
Testimonies of Wounded Histories: Gendered Resistance in Bama's *Karakku* and Clarke's *The Polished Hoe*

Vijaya Kalyani Tadi¹

Research Scholar, Department of English, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam

Email: vijayakalyani18@gmail.com

Dr. N. Solomon Benny²

Head of the Department, Department of English, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam

Paper Received on 28-05-2023, Accepted on 28-06-2023,

Published on 30-06-23; DOI: 10.36993/ RJOE.2023.8.295

Abstract

This comparative paper investigates how two postcolonial writers—Bama (Dalit Tamil Christian) and Austin Clarke (Barbadian-Canadian)—use testimonial narrative to uncover silenced histories of caste, race, and gender oppression. Drawing on trauma theory, subaltern studies, and testimonial literature, the article argues that *Karakku* and *The Polished Hoe* function not merely as autobiographical or confessional texts, but as acts of resistance and political intervention. These narratives transform personal memory into collective critique, making the private pain of gendered marginality legible as historical injustice.

Bama's *Karakku* confronts caste-based and religious marginalization through a vivid, colloquial Tamil that elevates the collective experience of Dalit Christian women. Meanwhile, Clarke's *The Polished Hoe* uses oral storytelling and confession to deconstruct the colonial silence around Black Caribbean womanhood, particularly regarding sexual violence and inherited trauma. Both authors deploy literary strategies that resist formal, canonical expectations, instead crafting alternative archives rooted in embodied experience and communal suffering.

In doing so, these works reclaim voice, restore agency, and rewrite dominant histories from the perspective of the oppressed. Testimony here is not merely recollection—it is a demand for justice, an act of truth-telling that transcends genre boundaries to enter the realm of political discourse. These texts compel readers to bear witness, not just to pain, but to survival and resistance.

Keywords: gendered trauma, caste, race, subaltern, testimony, resistance literature

1. Introduction: The Politics of Testimony

Testimony is a powerful literary and political act through which historically marginalized voices assert their presence within dominant discourses. In the context of postcolonial literature, it functions as a counter-hegemonic strategy—challenging official narratives, destabilizing institutional silences, and foregrounding personal and communal traumas often erased from mainstream history. Testimony allows the speaker not only to narrate suffering but to reclaim subjectivity, voice, and political presence.

Bama and Clarke, writing from vastly different geopolitical and cultural contexts—Dalit India and the Black Caribbean—each employ testimonial narrative as a deliberate act of intervention. Their protagonists, shaped by the brutalities of casteism, racism, and patriarchy, use voice as a weapon against silence. Testimony in *Karakku* and *The Polished Hoe* thus emerges as both a literary form and a mode of political resistance.

This paper positions these texts within the tradition of resistance literature, focusing particularly on how testimony enables subaltern subjects—especially women—to contest structures of power and rewrite historical memory. Far from being therapeutic or personal alone, their narratives implicate readers in the act of witnessing. In this sense, testimony becomes insurgent: an embodied, ethical demand to see what dominant history has chosen to forget.

This paper positions *Karakku* and *The Polished Hoe* within the genre of resistance literature. Though arising from distinct cultural contexts—Dalit India and the Black Caribbean—both texts share a commitment to rewriting official history from the perspective of the violated female subject. Testimony, in this sense, is not merely cathartic but insurgent.

2. Trauma and Memory: Silence, Storytelling, and Survival

In both *Karakku* and *The Polished Hoe*, memory emerges as a fractured but persistent force—one that resists chronological narration and instead unfolds in cycles, fragments, and echoes. Trauma, in these narratives, is not a resolved event but an ongoing rupture that manifests in silences, absences, and repetitions. Both Bama and Clarke frame their protagonists' storytelling as delayed but necessary disclosures, filtered through personal suffering and cultural erasure. Bama's *Karakku* opens with a tone of restlessness and rupture. The narrator, having left the convent, confronts the institutional violence embedded within religion, caste, and patriarchy. Writing becomes for her a radical act of survival and witness—an assertion of Dalit female subjectivity against a society that denies both. Memory, in Bama's hands, is activist: it resurrects suppressed histories and exposes systemic injustice by naming the pain that was once unspeakable.

Similarly, Clarke's *The Polished Hoe* presents Mary-Mathilda's night-long confession as a slow unraveling of historical and personal trauma. Her testimony, carefully paced and intentionally layered, bears the weight of decades of colonial violence and sexual exploitation. Clarke employs oral storytelling not just as a narrative device but as a cultural strategy, capturing the rhythms of Caribbean speech and the episodic nature of remembering. The

structure itself—one long monologue—mirrors how trauma is processed: not in order, but in emotionally charged fragments.

Importantly, both texts present silence not as void but as an active form of resistance. The withholding of speech becomes a way to preserve dignity, protect memory, and guard against retraumatization. When voice does emerge, it does so on the speaker's terms, creating a powerful moment of agency. In this way, storytelling is not only therapeutic but also transformative—a method by which the wounded subject reshapes both self and history.

Similarly, in Clarke's *The Polished Hoe*, Mary-Mathilda's long, nocturnal confession unravels years of pain, loss, and subjugation. Her testimony is not spontaneous but carefully structured, oscillating between memory and erasure. Clarke uses oral storytelling to reflect the performative, episodic nature of trauma recovery. In both narratives, silence is not absence but resistance—a space where pain is held until the voice can bear it.

3. Bama's *Karakku*: Caste, Religion, and Womanhood

Bama's *Karakku* is a searing indictment of caste oppression and religious hypocrisy. As a Dalit Christian woman, Bama confronts multiple layers of marginality—based on caste, class, gender, and religious affiliation. Her narrative exposes how institutions of supposed moral and spiritual authority—such as the Catholic Church and convent schools—become complicit in the reproduction of caste hierarchies. While Christianity claims universal equality, its implementation in the Indian social context remains steeped in discriminatory practices. The convent, which should symbolize care and sanctuary, becomes instead a space of regulation, discipline, and silencing. The narrator's body, labor, and voice are policed not only by Brahminical society but also by Christian leadership structures that mimic caste-based exclusions.

Bama's resistance is multifaceted and rooted in the language of lived experience. What makes *Karakku* revolutionary is its use of Tamil-inflected prose and Dalit idiom. She consciously rejects the Sanskritized, elite literary Tamil in favor of a local, oral, and grassroots dialect. This stylistic choice is not merely aesthetic; it is political. By using the everyday speech of Dalit women, Bama disrupts the literary canon and reclaims linguistic agency for a community historically denied access to literary and educational platforms.

Moreover, the narrative's focus on the laboring female body—working in fields, kitchens, and convents—serves as an indictment of both spiritual and economic exploitation. Through vignettes of girlhood, education, domestic servitude, and eventual spiritual disillusionment, Bama constructs an experiential archive of Dalit womanhood. Her personal pain becomes representative of the broader social oppression faced by Dalit women, rendering her autobiography a collective document of resistance.

Karakku therefore functions not merely as an individual confession but as a testimonial manifesto. It foregrounds the intersection of caste and gender to highlight how systemic injustice is lived in the most intimate spaces of the everyday. Bama's act of writing breaks

multiple silences—those enforced by caste, patriarchy, and religious orthodoxy—and in doing so, reclaims narrative authority for the subaltern female voice.

4. Clarke's *The Polished Hoe*: Colonial Rape, Confession, and Language

In *The Polished Hoe*, Austin Clarke constructs a confessional postcolonial narrative that interrogates the layered intersections of race, gender, and historical trauma. The protagonist, Mary-Mathilda, delivers a long monologue to a police officer over the course of a single night—a structure that mirrors the density and weight of the colonial memory she carries. Her story, shaped by her experiences of sexual violence, exploitation, and generational oppression, becomes an indictment of both the colonial regime and the patriarchal order that upheld it.

Mary-Mathilda's testimony unfolds not as spontaneous confession, but as deliberate reconstruction. She speaks into the silences of the colonial archive, revealing what official histories have concealed. Her voice disrupts the narrative logic of the plantation economy, where Black women's bodies were sites of both labor and violation. Through her recollection of rape by Mr. Belfeels—the white plantation owner—Clarke reveals how gendered violence was a fundamental tool of colonial domination. Her account, though personal, symbolizes a collective and systemic violence that defined Black womanhood in the Caribbean.

Clarke's use of Barbadian Creole, oral repetition, and biblical cadence imbues the narrative with cultural authenticity and spiritual depth. The rhythm of Mary-Mathilda's speech reflects the musicality of oral Caribbean traditions, reinforcing her position as both storyteller and historian. Her confession operates on dual registers: legally, it seeks acknowledgement of the crime she has committed; spiritually, it seeks absolution for a life constrained by structural injustice.

The novel's form—uninterrupted, cyclical, and digressive—mirrors trauma's refusal to adhere to linear chronology. Mary-Mathilda does not merely recount events; she re-experiences them through narration. The body, in Clarke's narrative, becomes both an archive of pain and a medium of resistance. Her voice, rising from the margins of history, destabilizes not only the colonial silence but also the patriarchal frameworks that sought to define her identity.

The Polished Hoe thus becomes a counter-archive, a literary document that reclaims history from erasure. Clarke's narrative affirms that confession, when rooted in trauma and truth, is not weakness but radical clarity. Through Mary-Mathilda, Clarke elevates testimony into an act of resistance that reclaims agency for the colonized and the silenced.

5. Shared Narrative Strategies: Structure, Voice, and Resistance

Despite arising from distinct cultural and historical landscapes, Bama's *Karakku* and Clarke's *The Polished Hoe* share a number of structural and thematic affinities that reinforce their power as testimonial narratives. Both texts center on female protagonists whose voices break through systems of suppression—caste and religion in Bama's case, and colonial and patriarchal rule in Clarke's. Their storytelling is not incidental but essential; through narrative structure, language, and voice, they reclaim authority, confront trauma, and demand historical accountability.

Both authors consciously disrupt linearity. *Karakku* unfolds in fragments of memory, woven through present reflection and past suffering, mirroring the process of trauma recovery. Similarly, *The Polished Hoe* adopts an uninterrupted, nocturnal confession that circles around pain rather than proceeding in chronological order. These narrative forms reflect the non-linear, recursive nature of trauma, where memory is triggered, repressed, and reprocessed over time. This rejection of conventional structure resists the logic of bureaucratic or archival order and instead privileges the rhythm of emotional truth.

Language, too, plays a central role in resistance. Bama's use of colloquial Tamil and Clarke's employment of Barbadian Creole represent a defiance of dominant literary languages. These vernaculars, far from being simplistic or provincial, are imbued with political charge: they validate marginalized speech communities and reframe whose stories are worthy of being heard. Both writers elevate the oral tradition, using idiomatic phrasing, repetition, and rhythm to connect individual stories to collective experience.

Importantly, both *Karakku* and *The Polished Hoe* resist the impulse to present their female protagonists as mere victims. Instead, Bama and Clarke craft narrators who are conscious, self-reflective, and politically engaged. These women are not only survivors but chroniclers, transforming personal pain into a testimony that critiques structural violence. Their voices become insurgent, unsettling dominant narratives and rewriting history from below.

Together, these texts build counter-archives—repositories of memory, pain, and resistance that challenge the legitimacy of official histories. Through layered voice, experimental form, and subversive language, Bama and Clarke demonstrate that storytelling itself can be an act of political resistance, a method of survival, and a call for justice.

6. Conclusion: Subaltern Voices Rewriting History

The Polished Hoe and *Karakku* stand as profound acts of subaltern resistance, reclaiming narrative spaces traditionally denied to Dalit and Black Caribbean women. These texts do not merely tell stories of trauma—they actively interrogate the mechanisms of historical erasure and linguistic control. Bama and Clarke challenge canonical literary forms, disrupt dominant historiographies, and destabilize normative language politics. Through the act of testimony, they offer counter-histories that expose the complicity of religious, colonial, and patriarchal institutions in maintaining systemic violence.

What binds these narratives together is their insistence that voice, memory, and narrative are essential tools for justice. Testimony becomes a conduit for both remembering and resisting. The act of speaking—once dangerous or forbidden—transforms into a method of collective survival. In giving space to the wounded yet resilient voices of Mary-Mathilda and Bama, the novels transcend personal catharsis and become instruments of political critique and empowerment.

These testimonial texts not only recover suppressed histories but also reframe them in the language of the subaltern—vernacular, fragmented, and emotionally charged. In doing so, they reconfigure literature as a battlefield of meaning where trauma is politicized, where silence is

broken not for sympathy but for structural transformation. Bama and Clarke demonstrate that literature can serve as archive, tribunal, and rebellion—where truth-telling is itself a revolutionary act.

Works Cited

Bama. *Karakku*. Translated by Lakshmi Holmström, Oxford University Press, 2000.

Clarke, Austin. *The Polished Hoe*. Thomas Allen Publishers, 2002.

Felman, Shoshana, and Dori Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. Routledge, 1992.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *Feminist Review*, vol. 30, 1988, pp. 61–88.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271–313.

Talib, Ismail S. *The Language of Postcolonial Literatures: An Introduction*. Routledge, 2002.