published in Tamil and later translated into English, is a literary text from South Asia that transcends local and national contexts and resonates with global concerns for a just and equal social order. As a life narrative, it delineates the journey of a struggling Dalit woman who fights patriarchy and caste discrimination, yet it is not just the story of an individual. Within the post-colonial perspective, *Karukku* stands out as an extraordinary literary achievement from South Asian Literature that represents the lived realities of its people in a language that rejects hegemonic control. Bama's linguistic resistance is heightened through her vernacular authenticity which uplifts the regional speech of Dalits in Tamil to the status of a literary tradition. *Karukku* deploys the localized Dalit Tamil vernacular and "ketta varthai" (abusive language) as a deliberate linguistic decolonial practice. This strategy does not merely record trauma; it actively dismantles the dual supremacy of upper-caste pure Tamil and elite English literary standards, transforming a marginalized dialect into an authoritative literary archive that reclaims Dalit feminist agency. This paper examines Bama's work in the backdrop of South Asian Literature and argues that *Karukku* embodies vernacular authenticity by challenging not only the dominant sections of the society but also its language to reclaim her identity as a woman.

Keywords: South Asian Literature, Subaltern Voice, Resistance, Agency, Vernacular Authenticity, Cultural Reclamation.

Introduction

The English writings from the SAARC region referred to as 'New Literatures in English', rather than 'Commonwealth Literature' or 'Third World Literature' reflect a deliberate shift from the emphasis on the colonial past and highlights the lived experiences of the people in contemporary times. The new literatures in English have developed through various stages,

Article History: Received: 30 March 2026. Revised: 18 July 2026. Accepted: 20 July 2026. First published: 01st August, 2026.

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Published by: Adrija Press, India.

Citation: Johri, Manjari. (2026). Vernacular Resistance in South Asian Literature: Linguistic Authenticity and Subaltern Voice in Bama's *Karukku*. *Newliteraria Journal* 8:2, 22-31. <https://dx.doi.org/10.48189/nl.2026.v08i2.003>

transcending from imitation, in the first phase, followed by a period of protest or resistance and

finally to a stage where the 'new' literature developed a distinct identity of its own. New Englishes are thus not merely linguistic; they are cultural and political acts of self-definition (South Asian Literature, 2017). Ashcroft et al. (1989) argue that postcolonial authors writing in English use the language to foreground the tension with the colonial power to assert themselves and emphasise their differences from the imperial centre (p. 1).

Hickey notes, "The label 'South Asian English' is a cover term for English in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and the Maldives" (2004, p. 538). English as a second language in multilingual societies, serves as a medium of communication among speakers of different native languages. In this region, English is viewed as a language of power and a tool for economic advancement and upward social mobility. The presence of the English language in the region for over 200 years has resulted in its nativisation, leading to the development of several local varieties of English, which are collectively known as South Asian English (Baumgardner, 1996).

Kachru (1965) views the nativisation of English as a process that enriches both the English language and indigenous languages. This enrichment occurs through borrowing, the creation of new words (neologisms), and the development of semantic shifts. Kachru explores the "Indianness" in Indian English, highlighting how historical, cultural, and linguistic factors shape its unique characteristics. It reflects the interplay of native languages with English, to create a variety that is neither wholly British nor wholly Indian, but a "unique blend" (p. 392). Indianness of Indian English is marked by lexical innovations and semantic shifts. The syntax of Indian English exhibits patterns which can be traced to the structures of the mother tongues. In a multilingual country like India, English serves as a medium of inter-regional communication, education, administration, and literature. Its adaptation to local needs has allowed it to become a fully functional variety, not merely an imitation of British English. It has become a distinct medium for expression, fulfilling practical as well as creative functions in society. South Asian New Literatures in English are remarkable for their treatment of contemporary realities, experiments with the English language, and engagement with themes of history, identity, displacement and social and political divisions (Chanda, n.d.).

Pollock (1995) mentions the growing impact of English as the chosen language for emerging writers in the 1990s, stating how New Literatures took the place of the erstwhile canonical texts and made way for the indigenous expression of the South Asian lived experience. Historically, language has served as a medium that perpetuates the hierarchical structure of power by establishing the ideas of 'truth', 'order', and 'reality'. This undisputed power is rejected by the post-colonial voice. *The Empire Writes Back* (2002) distinguishes between English and 'englishes', to explain how the tributaries of the language have grown out of the local, regional and geographical contexts in the postcolonial writings. While English stands for the 'powerful' centre, englishes refers to a "multitude of intersecting usages designated as 'peripheries'. The language of these 'peripheries' was shaped by an oppressive discourse of power" (Ashcroft et al., 2002, p. 9)

Bama in the context of South Asian Literature

Contemporary Indian literature in English showcases a wide range of voices addressing social, political, and cultural issues. Indian authors writing in English, along with regional writers whose works have been translated into English, have gained international recognition for echoing contemporary social inequalities, gender issues, and other forms of social problems faced by people worldwide. South Asian Writing in general and Indian Literature in particular, merge local perspectives with global literary trends.

In the context of indigenisation of the English language, Faustina Soosairaj Bama's work *Karukku* exemplifies how local vernaculars subvert linguistic hierarchies from within the postcolonial space. First published in Tamil in 1992 and translated into English by Lakshmi

Holmström in 2000, Bama's life narrative serves as a critical site of cultural reclamation. It subverts dominant language at the regional level by using Dalit Tamil instead of Upper-caste/Liturgical Tamil, and through the English translation which added a postcolonial dimension by carrying that vernacular weight into global English. This paper explores how *Karukku* addresses pertinent social issues like caste discrimination, female agency, gender conformity, and displacement through conscious linguistic resistance to seek cultural reclamation and autonomy.

It is argued that Bama deploys the localized Dalit vernacular not merely as a medium of storytelling, but as a radical decolonial practice. This study specifically interrogates how Bama uses a marginalized spoken dialect like a weapon and incorporates oral registers and *ketta varthai* (abusive language) purposefully to systematically dismantle the hegemonies of internal caste patriarchy and external Western or upper-caste linguistic norms. This study demonstrates how Bama transforms a subaltern tongue from a marker of social subjugation into an authoritative bibliographical record.

Language as resistance in *Karukku*

In her introductory note of *Karukku* (2012), Bama admitted that she wrote the book as a means of healing her inward wounds, yet the work has not been merely an expression of self-pity, it has rather been a means of "relieving the pain of others who were wounded" (p. ix). It has comforted those who had been born low and had suffered the "pain of caste discrimination, untouchability, poverty and destitution; it has given them courage and helped them to love life once more" (p. x). Bama proudly acknowledges that *Kurukku* has enabled people to raise their voices and enabled them to embrace their language, culture and life. Its English translation in 2000 marked a significant moment in literary history when a Dalit autobiography overtook mainstream writing for the first time. The work was awarded the Crossword Award for translation in 2001, marking a momentous occasion in the trajectory of postcolonial South Asian writing from India.

In the translator's note, Lakshmi Holmstrom writes, "*Karukku* was written out of a specific experience, the experience of a Tamil Dalit Christian woman.... It has a universality at its core which questions all oppressions, disturbs all complacencies, and, reaching out, empowers all those who have suffered different oppressions" (p. xiv). *Karukku*, in Tamil, means palmyra leaves that have serrated edges, which connotes a double-edged sword to aptly sum up the author's life narrative as a Christian, Dalit woman in a patriarchal setting. "The argument of the book is to do with the arc of the narrator's spiritual development, both through the nurturing of her belief as a Catholic, and her gradual realisation of herself as a Dalit" (pp. xiv–xv).

Bama's resistance to hegemonic structures operates through her refusal to neutralize the vernacular conventions of the Paraya settlement, which might appear to be vulgar to the upper caste. She deliberately rejected the formalized, polished names bestowed by the Church, and constructed an archive using vernacular words, such as, *Munkovam* (short-temper), *Kazhinja* (Leaky), *Needle-bum* (name given to Bama as a child), and *Teppa Tuuzhu* (millet) (10-11). By embedding these localized expressions into the text, the author establishes a Dalit linguistic space that defies the grammar of dominant institutions, such as the school, and the church. Bama rejects the language of the upper-caste Naicker streets to validate the spoken realities of the *cheri* (streets populated by the Dalit communities) and treats its idioms not as an impure or inferior dialect, but as a linguistic repository capable of resisting upper-caste containment.

The *vadai* episode from her childhood memory offers a sharp critique of caste-bound practices. When her brother, Annan reveals the humiliating logic behind a Dalit carrying food carefully without touching it before serving it to a Naicker, the little girl Bama questions how the food could become polluted by a mere touch of an outcaste? This incident marks a transition for Bama, from her innocent amusement to critical interrogation of untouchability. She questions, “What did it mean when they called us ‘Paraya’? Had the name become that obscene? But we too are human beings. Our people should never run these petty errands for these fellows. We should work in their fields, take home our wages, and leave it at that” (Bama, 2012, p. 16). She felt “infuriated” (p. 15), but her explained to her that “because we are born into the Paraya jati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect.... But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities” (pp. 17-18). Bama learnt at a young age that education alone could enable the progress of the downtrodden.

The autobiography exposes how language is institutionalized by authorities to enforce caste hierarchies and subdue Dalit bodies as inferiors. This is evident as Bama recalls the verbal abuse she faced, when the Chaaliyar headmaster publicly humiliates her, proclaiming, “You have shown us your true nature as a Paraya... Stand outside” (p.19). This discrimination is seamlessly mirrored by the religious authority of the Catholic priest, who reinforces the social prejudice as he blames the girl to have stolen coconut leaves from the school grove. He says, “After all, you are from the *Cheri*. You might have done it. You must have done it” (p.16). Bama’s textual strategy here is to lay bare how the words *Paraya* and *Cheri* are transformed by the school and church into signifiers of innate deviance and criminality.

Bama’s resistance can be deciphered in her refusal to adopt polished language in her works. By directly using the local Dalit dialect, Bama transforms the vocabulary of subjugation into a critique of the institutions themselves. She subverts linguistic elitism by deliberately manipulating syntactic structure, narrative rhythm, and code-switching. She rejects the balanced, formal syntax of classical Tamil and formal English literary expressions in favour of a conversational rhythm that reflects the oral storytelling traditions of the *cheri*. This fluidity is complemented by the use of stark subaltern vocabulary, including localised idiomatic expressions. Bama deploys code-switching strategically to expose internal institutional hegemonies; she juxtaposes the pious, institutional lexicon of the Catholic Church against the Dalit vernacular speech and *ketta varthai* (subaltern profanity). This deliberate linguistic friction does not merely convey the everyday trauma but forces the rough, unpolished grammar of the outcast body into conflict with the rhetoric of the school and the convent. Bama’s textual aesthetics actively dismantle the dual supremacy of upper-caste pure Tamil and bourgeois English, reclaiming a site for Dalit feminist self-representation.

In her depiction of state violence during the cemetery dispute, Bama constructs a jarring juxtaposition between the sacred sanctuary of the church and the raw, sordid reality of a police crackdown. When the village headman (*naataamai*) is forced to hide inside a traditional giant earthenware paddy storage jar, only to be dragged out and beaten, Bama rejects any elevated prose styles that might soften the blow (p. 36-38). Her language relies on a stark, visceral realism and the image of the thud of police boots stamping up and down exposes how the parish priest actively betrays his flock by informing the authorities. By framing this betrayal within the physical space of the belfry and sanctuary, Bama exposes a deep rift between the language of institutional liturgy and the lived, material realities of the subaltern. The narration consciously diffuses the elevated rhetoric of the Church.

Bama narrates different stages of her life as a schoolgirl, growing up in a caste ridden patriarchal society that oppressed the downtrodden. She later joined the Christian order as a nun but soon became disappointed as she mulled over the lives of the exploited people, “It seemed to me it was meaningless to repeat prayers in beautiful, decorative language and to live without the correspondence and connection between prayer, worship, and life” (p.105). As a young nun, Bama dreamt of sharing her life with the poor and the suffering and was

disappointed when she was employed at a Convent school that catered to the children of the wealthy. She soon left the convent and decided to reclaim her position in society and fight for the equality of the Dalits. With utmost clarity, Bama speaks of the new awareness the Dalits have acquired over time through social campaigns and writers like herself. She proclaims powerfully that, "Dalits have begun to realise the truth...They have become aware that they, too, were created in the likeness of God. There is a new strength within them, urging them to reclaim that likeness which has been so far repressed, ruined, obliterated; and to begin to live again with honour, self-respect, and with a love towards all humankind" (Bama, 2012, p.109).

Later in *Karukku*, Bama's linguistic subversion shifts from a critique of secular institutions to a direct deconstruction of the rhetoric of the convent. She employs a sharp irony to expose the profound chasm between the pious vocabulary of the sisterhood, which preaches poverty, humility, and Christian charity, and the casual, colloquial bigotry of the senior nuns who dismiss Dalit applicants to join the order of the church as inherently coarse or intellectually inferior. Bama's narration becomes a diagnostic tool that unmasks how sacred liturgy can be weaponized to enforce subaltern compliance. She writes, "The word 'cheri' was always used by the sisters as a word of insult, a word that meant you were dirty, lazy, and unfit for anything higher." (p. 69). This linguistic defiance comes full circle in her narration of her radical departure from the convent. She declares that institutional authorities "may hide themselves behind their high walls and their big gates, but they cannot stop the changing times...the consciousness that has awoken among us will not sleep again" (p.104). In order to seek cultural, vernacular and self-reclamation, Bama declares, "we must write our own stories, in our own words, so that tomorrow our children will walk with their heads held high" (p.105). Her role as an author is driven by her passionate desire to construct a just society that promotes equality and love. Her foray as a writer has been guided by the urge to break the silence.

Nayar (2006) astutely notes that dalit writing "reveals the structure of the traumatic experience (caste in India) while also gesturing at the ways in which the victims have fought, overcome and survived the event. Dalit life-writing is about the re-construction of the self after the traumatic event (Nayar, 2006, p.83)". *Karukku* should not be read merely as a life narrative, but as a "testimonio", which is a genre of life-writing that includes witnessing atrocity, documenting trauma, and speaking for a community that is oppressed or voiceless (Nayar, 2006, p. 84). Though the book starts with her personal journey in the first-person pronoun "I", it soon transcends into her concern for the community through her depiction of the travails of others, whom she addresses as "we" and "us". Instead of being just a catalogue of suffering, the narrative is a tale of survival and resistance. As a testimonio, the work emphasises subaltern agency, where writing becomes an act of resistance and reclamation of human dignity.

Caste, Gender, and Bama's Dalit Feminist Standpoint

Bama's *Karukku* articulates a distinct Dalit feminist standpoint by mapping caste and gender as a mutually reinforcing matrix of subjugation. She challenges mainstream feminism by highlighting double subjugation of a Dalit woman's experiences, who are oppressed by upper-caste hierarchies and also by the patriarchal control within their own community. Bama highlights how Dalit women perform backbreaking agricultural labour under upper-caste landowners, only to have their labour devalued along gender lines even within their own marginalized community. She writes, "Even if they did the same work, men received one wage, women another. They always paid men more. I could never understand why." (p. 54-55).

Bama poignantly recalls why "Children from other communities would walk along the lake shore, all dolled up, on their way to the cinema. But the rules of the village ensured that none of the women from our community went to the cinema" (p.54). She challenges the status

quo as she enquires, “Are Dalits not human beings? Do they not have common sense? Do they not have such attributes as a sense of humour and self-respect? Are they without any wisdom, beauty, dignity? What do we lack? (p.27). Bama questions the deep-seated discrimination to which even children from the outcasts are subjected, her writing inspires the courage to challenge and resist the humiliation and oppression to which Dalits have been subjected historically. She inspires through her words, “We who are asleep must open our eyes and look about us. We must not accept the injustice of our enslavement by telling ourselves it is our fate, as if we have no feelings; we must dare to stand up for change (p.28)”. Her writing contributes to raising Dalit consciousness by asserting the role of the subaltern subjects in bringing about a social transformation, and creating a just and equal society.

Uma Chakravarti (2012/2013) has explored how Dalit women’s writing constructs a distinct feminist standpoint that is situated in caste and gendered experience. It is not a subset of Indian feminist writing but has a specific epistemological position. The intersection of caste and gender consciousness produces a different feminist consciousness, which grows out of their lived experiences. She writes that, “Karukku evokes the pain she has suffered through poverty and stigma as she is seared by sharp when collecting firewood. Now she uses word as sharp like the karukku to hit back at the oppressors” (Chakravarti, 2012-2013, p. 142). Chakravarti emphasises that writing is an act of resistance that enables women to reclaim voice and selfhood and also to give a voice to the unheard ones. “Dalit feminist writing helps to bring to the foreground the thrice oppressed status of women through “class power and; by the stigma of the caste system and the oppression experienced through the power of dominant castes; and on the basis of their gender through regular abuse of their dignity and endemic sexual violence” (Chakravarti, 2012-2013, p.142). Dalit writing by women has contributed to women’s struggle for emancipation by highlighting the shared and distinctive experiences of women on the basis of their caste. It has drawn the attention to the triple jeopardy to which they are subjected, opening dialogues for a more inclusive understanding of gender justice that acknowledges the intersections of caste, class, and patriarchy in shaping women’s lived experiences.

Vernacular Politics and Dalit Literary Aesthetics

Moving beyond the immediate physical and economic dimensions of subaltern subjugation, Bama ensures that the reclamation of identity extends from the body to the text. Through her literary works, her resistance manifests as a deliberate, radical disruption of traditional literary form. Dalit Literature is the writing that has emerged out of the lived experiences of exploitation, social injustice and oppression faced by the Dalits. It is not merely a literary trend, but a social, political and cultural assertion to reclaim dignity, voice and history that the dominant caste has denied them. It represents the collective consciousness of the silenced community and bears witness to everyday violence and injustice. Consequently, it has the quality of being testimonial rather than being aesthetically pleasing with literary embellishments. Language has the potential to serve as resistance, as Dalit writers use regional dialects to convey their experiences authentically. Dalit writing is framed as activism aimed at provoking thought and inciting social change, echoing the Ambedkarite call for education and organisation. Translating Dalit works can enhance visibility while maintaining the original emotional depth, and Dalit writers have a moral obligation to write truthfully and prioritise community concerns over literary trends and literary fashion. “The Dalits have a different vocabulary and speech. They should deliberately overstep what they are permitted to write by the rules of the ‘dominant’ grammar. The Dalit should write as a Dalit. The Dalit’s writing should be read like the Dalit’s. Writing and reading are indeed political practices” (Bama & Vijayalakshmi, 1999, p. 98). It is not merely the story of an individual but that of the community against the hegemonic rule of the dominant class.

SharanKumar Limbale (2004), an acclaimed Dalit writer from India, is quite vocal about the need for a distinct aesthetic for Dalit writing says:

Dalit writers believe that their literature should be analysed from a sociological perspective focused on social values than on beauty. An exclusively aesthetic consideration of Dalit literature will disregard the Dalit writers' fundamental role, and hence is not acceptable to Dalit writers. Rejecting traditional aesthetics, they insist on the need for a new and distinct aesthetic for their literature- an aesthetic that is life-affirming and realistic. (p.19)

Dalit literature portrays the tribulations of the outcast as a "lofty image of grief" (Limbale, 2004, p.29). It seeks to reaffirm the principles of equality, liberty, honour, security and freedom from intimidation. Human beings and humanity are at the centre of its writings, and it aims to lead society towards a social revolution.

Bama sparks the consciousness and pride in her community through her works. She faced a lot of challenges, as any woman would, who talked about "sex, marriage, family life and a single woman's life". Being a Dalit made her situation worse. Her "Dalitness" made her feel tossed aside as impure. Untouchability, caste system, discrimination and violence were constant challenges that she faced as a writer and as a woman. In an interview, she admitted that:

For a Dalit woman to write and become a writer was itself a big challenge for me.... Even in my own village, it was not liked when I wrote my first novel, *Karukku*, because it was misinterpreted and they thought I was degrading them, or it was a shame that I was exposing their lives in public... Then the language that I used. I always used the dialect of the people, and it was very earthy, and from the literary side, they didn't accept it, telling me that it is not a classical language, and as an educated woman, I should use more polished language (Singh & Susairaj, 2016, pp. 23-24).

Regarding the use of female Dalit writing, Naik (2016) notes "By writing in a 'Dalit style of language', taking recourse to oral tradition, the Dalit woman elides and invents words, breaks the syntactic structure to express the Dalit world, thereby countering the hegemony of the upper caste/ upper-class language which seeks to impose order and obedience" (Naik, 2016, p.16). Women writers, such as Baby Kamble and Bama, use a distinctive narrative style that diverges from traditional literary forms. Their work incorporates oral traditions and unique language, allowing them to authentically express the Dalit experience while resisting upper-caste dominance. These writers challenge prevailing narratives that marginalise Dalit experiences, reclaiming their voices and asserting their agency against imposed social norms. Naik also emphasises the intersection of caste and gender in the unique oppression faced by Dalit women, as seen in Bama's writing, which reveals how these interconnected identities shape their lives.

By narrating their personal stories, Dalit women writers reject stereotypes of passivity, presenting themselves as active agents in their own histories. Their contributions greatly enhance the field of Dalit literature and provide valuable insights into the ongoing discussions of caste, gender, and social justice. Bama was criticised for the use of "vulgar" language when *Karukku* was first published. "Bama claims, however, that *ketta varthai* (abusive language) is a weapon for Dalit women who are otherwise bereft of any power and authority (Muthukkaruppan, 2017, p. 67).

Shankar and Gupta (2017) argue that caste is not merely a social category but a lived experience that profoundly shapes individual and collective identities. They emphasise that life narratives serve as vital testimonies that reveal the deep-seated impacts of caste oppression. Caste is a global phenomenon that warrants international scholarly attention. Dalit diaspora communities and similar marginalised groups worldwide find a deep resonance in such

narratives and urge the community to voice out their concerns and resist against violence and oppression.

Conclusion: Cultural Reclamation in South Asian Women's Writing

In her seminal essay, 'Under Western Eyes' (1986), Chandra Talpade Mohanty critiques Western feminist scholarship that homogenises "Third World women" as victims without considering historical, cultural, and political contexts. Such representation reinforces the colonial perception of women from the Global South as passive victims. Women from the South Asian region cannot be clubbed together as a universal category. Mohanty stresses that oppression must be analysed through an intersectional approach that takes into cognisance the local histories, social structures, and economic contexts. Gender cannot be understood in isolation from class, race, colonial history, and political economy. *Karukku* challenges this erasure by presenting Bama's nuanced, context-specific experiences as a Dalit Christian woman in Tamil Nadu. Her narrative foregrounds agency, resilience, and community consciousness, refusing to fit Western stereotypes of victimhood. Bama's writing showcases how Dalit women's empowerment can emerge from within the community through education and self-expression.

There is ample evidence to elucidate the deep-rooted structural discrimination to which the subalterns are still subjected. According to the Asia Parliamentarians Forum on Dalit Concerns (APFDC) report of 2018, "Dalit communities make for the most discriminated and excluded community in the world, concentrated in South Asia". A report by South Asia Collective, & Minority Rights Group in 2023, states that the Human Rights situation in South Asia, which is home to a fifth of humankind, is rather "grim". The South Asian states are not adequately committed to "protecting and promoting human and minority rights" and have poor "implementation of the measures that do exist". National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights 2023, describes Dalits as contemporary form of slaves who are forced to perform lowly jobs that compromise human dignity. UN's terminology for caste discrimination is 'Discrimination based on work and descent' (DWD), and it is estimated that over "80 per cent of the 260 million DWD communities worldwide, belong to the five countries - Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka". In the backdrop of such a large section of the Dalit community, Dalit writers such as Bama, Sharan Kumar Limbale, Omprakash Valmiki and Urmila Pawar have contributed to the upliftment of the DWD community through their works that critique the degradation that they have been subjected to historically and even in contemporary times.

Considering that 80% of the Dalits reside in South Asia, Bama's immense contribution to Dalit Literature and her role as an activist throws light on how South Asian Literature has shaped the consciousness of the readers in bringing about a definite impact towards the construction of a more equitable society. Bama's vernacular resistance and cultural reclamation in *Karukku* stands out as a decolonial practice within South Asian Literature. She consciously challenges the authority of standardised, upper-caste and colonial English, thus deconstructing the structures of literary legitimacy, successfully transforming the vernacular from a marker of subjugation into a tool of empowerment and epistemic resistance. In doing so, *Karukku* not only restores dignity to the speech of the oppressed but also redefines what counts as literary language, establishing the vernacular as a site of cultural sovereignty and decolonial self-fashioning.

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