The word “Resistance” is derived from the Latin root-word “resiste’re” meaning “to stand against” (Bande 1). The word resistance is used to designate the “…effort by some portion of the civil population of a country to resist the legally established government or an occupying power and to disrupt civil order and stability. It may seek to achieve its objects through either the use of nonviolent resistance (sometimes called civil resistance) or the use of armed force” (“Resistance Movement”). Therefore, the word resistance is an effort to achieve a specific aim either through violence or non-violence. Resistance also denotes an “insistent…enduring behavioral strategy having the potential to dislodge the dominant structure…” In simple words, resistance is a kind of behaviour shown by the subaltern to oppose the dominant. It is the “phenomenon that insists on re-thinking the past and eliminating the traditional hegemonic biases that obstructed the identity of the subaltern group and silenced them. Resistance involves re-interpretation so as to bring the marginalized into the center, it also recognizes the need to “hear voices” and give consideration to the dispossessed” (Bande 1). Resistance is a phenomenon that asserts to re-consider the past, works to eliminate the obstacles which erase the identity of a subaltern and mute her/his voice, attempts to bring the marginalized into the center and gives recognition to the voice of the dispossessed. According to Douglas Haynes and Gyan Prakash, resistance is “…contestatory” and “constantly presents in the behaviors, traditions and consciousness of the subaltern” the power to “tear through the fabric of hegemonic forms” (qtd. in Bande 1). Hence, resistance is standing against the exploitation by the exploited.

When a writer pens down resistance against oppression, she/he “shows a fundamental opposition to social system” (Bande 9) responsible for the oppression. Barbara Harlow in her work Resistance Literature argues, “Literature, in other words, is presented…as an arena of struggle” (2). Hence, literature is used as a ground of struggle, a revolt associated with the hopes of a group of people who are victims of social, economic and cultural inequality, oppression and subjugation.

The word ‘resurrection’, as The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines, is“(in Christian religion) the time when Jesus Christ returned to life again after death; the time when all dead people will become alive again, when the world ends”
(“resurrection,” def. 1) and “a new beginning for something which is old or which had disappeared or become weak” (def. 2). Hence, resurrection is revival, that is coming back to life again. Writing resistance can be read as “an exercise in “talking back” to authority” to resurrect and “re-assert the self” (Bande 19).

Vemula Elliah in context of Dalit women points out, “Where there is oppression, there is resistance. Oppression in a way is counterproductive. Since dalit women are oppressed, they will find their own forms of resistance…” (qtd. in Narayankar). Dalit women have found verbalization of their sufferings, feelings and experiences as one of the ways of exhibiting resistance. Malashri Lal and Sukrita Paul Kumar in their Introduction to Speaking For Myself: An Anthology of Asian Women’s Writing state, “…articulation of ‘suffering’ is empowering in itself; it is a demonstration of strength acquired through self-reflection. It counters the common notion of a woman’s passive acceptance of victimization” (xxii). Through articulation Dalit women are registering resistance against their oppression and victimization and thus are orienting themselves, creating an identity and a space for themselves to emerge as self-confident, articulate women, thus expressing “the need to remake their histories and reclaim their voices” (Bande 5).

The focus of this chapter is on the critique of two life narratives as a way of articulating resistance against oppression. When Dalit women’s voices are documented in life narratives, they become “important agents” to block the patriarchal as well as the caste ideology and “are valorized” (Bande 16). The act of articulation of sufferings by Dalit women is itself “an act of resistance” (9) against the biased social institutions. When Dalit women articulate their life stories by recalling their experiences, and victimization of their bodies, they document resistance against “the injustices and discrimination” (16) which distress them. The act of remembering of victimization by Dalit women place them in opposition to the hegemonic structure of the gender and caste, and therefore claim their identity and space in literature as well as in society which leads them towards their resurrection.

Karukku (2012) narrates the personal experiences of the struggle of an educated Tamil Dalit Christian woman, Bama, who is aware of the social inequalities to which
Dalit women are subjected to and resists them in her quest for identity. The life narrative is divided into nine chapters which are numbered, not titled. The chapter nine is followed by postscript. *Karukku* abandons the linearity of a conventional narrative. Bama, in her life narrative, picks up a specific memory, a specific experience and a specific event of her life in each of the chapters and ruminates over it. *Karukku* offers a critical appraisal of Tamil society in which Bama is a Paraya, and the church in which she is a Tamil Paraya Christian: “It was only after this that I began to understand, little by little, that in that order, Tamil people were looked upon as a lower caste. And then, among Tamils, Parayar were a separate category” (*Karukku* 24). Being born in the Parayar caste she faces prejudice both in the society and in the convent. However, being a Tamil she is further marginalized in the church order. There is constant shifting from “Our” to “I” and then “I” (*KAR* 1) to “our” (2) and “we” (7) in the narrative which signifies the movement from collective to individual and then individual to collective.

In Tamil, “karukku” means palmyra leaves which have serrated edges on both sides like double-edged swords. Bama in her Preface to the first edition of *Karukku* says, “There are many congruities between the saw-edged palmyra karukku and my own life” (“Author’s Preface,” xxiii). She further elaborates:

The driving forces that shaped this book are many: events that occurred during many stages of my life, cutting me like karukku and making me bleed; unjust social structures that plunged me into ignorance and left me trapped and suffocating; my own desperate urge to break, throw away, and destroy these bonds; and when the chains were shattered into fragments, the blood that was split—all these taken together. (xiii)

The images of “blood and chains articulate very powerfully acts of victimization as well as resistance” (Christopher 14).

Bama begins her narrative with the description of her village Puthupatti’s beauty: “Our village is very beautiful…before I come to castes and communities, I have a lot to say about the village itself” (*KAR* 1). She talks about the surrounding mountains, ponds, streams, birds, animals, fields, which add to the beauty of her village:

The mountains range right around the village… encircle the village, making a kind of border….In the rainy season our village becomes even
more lushly beautiful….If you look in a westward direction, the lakes and ponds stand side by side, strung together in a row….At dawn and at dusk, the eastern and western skies are splendid to see….The crops glowing, swaying in the breeze, filled the heart with delight. (4)

She juxtaposes the pictorial imagery of her village—God’s creation with the caste division settlements which correspond to man’s creation:

…there were the streets of the Thevar, Chettiyar, Aasaari, and Nadar. Beyond that were the Naicker streets. The Udaiyar, too, had a small settlement there for themselves. I don’t know how it came about that the upper-caste communities and the lower caste-communities were separated like this into different parts of the village. But they kept themselves to their part of the village, and we stayed in ours. We only went to their side if we had work to do there. But they never, ever, came to our parts. (7)

Bama refers to the layout of the village. There was a spatial demarcation between upper caste communities and lower caste communities. The upper caste people never entered the lower caste settlements as entering the other’s space meant assimilation with the others. The dominants kept the difference with others intact as the glorification of this difference helped them to maintain their central position. The lower caste people too faced restriction in the upper caste areas. However, ironically, upper caste people would make Dalits enter specific places of their settlement like fields, cattle sheds, etc., for labour: “To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body… had always to return to the margin” (hooks, Feminists Theory xvi). After work, Parayas returned to their marginal space. They were never allowed to stay in the “feudal space” (Guru, Afterword 165). This spatial segregation, a reminder of Parayas’ marginality, puzzled Bama: “I don’t know how it came about…” (KAR 7). She in her life narrative uses this “margin – a profound edge” as a “space of resistance” (hooks, “Choosing the Margin” 206).

There existed a great disparity between the upper caste area and the lower caste area as far as government offices and facilities were concerned: “The post office, the panchayat board, the milk-depot, the big shops, the church, and the schools—all these stood in their streets….Besides, there was a big school in the Naicker street which was meant only for the upper caste children” (KAR 7). Parayas were denied the basic amenities. Their situation being similar to Black Americans who “during 1950s” faced
exclusion “from public services, to cafes and restaurants….The schools that had been made for black people were extremely poor….This was not the case with white people and their schools. The white people’s schools flourished with books, equipment and….Good teachers had been employed to teach each class…” (“Disadvantages of Black Americans”). Denial of education to Dalits has been a strategy used by upper caste people to exploit their labour.

Memory plays a crucial role in Bama’s narrative. Eva Illouz states that the “…act of “remembering” one’s ordeal” is an act of “claiming agency, and owning one’s own voice” (192). Bama moves from past to present recalling different incidents which took place in her life. Her life story begins with her childhood memories. Bama became aware of caste discrimination at an early age, although she could not comprehend the evil fully: “When I was studying in the third class, I hadn’t yet heard people speak openly of untouchability. But I had already seen, felt, experienced, and been humiliated by what it is” (KAR 13). Bama had seen, felt and experienced the humiliation of caste practices. Bama, in her life narrative, adjoins “corporeal pain” with “collective oppression and suffering” (Nayar, “Bama’s” 88). Each bodily image, in the narrative, is located within the social structures of caste: “…the law is already applied with and on bodies, “incarnated” in physical practices…” (Michel de Certeau qtd. in Smith, “Performativity,” 109). One day when she was returning home from school, she saw an old Paraya man:

…holding out the packet by its string, without touching it. I stood there thinking to myself, if he holds it like that, won’t the package come undone, and the vadais fall out? The elder went straight up to the Naicker, bowed low and extended the packet towards him, cupping the hand that held the string with his other hand. Naicker opened the parcel and began to eat the vadais. (KAR 15)

Naickers being upper caste could not touch low caste Parayas: “to retain relative social superiority on the scale of ritual hierarchy” (Guru, “Archaeology,” 52). This incident raises an introspective question: how did the packet escape being polluted when the string was held by the Paraya? It reflects the double standards of the upper caste: exploit untouchables’ labour and services and exclude, marginalize and push them outside the social periphery as ‘others.’ Bama’s rumination over the incident shows her concern at this inhuman practice: “How could they believe that it was disgusting if a
Paraya held that package in his hands, even though the vadai had been wrapped first in banana leaf, and then parceled in paper?” (KAR 15). According to Usha Bande, “Questioning is an integral part of growth; but it is also the first step to resistance” (38). The questioning about Naicker’s behaviour towards Parayas was the first expression of resistance in Bama. She felt so provoked and enraged that she wanted to touch those vadais herself, to see the reaction of Naicker:

Why we should have to fetch and carry for these people, I wondered. Such an important elder of ours goes off meekly to the shops to fetch snacks and hands them over reverently, bowing and shrinking, to this fellow who just sits there and stuffs them into his mouth….How was it that these fellows thought so much of themselves? Because they had scraped four coins together, did it mean they must lose all human feelings? What did it mean when they called us ‘Paraya’? Had the name become that obscene? But we too are human beings. (KAR 15-16)

The practice of handing over the leftovers or pouring water in the cupped hands without touching Paraya gave Bama further glimpses into this callous practice of untouchability.

Through the servant life of her two grandmothers who worked in the houses of Naickers, Bama reveals the harsh treatment received by the labourers and servants from Naicker landlords: “The Naicker women would pour out the water from a height of four feet, while Paatti and others received and drank it with cupped hands held to their mouths.” Bama felt infuriated at this sight. Her other grandmother, at the crack of dawn, would go to Naicker houses to “sweep out the cowshed, collect up the dung and dirt,…” After finishing all her filthy chores, her grandmother placed “her vessel that she had brought with her, by the side of the drain. The Naicker lady came out with her leftovers, leaned out from some distance and tipped them into Paatti’s vessel, and went away. Her vessel, it seemed must not touch Paatti’s; it would be polluted” (16). Whenever Bama accompanied her grandmother for work she felt disgusted at her being treated in an atrocious manner. Many a time, Bama asked her grandmother, to resist this misconduct as it was abusive. But her grandmother replied, “These people are the maharajas who feed us our rice. Without them, how will we survive? Haven’t they been upper caste from generation to generation, and haven’t we been lower caste? Can we change this?” (17). Her grandmother’s reply explicitly explains the internalization of caste practices among
Dalit women due to caste hegemony which forces them to accept their subordination as their fate and, thus nullifies any act of resistance. Her grandmother was so conditioned that Bama’s reproaching did not affect her.

Even the upper caste children were disrespectful to her grandmother “even tiny children, born the other day, would call her by her name and order her about, just because they belonged to the Naicker caste.” However, her grandmother would address the young Naicker boy “Ayya, Master, and run about to do his bidding” (16). Bama resented the humiliation due to caste identity. The Naicker children were trained in caste identity from a very young age. They took it as their birth right to boss the poor women workers: calling Bama’s grandmothers by their names, showing no deference to their age.

Bama found education as a sole means of emancipation, to overcome caste afflictions, and a way to progress: “Education Everyone must have. Means of defense everyone must have. These are the paramount requirements of every man for his self-preservation” (Ambedkar, Annihilation 48). Bama recalls the advice of her elder brother that education is the means to attain self-respect and to overcome caste disabilities which acted as a boon for her: “Because we are born into the Paraya jati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that. But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities. So study with care, learn all you can.” The words of her elder brother left a deep impact on her and “I studied hard, with all my breath and being, in a frenzy almost. As Annan had urged, I stood first in my class.” Even though a studious student, she experienced the caste stigma in the school: “And I must tell you bluntly that if you are thinking that you can get rid of caste easily you are seriously mistaken” (Srinivas qtd. in Ganguly 1). Bama was unable to escape the caste stigma:

Untouchability is the lowest depth to which the degradation of a human being can be carried. To be poor is bad but not so bad as to be an Untouchable. The poor can be proud. The Untouchable cannot be. To be reckoned low is bad but not so bad as to be an Untouchable. The low can rise above his status. An Untouchable cannot. To be suffering is bad but not so bad as to be an Untouchable. They shall some day be comforted. An Untouchable cannot hope for this. To have to be meek is bad but it is not so bad as to be an Untouchable. The meek if they do not inherit the earth
may at least be strong. The Untouchables cannot hope for that. (Ambedkar, “Essays on Untouchables and Untouchability: Religious”)

The satirical reminds of her caste in the school and at the church infused in Bama the consciousness that she was a Paraya, member of a low caste: “Wherever you look, however much you study, whatever you take up, caste discrimination stalks us in every nook and corner and drives us into 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” (KAR 26). Bama realized that caste discrimination and hegemonies hurt Dalit’s dignity and hamper their opportunity to progress in life. Sidonie Smith observes, “…autobiographical storytelling is always a performative occasion…” (“Performativity,” 109). By articulating her feelings, Bama writes back to the social hegemonic structures and resists the caste prejudices which force Dalits to accept the enforced identity of being inferiors.

Bama, in Karukku, not only talks about her own individual experiences but also reflects on the distressful condition of the children of her community. Upper caste teachers treated Dalit children with contempt. These children were forced to serve in the school as cheap labourers. Menial jobs in the school like, “…we carried water to the teacher’s house; we watered the plants…” were assigned to Dalit children. Even the priests in the church were not above caste prejudice: “They always spoke in a bad way about people of our caste. If ever anything bad happened, they would say immediately, and without hesitation, ‘It must be one of the Cheri children who did it’” (KAR 18). The church is also not free from the caste and class bigotry. The caste and class intolerance makes Dalit children’s life miserable in schools: the unwelcomed spaces.

Once in her school days, Bama was accused of stealing a coconut. All her protests fell on deaf ears: “The next morning at assembly, the headmaster called out my name. ‘You have shown us your true nature as a Paraya,’ he said. ‘You climbed the coconut tree yesterday after everybody else had gone home, and you stole a coconut. We cannot allow you inside this school. Stand outside.’” Since a scuffle was going on between the Chaaliyar people and Paraya people during those times. The headmaster belonging to Chaaliyar caste left no stone unturned to humiliate the Paraya girls which reflects that
caste conflict not only cause suffering and distress to Dalits collectively but also humiliate and shatter them individually. After a lot of requests she was given permission to go back to school with the remarks, ”‘After all, you are from the Cheri. You might have done it. You must have done it.’” When she entered the classroom “the entire class turned round to look at me, and I wanted to shrink into myself….“ Humiliated she “went and sat on my bench, still weeping” (19). Bama’s ashamed body in public space mirrors the shame of the entire Dalit community. This incident gave Bama insights into the vicious circle of how caste perpetuated abuses: “When Bama is humiliated…in full view of her class, the caste system’s oppression is inscribed in terms of Bama’s “shamed” body” (Nayar, “Bama’s,” 88). In the act of remembering the scene, Bama “has encoded the mode of resistance that constructs her in opposition to the hegemonic structure of the caste system” (Rao and Ambhore 247).

After passing eighth standard, Bama went to high school in a neighbouring town. It was a convent school but not bereft of caste prejudices. The Warden-Sister “could not abide low-caste or poor children. She’d get hold of us and scold us for no rhyme or reason.” She would humiliate Dalit students by using derogatory language: “‘These people get nothing to eat at home; they come here and they grow fat,’ she would say publicly. When we returned to the school after holidays, she would say, ‘Look at the Cheri children! When they stay here, they eat their fill and look as round as potatoes. But look at the state in which they come back from home—just skin and bone!’” She, without fail, abused them citing their poverty and caste. The insults hurled at Dalit students were heart piercing. Bama admits, “It was really embarrassing. We too paid our fees like everyone else….Yet we had to listen to all this as well” (KAR 20). Educational institutions, the temples of learning are the source of awareness but the incidents such as these show that the educational institutions that are the “critical platform for change becomes the medium and the very apparatus to insinuate humiliation and discrimination at the inception of caste identity. In other words, the discriminatory practices have been internalized by the higher caste groups towards the Dalit (teacher, colleague, student, peer groups) in education and social networking on every day basis” (Jodhka), thus indirectly hampering Dalits’ advancement.
Bama reminiscences that it was not only in school where she suffered caste insults. During holidays when she returned home from school by bus, her co-passengers, women from the upper castes, on learning her caste, told her to move elsewhere. But when Bama refused, they got up and stood all the way rather than sit next to her: “They look at us with the same look they would cast on someone suffering from a repulsive disease. Wherever we go we suffer blows. And pain” (KAR 27). The segregation of her body and humiliation meted out disgraced her as an untouchable: “Here caste is inscribed upon the Dalit’s body through its very rejection….Dalit bodies are hurt and brutalized because the social structures allow (even enable) the brutalization” (Nayar, “Bama’s” 89). Although the pain is individual, Bama suffered it for being Paraya: “…pain moves outward from the narrator to the narrator’s community…” (90). Hence, the individual and the collective merge. Bama’s mother advised her: “‘Say you are from a different caste. They’ll never know’” (KAR 20). Bama’s mother, like her grandmothers, too shared the attitude of not coming out in the open to protest against injustice. However, self-respect and self-dignity prevented Bama to hide her caste: “‘But why should I pretend to these people that I’m from a different caste?’” (20-21). Bama never supported this cowardice act. Paraya was her identity and she acknowledged it proudly by refusing the pretension of being from another caste, thus asserting her ‘self’ and self-respect. She felt pained to observe that the people of her community had resigned themselves to the subaltern status. She on her part openly resisted the social structures which refused acceptance to her as a Paraya.

Bama recognized the potential of education to attain self-respect and to overcome caste restrictions: “Since awareness of the pressures...is the ground of resistance...the difficult road to a liberatory autobiographical practice lies through the terrain of cultural critique” (Smith, “Autobiographical Manifestos,” 435). Education leads to awareness and awareness of the hegemonic structures forms the ground of resistance which paves the way to a ‘liberated self.’ Bama studied hard. She was awarded a prize for standing first among all the Dalit students who took the government S.S.L.C exam in her district. This achievement encouraged her to study further. Initially she felt embarrassed when she was pointed out as a Dalit student in assembly or in the classroom: “And in my heart I have even grieved over the fact that I was born as I am” (KAR 27). But she gained a sense of
pride “as the Harijan Child who had gained the best marks” (21). Bama’s mother rejoiced in her achievements: “…the Dalit mother can’t nourish her daughter in ways that a middle class mother can but she leaves her a different kind of legacy…she teaches her to ‘make space’. It is owing to such a model of mothering that the narrator manages to gain education for herself” (Sangwan). Bama’s mother encouraged and supported her in all her endeavours to receive education in order to have a respectable life unlike hers and other women of her community.

Bama’s studies came to an abrupt halt due to lack of financial support: “…my parents wanted me to stay back home saying there was no need for me to go to college or to study any further. In any case there was no money. Then they said it would be difficult for me to find a husband in my community if I went in for further education” (KAR 74). Her parents feared if Bama acquired higher education, it would be difficult to find a husband for her in their community. Poverty and the trouble of finding a suitable mate remain the common reasons for stopping girls from acquiring education, especially higher education: “…a virtuous woman is one without talent…Men feared that if women were educated they would become superior to men, so they did not allow us to be educated. Couldn’t the women have challenged the men and refused to submit?” (Qiu Jin qtd. in Ebrey 343) It is ironical that it is always the girl who is asked to abandon studies because according to the traditional societal notions, a wife must not be equivalent or superior to her husband. She should be submissive and docile and should mould herself according to her husband’s needs: “The decision to stop a girl’s education is usually related to plans for her marriage. A girl who is too well educated will have a difficult time finding a suitable mate, for it is felt that the husband should always be better qualified educationally than his wife. The additional period of study may also make her less eligible for marriage because of her age – as a husband ought to be older than his wife too” (Vatuk 27).

However, Bama was fortunate. When a nun came to know about Bama’s financial constraints, she pawned her earrings and “sent me to a college with money” (KAR 74). Bama had a difficult time in the college but she was determined to study and did not
return home despite harsh conditions. She never let the caste and gender disparities lower her morale. Bama later pawned her own earrings in order to pay her examination fee.

The government offers various financial grants to Dalit students and also makes arrangement for special tuitions for these students for their educational betterment. These grants and tuitions at times turn out to be more humiliation than consolation, mainly because it singles out the caste identity: “We are objects of contempt in public places. People say, he/she doesn’t have any talent or merit. He/she has found a way in through a quota…” (Bama, “Interview”). Bama when she joined college thought nobody would care about her caste. But she realized caste moves along with a person as a potent marker of identity. One day, a lecturer in the college announced, “Will Harijan students please stand; the government has arranged that Scheduled Caste students should get special tuition in the evenings.” Only two students stood up including Bama. There was a sudden fuss among other students who looked upon Bama and the other Dalit student with contempt. This act of theirs hurt Bama. She at once told the lecturer, “I didn’t want their special tuition or anything else” (KAR 22). The palpable remarks of the teachers regarding dalit students: “… that they lack ability, are not intelligent or do not deserve to study, tended to increase the latter’s uneasiness in the class” (Nambissan 8) further degraded them in front of the class. The measures adopted by the government for the educational enhancement and economical inclusion of Dalits many a time adds to their woes: “We felt really bad then. We’d stand in front of nearly two thousand children, hanging our heads in shame, as if we had done something wrong. Yes, it was humiliating” (KAR 21). Thus, even privileges guaranteed to protect their interests stigmatize them socially.

During festive season, the college administration held back Dalit children from visiting home on the pretext: “What celebration can there be in your caste….” Bama saw through their pretense: “they were giving permission for wealthy children to go home” while retaining them for work during festive days. She resisted insisting that “there cannot be different rules for different castes, only the same rules for everyone” (22). Bama stood against the injustice. She got not only for herself but also for other Dalit students the permission to go home. Bama’s stand “because I had the education, because
I had the ability, I dared to speak up for myself…” (20) reflects how awareness and education play an important role in a person’s emancipation.

Like Urmila Pawar, Bama in *Karukku* also recalls her student days spent in the grip of poverty. Bama many a time “didn’t want to stay and study” in the convent because of her inability to afford costly dresses: “I wondered to myself how it was that children belonging to other communities always had the fine clothes and good food. I realized it was they who had the money. As for me, my community was low-caste; I had no money either.” However, the next moment she came to her rescue: “All the same, I thought, I would study hard and make good. So I worked really hard” (73). It was the will to change her life which incited Bama to study. She did not have money to buy a good dress for college day celebration. She locked herself in the washroom to escape embarrassment:

I wanted to weep and weep when I considered my plight….A friend of mine from a Naicker family had said to me, ‘You could have written home and asked them to send you a silk sari.’ So, were there silk saris growing in a garden in my home? She couldn’t have known the truth—that there was no one in my home who possessed a silk sari. I could not have asked them to buy me a silk sari either. There was no money to throw away on a sari. So I hid in the bathroom until the party was over. (76)

Some students asked her, “Did I only possess one set of clothing? Didn’t I have any others?” (74). However, Bama endured shame and humiliation and stayed on. It was against such adverse circumstances that she completed her graduation and B.Ed. Afterwards when she started teaching, she was able to “earn enough money every month” which gave her the freedom to spend money “independently, and as I pleased….I realized that those who have the cash to spend can always afford to live in comfort” (76). Thus, like Virginia Woolf, she was able to realize the worth of economic independence. A woman must be economically independent and have a space of her own. Economic independence is an important step towards women’s empowerment as it liberates them from dependency on others for their survival. It motivates them to assert their right to have a space not only public but also private, and hence gives power to resist the atrocities and injustices, and to ascertain an identity of their own in family and in society.
Bama, in Karukku narrates the pain of the Dalit children who at the age of going to school worked hard to fill their bellies “then, how are they to educate themselves?” Bama wanted to help those struggling children: “There was a desire in my heart to help other children to better themselves, as I, born into the same community, had been able to do, because of my education…” (76). Besides, she also interrogates the injustice and inequality meted out to Dalits in the church: “It struck 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 such strict control?” (23). Her family and friends did not approve of her decision. However, against her family’s wishes, she resigned from the teaching post to enter the religious order.

Every place has impact of caste divisions; she understood this, after she entered the church order: “…it was like coming from backwoods into a big metropolis” (23). Bama narrates one of the distressed memories of her life. When Bama was about to complete her training as nun, a sister told her: “…in certain orders they would not accept Harijan women as prospective nuns…there was a separate order for them somewhere.” Conscious of being a Dalit, Bama approached the sister in desperation to ask about her prospects in that convent. The sister puts forth a question, “…whether any other order had invited me to join them.” When Bama told her that the convent school where she worked earlier “the Sisters had invited me to enter their order.” The Sister then replied, “Well, they asked you too, did they? Don’t worry about it. You may join us.” It was not the question of entering/joining the convent that Bama reveals here. It was the question of being, surviving and continuing there. Bama laments, “…there was no place that was free of caste” (25).

Bama’s situation brings to mind the character of Siluvai in Raj Gautaman’s novel Siluvai Raj Sarithiram. Siluvai Raj Sarithiram is a radical critique of Christianity. Siluvai, a Dalit Christian, undergoes various harrowing experiences since childhood until he converts to Hinduism in his mid-twenties when “I realized how casteism prevailed in Roman Catholicism” (qtd. in K. Geetha 327). Besides, Toru Dutt in her letters to Miss Mary E. R. Martin admits that she used to feel alienated within the Christian society as
she was a converted Hindu Christian: “We do not go much into society now. The Bengali reunion are always for men, wives and daughters and all women kind are confined to the house, under lock and key, and Europeans are generally supercilious and looked down on Bengali” (271) converts. In such situations where upper caste converts were denied space in the Christian society, the position of a Dalit Christian becomes doubly marginalized as an outsider and as a Dalit. This reflects the dilemma of Dalits and the two-facedness of the Church which converts Dalits on the promise of providing equality but too becomes “an instrument of oppression” (Christopher 19) through hierarchal divisions.

Bama observed visible discrimination in the school where she was assigned to teach after taking orders as nun. The school had many students coming from effluent families beside Dalit students. But the students from her community were assigned lowly jobs of sweeping the premises, swabbing and washing the classrooms and cleaning out the lavatories. William Blake in his poem “London” (1794) expresses his distress on the exploitation of children in the church:

How the Chimney-sweepers cry
Every blackening Church appalls. (Blake)

The poet bluntly points out that each child who is forced into employment as a chimney sweeper is a black mark against the church which has failed to take care of its destitute children. William Blake sees the church as ‘blackened’ rather than seeing the chimney sweeper as blackened. Like William Blake, Bama in her life narrative also affirms that the church has failed to serve the poor destitute: “The Gospels show Jesus ministering to and among the poor. He always associated himself with the outcasts of the society…and spoke against riches and comfort.” The church, she realized, abandoned the “spirit of the Gospel” (Christopher 17) and has become an instrument of tyranny. Bama reveals a wide gap between the faith and church practices. Bama recalls the stories told to her in childhood by nuns:

If ever I had to stay alone in the church, my insides would quake. Because just at those times I would remember the stories that the Sisters had told us in Scripture lessons about the Devil….The nuns never seemed to tell us any cheerful stories. It was always the stories of Devil...wandering about with a pair of balances, with the sins we had committed in one pan weighed against the merit we had earned in the other. Every time I went
near the church, I would be stupefied with terror, imagining the Devil with his balance, yelling above my head. I could actually see my loads of sins pulling the pan downwards. (KAR 83)

Thus, to perpetuate fear than faith, the religious institutions instead of becoming a source of solace and knowledge became the source of terror, fear and exploitation.

Bama in *Karukku* laments that the people associated with the church did not encourage Dalit children to improve their status:

...everything they said to the children, everything in the manner in which they directed them, suggested that this was the way it was meant to be for Dalits; that there was no possibility of change. And mainly because of this, those children seemed to accept everything as their fate. (103)

Their situation is similar to the situation of the Blacks portrayed in the novel *Petals of Blood* (1977) by Ngugi Wa Thiong’o. The characters of Karega and Hawkins represent those who are not only disillusioned with the British system of education but who also saw through its real design: “The education we got had not prepared us to understand those things: it was meant to obscure racism and other forms of oppression. It was meant to make us accept our inferiority so as to accept their superiority and their rule over us” (165). In a similar way, the convent educated Dalit children were forced to accept their inferior status without being critical observers so as to bear exploitation without resistance.

Bama minutely observed the discriminatory practices in the church. People from the affluent castes held positions of power. Dalits were confined to serving the priest and the Mother Superior. During New Year celebrations, Dalits carried gift packs, fruit or biscuits for them: “Even though our people had never tasted the fruit themselves, they somehow went through every effort to buy the fruit for the Church elders…” (KAR 65). Bama, by articulating Dalits’ exploitation in the church, brings to the fore the maltreatment of Dalits by the priests and the nuns who “control the dispossessed and the poor by thrusting a blind belief and devotion upon them, and by turning them into slaves in the name of God, while themselves live in comfort” (108). Before becoming nun, a woman has to take the vow to live in poverty and help the downtrodden and destitute. But Bama observes that the “convent does not know the meaning of poverty.” The nuns
hardly care “to glance at poor children, and only wished to serve the children of the wealthy” (77). Bama in this helpless situation lost her peace of mind: “My conscience was battered and bruised….I left the convent and went home, utterly weary and dispirited” (78). Bama became nun because she took the convent and the church as symbols of love and equality. It was after entering the convent that Bama came face to face with the real state of affairs. She found the people attached to the church whose duty is to preach equality and love, practice caste and class prejudices and exercise discrimination: “…they really do treat the people who suffer from poverty in one way, and those who have money in their pockets in a totally different way” (77). Bama, in her life narrative, integrate every memory and experience of her life in the convent. However, she maintains silence on the sexual exploitation in the convents which is expressed in Sister Jessme’s life narrative Amen: The Autobiography of a Nun (2009):

As I don’t respond, Sr Vimy turns against me….The sisters realize that her anger is because of my spurning her advances. Indirectly, they hint that I should cooperate with her. I can’t believe such things are happening, but as there is none to rescue me, I am forced to succumb to her attentions for a while….Later, a young and smart priest was made the chaplain of the college-convent. Every now and then, he was seen in that part of the college where Sr Tressila worked. Once, I even saw him pinching and caressing her in jest. (51-55)

Sister Jessme narrates the sexual harassment which she suffered and also talks about the sexual relationships between priests and sisters and between sisters in the convents. This dark side of the convent is left unanswered in Bama’s Karukku.

Bama recalls her memories of tumult while serving in the convent as nun. Karukku acts as a friend to whom Bama pours out what she felt and experienced in the convent: “I began to think that the priests and nuns had deceived me hugely” (KAR 102). Bama entered the convent with the hope that her life should be “useful to few others” (122). However, what she found there was a facade of indifference: “…they claim that God was born into a poor family, lived among the poor, and died poor, but if by accident a poor and lowly person appears within the precincts of the convent or the school, they’ll fall upon that person like rabid dogs” (106-07). Bama became “completely confused” by observing a wide gap between their preaching and actual practice. The convents run
schools which are for the destitute children but Dalits “are told that if they take Dalit children, their standards will fall. They marginalize all of us Dalits as being of poor quality” (119). This hurt Bama and made her conscious about the grim position of Dalits within the church.

After seven frustrating years in the convent, on 8 November 1992, she left her life of renunciation and came out into the world: “My conscience was battered and bruised….I left the convent and went home, utterly weary and dispirited” (78). Convent life threw her into “spiritual turmoil.” She was anguish at the “affluence of the convent compared to the abysmal poverty of her community” (Christopher 16-17). She walked out of the convent, “not rejecting God but rejecting the institutions that have corrupted the Gospel” (20). According to Pramod K. Nayar, “…her exit from the convent is an act of agency driven by her will to work for the Dalit cause.” Bama wanted to work to uplift the downtrodden. When she found that she could not accomplish her goal by staying in the convent, she left it. By leaving the convent, she asserted her “individual agency” (“Bama’s,” 92) to fulfill her personal desire to work for Dalit community.

The decision to leave the convent was not easy for Bama. Bama recalls when she boarded the train from Jammu to Tiruchi in the same compartment there were some army personals who were also going home for vacation. She compared her situation with them. They were going home full of joy and happiness and Bama was also going home, the home which she lost after her decision to be a nun, desperate and with a heavy heart. She was unable to comprehend what future would bring to her and what would become of her life. At this moment of desperation, Bama recalled her mother who always encouraged her: “I wanted to shout, ‘Amma, I haven’t thrown away my life; I have rescued it, just as I was about to throw it away, and brought it home safely. I must live a new life now, Amma. I really must.’….Amma would speak up for me” (KAR 133). Once again, Bama looked towards her mother who always remained a moral support to her. After coming out of the convent, Bama suffered unemployment and seclusion. Her position as an unmarried Dalit woman:

And if a woman so much as stands alone and by herself somewhere, all sorts of men gather around her showing their teeth. However angry you
get, however repelled by their expressions and their grimaces, even to the point of retching, what can you do on your own? We think so many thoughts. We hope so much. We study so many things. But in real life everything turns out differently. We are compelled to wander about, stricken and unprotected (119)

had its own set of difficulties. Her helplessness was aggravated by the evil designs of people who consider a working unmarried woman an easy prey.

She faced problems in getting a job as she was a Paraya. Some schools because of caste prejudices did not accept Paraya woman as teacher:

In any case, I didn’t get that job. Why? Because I am a Dalit. It was a school that is governed and run by the Nadar. It seems they only appoint Nadar women. I don’t know why, in that case, they make such a fuss about the interview, and invite us all to apply…. (118-19)

This illustrates that in Dalit women’s case it is important to take into account gender identity along with caste and class identity. She is triply marginalized because of gender, caste and class.

*Karukku* proffers resistance against the social and the religious institutions which are responsible for the marginalization and suffering of Dalit women. However, the narrative moves from particular to the universal as it questions all sorts of oppressions and offers solace to all those who still are suffering and are wounded: “*Karukku* was written out of a specific experience, the experience of a Tamil Dalit Christian woman. Yet 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” (Holmstrom, Translator’s Note xiv). The Dalit experiences of poverty, discrimination and violence form the core of Bama’s *Karukku*. Bama’s *Karukku* is her earnest appeal to Dalit community:

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 true feelings; we must dare to stand up for change. We must crush all these institutions that use caste to bully us into submission, and demonstrate that among human beings there are none who are high or low. (28).
Bama implores Dalits not to accept atrocities and injustices as their fate. It is the social structure which is responsible for their enslavement and degradations. Dalits should resist submission and work for change. They must resist caste discrimination to create a just society free of inequalities.

Bama also brings to the fore the issue of domestic violence suffered by Dalit women. Uudan, a blower, used to beat his wife in a beastly manner: “nobody could go near and separate them.” He would “drag his wife by hair to the community hall and beat up her as if she were an animal, with his belt” (61). This incident underscores the subservient position of Dalit women. Even the children’s games highlight the reflection of marginalization, and gender and caste stereotypes. It was always the boys who played the role of Naickers and Nadars exploiting poor Dalits; and husbands who would beat their wives: “Two or three boys would play at being Naicker….These boys would act as if they had a lot of power over us….The boys managed the shops pretending to be the Nadar Mudalaali….Then we played at being married…the husband coming home drunk and hitting his wife…” (56-57). Even games put forward patriarchal and caste domination. The children’s games become the means through which the patriarchal gender conditioning is done: “I was taught that it was not proper for a female to be violent, that it was “unnatural.” My brother was taught that his value would be determined by his will to do violence…” (hooks, “Understanding Patriarchy” 1). Hence, even in games the Dalit girls were assigned victim/passive receiver roles and placed in a subordinate position in relation to Dalit boys who played dominant, power yielding roles.

Bama, like Urmila Pawar and Baby Kamble, also portrays the resilience, strength and unwavering spirit of Dalit women to overcome hurdles and survive. Bama’s father was in the army. During the war time, he was unable to send money home. During these difficult times, it was her mother “who managed to look after us, by picking up some coolie work.” Bama helped her mother by picking some work of “gleaning groundnuts, collecting firewood, picking up dry dung” (72) during school holidays. Her mother ate food only after the children finished: “my mother had to go hungry” (73) as “children would finish off whatever gruel or porridge there was” (72-73). A woman is considered as “the angel in the house” (Virginia Woolf qtd. in Stafford 64). As an angel she is
expected to act in certain ways. She always has to care for other people rather than herself. Her life is devoted to her husband and children, not to herself. It is her duty to sacrifice her wishes and desires.

Paraya women used to manage household and societal chores even in the most adverse conditions without male protection and men’s earnings. Bama remembers the riot between Paraya and Chaaliyar caste. Paraya men were terrified of the police and hid in the forest leaving alone the Paraya women to manage the family and fields: “As usual, the women went to the fields where they worked as day-labourers. On their way, they took gruel to the men hiding in the woods, told them the news, and went on. And so the women somehow managed on their own, even without their men’s earnings” (KAR 38). Hence, Paraya women do better than men in traditionally subscribed masculine space and role: “And there are what we might call significant others, those whose stories are deeply implicated in the narrator’s and through whom the narrator understands her or his own self-formation” (Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography 86). It was from the earlier generation of women that Bama learnt the necessary skills to survive and make space for herself in society.

Bama’s “narrative strategy of reminiscence” serves the “function of capturing” the moments “from the past to interrupt the painful present” of Dalit woman’s experience “as well as enabling a critique” (Christopher 17) of the biased social institutions. There are numerous expressions of marginal experience and fighting instinct in Karukku. Karukku gives us hope when Bama sees the beginning of a change in the gradually growing awareness among Dalits of their own oppressions:

But Dalits have also understood that God is not like this, has not spoken like this. 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. To my mind, this alone is true devotion. (KAR 109)

Dalit women’s life narratives are not simply the narration of life stories but they are used as a means of self-assertion and self-resurrection. These narratives are a process of self-emancipation that create their identity and space within literary as well as social
sphere. By writing her life narrative *Karukku*, Bama has voiced the silence which was there yet unnoticed for thousands of years. By leaving the convent, she overcame her fears and affirmed her identity. She discovered that she had to break the imposed silence. When Bama left the convent, it seemed to her that she was left with no aim to live her life. In order to give her life a direction and to resurrect her individual identity, she wrote *Karukku*: “…the “I” writes under the sign of hope and what Helene Cixous calls “the very possibility of change,”” (Smith “Autobiographical Manifestos,” 438). *Karukku* becomes the hope for a social change and acts as an agency of resistance against caste and gender injustices for a marginalized and distressed woman who never negates but negotiates from her marginal identity and position to resurrect herself as a dignified Paraya woman.