

Bama's Vision of Women in *Sangati*

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Abstract

In the Indian scenario, casteism is prevalent which subjugated some communities. Dalit was one such caste deprived of even the basic amenities which were necessary for any ordinary human being. They were discriminated on every front and were forced to live in the periphery of the villages, towns and cities. They did not have an access to education which was a tool of empowerment of man. Economically also, they were on the first step of the ladder.

Women in the Indian society were generally treated as subordinates to men, they were discriminated and disgusted as well. The plight of Dalit women can easily be assessed by the fact that they being Dalits first and secondly women.

The Dalit novelists, particularly Bama highlighted the double suppression of these Dalit women in terms of gender discrimination, labour, education, etc. Bama in her novel Sangati, portrays the higher position or preference of boy over a girl. She writes: "if a baby boy cries, he is instantly picked up and given milk. It is not so with the girl". The paper aims to focus on the treatment given to women in the Periyar society as compared to the males in the same community and Bama's vision of women.

Key Words Casteism, Indian Society, Women, Dalits, Marginalization, Discrimination.

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Introduction

“If the third is a girl to behold, your courtyard will fill with gold”

-*Sangati*

Bama's *Sangati* analyses Dalits women's oppression by double patriarchies –the covert patriarchal stance subsumed within the gender relations of their own community and the overt patriarchal system of the upper castes. Absolute power rests with men in the community and in the institutions led by them - the caste courts, the Church, the Panchayats. The novel brings forth the patriarchal attitude of the upper castes who equate the visibility of the Dalit woman with availability. *Sangati* is another tale of the pain of the oppressed Dalit woman. Bama highlights the “difference” of Dalit women from the privileged upper caste women and, more importantly, celebrates their “identity” in their strength, labour and resilience. Though the Dalit women are oppressed, subjugated and looked down upon as inconsequential creatures both by the upper-class people and by their own men, these women exhibit an amazing strength of resistance and survival potential.

This paper is a study or the analysis of Dalit marginalization, discrimination, isolation and humiliation from common tradition of life especially the tragic condition of Dalit women in Indian society in *Sangati*.

Dalit Literature is about the sufferings of ‘oppressed class’. Exploitation or oppression of weaker by stronger is as old as mankind itself. The Indian history has been a vibrant record of conflict and dialectic between two opposite forces like exploiters and exploited colonizer and colonized, powerful and powerless. In Indian society, some communities are at the lowest step like: Dalits, females, poor, eunuchs, etc. If the woman belonged to a Dalit community, she would suffer in two ways: first being a woman, second belonging to the lowest community. Therefore, it could be said they are “doubly oppressed.”

Women's movement started in 1960's and a number of writers contributed in the movement like: Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of Rights of Women* (1792), Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, Fredrich Engels's *The Origin of the Family* (1884), John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) etc. These writers speak out the real woman who struggled with social norms, condition, which are extremely propagated by a patriarchal society. Toril Moi explains, “The first is a political position the second a matter of biology and the third, a set of culturally defined characteristics.” Women's condition was not good in 1960's and 1970's but in 1980's the mood changed. Being a Tamil, Dalit Christian women Bama is able to express

emphatically the women's identity. She examines caste and genderoppression together. She redefined 'woman' from the political perspective of a Dalit.

In *Sangati*, Bama focuses on the doubleoppression of females and exposes how a man spend money to earn as they please but on the otherhand a woman has to fulfill their family responsibilities. The theme of *Sangati* is "Subjugation to Celebration." Bama's '*Sangati*' is a unique Dalit feminist narrative which is mainly concerned with women's movement in India.

Sangati carries an autobiographical element in its narrative, and is the story of a whole community, not an individual. Many strong Dalit women who had the shackles of authority are also focused. The condition of Dalits was very bad as they were not allowed to enter in to the temple, and schools for education.

Writers like Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir speak out about the representation of women in literature. In 1980's, the first feminist criticism became much more electric. It focused upon attacking male version of the world to exploring the nature of female experiences. Dalit feminism points out repeatedly that Dalit struggle has tended to forget a gender perspective. In Dalit society, every woman lives under the double power of caste and patriarchy. They are doubly oppressed. Women's are considered as the symbol of sex and object of pleasure. A study of Dalit feminist writing reveals a tale of endless miseries, inhuman victimization and shocking gender discrimination.

Sangati was originally written in Tamil in 1994. It was translated by Laxmi Halmstrom into English. The word "sangati" means events, and thus the novel through individual stories, anecdotes and memories portrays the event, that takes place in the life of a woman in Periyar community.

Sangati is an autobiography of her community, which highlights the struggle of women of Periyar community. Bama chooses only a woman protagonist for every story in her novel. The novel contributes both to the Dalit movement and to the women's movement in India specially Tamil Nadu. "*Sangati* is a look at a part of those Dalit women who dared to make fun of the class in power that oppressed them and through this, they the courage to revolt." (8)

Bama exposes caste and gender problems both outside and inside the community. *Sangati* focuses generally on Dalit women on various issues such as gender, sexual discrimination. According to Bama "All women in the world are second class citizens. For Dalit women, the problem is grave. Their Dalit identity has given them a different set of problems. They experience a total leak of social status. Even they are not considered dignified human beings. My stories are based on these aspects

of Dalit culture" (google.com)

Sangati is a portrayal of many trouble witnessing stories as one writer Paatti said "Once you are born a woman, can you go and confront a group of four or five men?" Should you ever do it? (28) Women are presented in *Sangati* as wage earners as much as men as working as agricultural and building side labours, but earning less than men do. Yet the money they earn is spent as they please, whereas women bear the financial burden of running the family. Women are also constantly victim to sexual harassment and abuse in the world of work.

The women, in any case, whatever work they did, were paid less than men. Even when they did the very same work, they were paid less. Even in the matter of tying up firewood bundles, the boys always got five or six rupees more. And if the girl tied up the bundles, but the boys actually sold them, they got the better price. (18).

Although both men and women came after a hard day's work in the field, the men went straight to the bazaar or chavadi to while away their time, coming home only for their meal. But as for the women they return home wash vessels, clean the house, collect water, gather firewood, go to the shops to buy rice and other provision boil some rice, make a kazhambu or a kanji feed husband and children before they eat what is left over and go to bed. (59)

Even they lay down their bodies wracked with pain; they were not allowed to sleep. Whether she dies or survives, she had to finish his business. Women were not allowed to take part on any occasion, the man themselves would dress up and act as women rather than allow us to join in. (32) Thus women bear the double burden of the work outside and inside home. In some instances, when men spent their wages for drinking and other activities, women alone have to manage the expenses of the house.

The novel deals with gender bias faced by Dalit women right from the childhood. Girl babies are always considered inferior and taken less care. Dalit girls are hardly enjoying her childhood. They have little time to play as she has to take care of their younger siblings. Maikkanni is one such girl who has started to work from the day she learns to walk. (70). She has to go to work when her mother delivers a baby. When her mother becomes fit, Maikkanni turned to take care of the new born baby. The life of a Dalit girl was tormenting but the life of a grown up Dalit woman was worse. The story of narrator's cousin Marriamma tells a lot about the sexual assault the abuse faced by Dalit women and their inability to stand up against it. Bama is very careful in portraying the picture of a Dalit woman. Bama shows gender

discrimination meted out to them throughout the lives of Dalit women.

Bama realistically portrays the physical violence, like lynching, whipping and canning the Dalit woman by fathers, husbands, and brothers. Bama explores the psychological stress and pain. Her language is also very different from other Indian womenwriters as she is more generous with the use of Tamil Dalit slogans. She addresses the women of village by using suffix 'Amma' (mother) with their names.

The voice of many women speaking and addressing one another, sharing their everyday experience with each other, is sometimes expressed in anger or pain. The language is full of explicit sexual references too. Bama says that a man can humiliate a woman many times, he can disrespect a woman, it is very normal. But in this partial doubleminded society, woman has no right to speak out anything. This is acceptable to all and if she speaks or revolt, it is unacceptable.

The postcolonial thrust of her book is its huge criticism of Indian church. Bama feministically voices out the grievances of Periyar women with characters like vellaiyammappatti and a small girl and the narrator herself, who learns the story from her grandmother which becomes development of the novel. In the novel, many strong Dalit women had courage to break the shackles of authority. To which Bama said that they live under pressure and get to enjoy their fully life.

In India, there is prevalence of caste –hierarchy within sub castes of Dalit community. In *Sangati*, the Catholic priests were also gender biased and treated the converted Dalit women as inferior. Bama used two modes of narration in her book *Sangati*: One is confessional and the other, is conventional. And thus, she goes deep up to the historical perspective of Dalit community. She has personally experienced the marginalized. She sums up their situations in following lines:

“Everywhere you look, you see blows and beatings, shame and humiliation... we have not been to school or learnt anything, we go about likewise all our lives, from the day we are born till the day we die, as if we are blind, even though we have eyes”.

Marriage is another institution that follows the patriarchal rule of gender roles. Women are not given any freedom of choice on whom can they marry and marriages are arranged by respective families. In the life of most of the women characters, apart from doing full day's labour inside and outside home, their nights are to be spent for the pleasure of their husbands and their willingness or pleasure is not a matter of concern in the marriage life. They have to bear as many children as their husbands want to and it is the women who have to do the birth control as men

will never do such an act which is conceived as an act of losing their masculinity. Even the full pregnant women have to work in the field owing to their social conditions and poverty and for delivery, women are not given proper medical care and some of them die for this reason. There are many instances of domestic violence that are represented in this novel where women are abused, physically and emotionally tortured by their husbands and in most of the cases, the beatings and abuse of men are seen as 'natural'.

Sangati examines "the difference between women and their different ways in which they are subject to oppression and their coping strategies". In the novel, the language of Dalit women is rich and resourceful giving way to proverbs, folklore and folk songs. Bama as a feminist writer, protests against all forms of oppression and sufferings faced by Dalit women in the first half of *Sangati*. But later part of *Sangati* moves away from the state of depression and frustration. Instead it presents a positive identity to Dalit women focusing their inner strength and vigor. She also attracts the readers towards the education system about Dalit community. She gave the example of Pecchiamma, who belongs to Chakkili community, studied only up to fifth class. The girls of that community do not go to school all that much.

Through *Sangati*, Bama holds the mirror up to the heart of Dalit women. She makes an appeal for change and betterment of the life of a Dalit woman in the variety of fields, including sex and gender discrimination, equal opportunity in work force, education rights etc. Actually gives the narrator a key function and controls all the incidents and events in a proper way. The narrator becomes both omniscient narrator and a controlling agent of their story, who speaks out historical aspects of Dalit community through variety of characters, and it becomes development of novel. Bama is clear that no one is going to help the hopeless women in her community, it is up to the woman themselves to take their lives into their own hands. Hard labor and precariousness of Dalit women leads to a culture of violence, and this runs through the novel.

Dalit literature articulates the oppressions and exploitations faced by Dalits in a caste ridden society. Dalit writing as a political form of writing records the cultural and social lives of Dalits and ideologically the writing offers a call for resistance. Bama is a Tamil Christian Dalit writer who writes about the lives of Dalit Women in Tamil Nadu. *Sangati* can be seen as a site representing Dalit women and analysing how caste and gender act as tools of double oppression in the lives of these Dalit women. This critical feminist reading of the novel from a Dalit Feminist perspective focuses on how women are discriminated in the Periyar community in

their relations with different social institutions like education, marriages, electoral politics etc. Simultaneously, this text through its form and theme, builds up a resistance against the oppressions women face in their day to day lives.

The Dalit fiction can be considered as a social document that presents multiple levels of oppressions and marginalization faced by Dalit women in their everyday life. The evolution of the Dalit women and her empowerment through education serves to make her condition relatively better than that of the older generation people. From the grandmother to the narrator, this self-consciousness of the marginalization and the call for resistance has been getting louder. Thus *Sangati* not only fictionally represents gender and caste oppression in the Periyar community but also evolves an ideology of resistance and a call for action.

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