

Exposing Double- Marginalisation: Dalit Feminism In Bama's *Sangati*

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Abstract

Dalit literature is born out of the necessity and urgency to give expression to the agony suffered by the underprivileged classes. The primary motive of Dalit literature is the liberation of Dalits and to voice out their pathetic plight which has been overshadowed by the mainstream writings. It is a protest against the unjust and inhuman social system which perpetuates discrimination on the basis of class and caste. *Sangati* is a novel full of interconnected events and narratives which portrays the deplorable state of Dalit women in the *Paraiya* community. Bama through *Sangati* projects that hard labor and poor economic conditions lead to a culture of violence. The most common violence includes physical abuse, verbal abuse, marital rape, neglect and desertion without any financial support. *Sangati* contempts the way in which patriarchy works in the case of Dalit women. Bama explains about the psychological stresses and tensions of Dalit women as they suffer unimaginable oppression not only through caste but also gender.

Key words: Gender, Caste, Dalits, Marginalisation, Discrimination

Literature manifests the cultural and traditional aspects of a language or people. Literature which serves as a reflection or rather a mirror to the society, projects its ills with a view to making the reading public realise its mistakes and make amends. Literary works as many critics emphasise must serve not only the entertainment or pleasure evoking role but also a didactic purpose. Of all the different types of literature prevalent today, the responsibility entrusted upon the shoulders of Dalit literature stands inevitable. To voice out the needs and indigence of the oppressed class, to bring forth the ripples of a new change, Dalit Literature is a dynamic force worth researching upon. Dalit literature is born out of the necessity and urgency to give expression to the agony suffered by the underprivileged classes. It is a voice of protest against the unjust and inhuman social system which perpetuates discrimination on the basis of class and caste. The term 'Dalit literature'- 'Dalit' meaning oppressed, broken and downtrodden was first used in 1958 at the first conference on Dalit literature in Mumbai, known as Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha (Maharashtra Dalit Literature Society), pioneered by Jyotiba Phule and Bhimrao Ambedkar. . The emergence of Dalit Panthers, a political organisation

formed in 1972 in Maharashtra, is a significant movement in the history of Dalit literature which was furthered by various political and literary movements across India. Dalit literature, an established genre of literature is unique because it expresses the reality of that experience which has remained unnoticed in the mainstream writings. It is no more considered as a mere lamentation or the story of the suppressed but it serves as the voice of the multitude. Dalit writers make use of literature to express their sufferings, cultural exploitation and also their political positioning. Poems, novels, short stories and autobiographies written by Dalit writers provide useful insights on the question of Dalit identity. These writers make use of the language of the out-castes and under-privileged in Indian society.

Dalit literature in Tamil Nadu suggested an egalitarian spirituality and an organic humanism. Dalit literature in Tamil Nadu until the 1980's was regarded as a literature written by the Dalits for the Dalits. Later, it has formed into a genre that speaks for the entire subaltern including women and protests against all traditional social establishments. It is characterised by the call for self-identity and self-assertion. Tamil Dalit literature is not a literature of vengeance or hatred but is a literature of greatness and freedom. The dual oppression of Dalit women on the basis of caste and gender plays an important role in Tamil Dalit literature. It also marks a distinctive space in literature. The first Dalit novel in Tamil is *Pazhiyana Kazhidalum* written by Sivakami in 1989 which strongly made its impact felt upon the reading community. Tamil Dalit scholars played a major role in the transformation of Tamil literature itself. It is important to note that in mainstream Tamil literature, the Dalits were ironically portrayed as unhygienic, unlawful, sinning and immoral. No social significance was attributed to them. They were displayed as those who never aspired for any progress in life. They were also portrayed as 'Peryapuram', people who cherished their slavery. They survived in terrible poverty, starvation, ignorance, insults, injustice and atrocities that are totally against basic human rights.

Bama, also known as Bama Faustina Susairaj is a Tamil novelist who rose into fame with her autobiographical novel *Karukku* which narrates the agony and sorrow of Dalit Christian women in Tamil Nadu. *Sangati* is the second work of Bama published in 1994. Her other works include *Kusumbukkaran* (1996), *Vanmanam* (2002), and *Oru Thattvum Erumaiyum* (2003). Writing from the margin, Bama's writing is a path-breaking intervention in Tamil Dalit fiction. Bama belongs to the class of first class generation learners in her community and has found a place in academic circles by virtue of being a school teacher and more significantly as a writer. A Dalit woman and a former nun, Bama writes about her experiences placing them within the context of her personal and professional life. From such a position, she explores the multiple structures of oppression that operate in the lives of Dalits and more specifically in the lives of *Paraiya* women of Tamil Nadu. The confessional, conversational mode of writing adopted by Bama in *Karukku* and *Sangati* is a significant milestone in Tamil Dalit fiction. She articulates the experiences of the oppressed in the language of the oppressed. Her works foreground the twice cursed lives of Dalit women, oppressed on account of their caste as well as gender, at home and outside, by upper-caste men and Dalit men. She intends to foreground Dalit's resistance to oppression rather than merely record their victimisation on account of their caste. Women and Dalits are both oppressed groups, oppressed on account of affinity between the two groups and

Bama uses feminist strategies of representing the oppression of Dalits in her narrative of Dalit experience.

Sangati is a semi-autobiographical novel which turns to be an ethnographic work. It is written both in the first person and third person narrative. In *Sangati*, the events are narrated through the mind of a girl and through the stories told by her grandmother Vellaiyamma Kizhavi. It starts with the narrator's grandmother's comment that "if the third is a girl to behold your courtyard will fill with gold" (Bama 13). The grandmother was a strong woman who raised her children on her own even though her husband abandoned her four years after their marriage. The narrator herself was the third child but her mother seemed a little disappointed that the girl is so dark. The narrator's mother told her that they did not make any difference between boys and girls at birth but when they raised them, they became more concerned about the boys than the girls. The novel as a whole can be considered as a vivid description made by the narrator about her village and the Paraiya community.

Sangati is the autobiography of a community loaded with interconnected events in the life of the *Paraiya* women. Bama exposes caste and gender problems both inside and outside the community. *Sangati* focuses generally on Dalit women based on gender and sexual discrimination. It deals with the gender bias confronted by the Dalit women right from her childhood. They hardly enjoy their childhood, being marginalised right from their birth. It is a norm in the village that a male infant is never allowed to even whimper while the female baby is left unattended for long hours. In the case of weaning, the male child enjoys breast feeding for a longer period compared to female babies. They do what they please, as for the girls they must stay inside their houses doing all the household works. They are not even allowed to play 'boys' games'. The narrator's grandmother also gave much care to her grandsons than her granddaughters. If *Paatti* brings mangoes, the best pieces of the fruit will be given to the boys and the girls, having no other way out used to pick up and eat the leftover skins. The elder women say that, it would be the boys who are going to look after them. The girl children are reared only to be given to someone else.

In *Sangati*, Bama tries to bring about certain distinctions in the portrayal of men and women. While both men and women are presented as wage earners who equally are hard working, women are presented as being forced to work because of poor economical conditions. This condition of women is aggravated when their men are shown squandering away money for alcohol instead of spending it on daily provisions. In many cases women are the breadwinners of the family irrelative of their health conditions or even when they are carrying a child. "We have to labour in the fields as hard as men do, and then on top of that, struggle to bear and raise our children. As for the men, their work ends when they've finished in the fields. If you are born into this world, it is best you were born a man" (Bama 6).

Bama pictures how Dalit women are taught to work from their early days, even in their childhood. In *Sangati*, the narrator talks about a girl called Maikkanni who started to work from the day she learnt to walk. Her father abandoned her mother and his children. When her mother got pregnant, she went to the matchstick factory. After her mother's delivery, she stopped working in the factory and took care of her younger ones and did the entire house work. She was

the only one who had a connection with the outside village. She explained about her bus journey and her life in the factory to her neighbors who listened to her in amazement. There were also other girls like Maikkanni who had to work both inside and outside from their tender age while the boys were seen playing and spending their time leisurely. Even though women did work as hard as men, they were given wages way too less than what men got. “The two primary targets of Women’s Oppression are the sexual division of labour and the culture which rationalizes it” (Nisha Singh 32). The manipulative nature of men and the exploitation of women are presented in its utmost barbarity in the novel. The upper-caste men make the Dalit women toil in their fields, at the same time exploit them physically when they get a chance. The narrator’s cousin Mariamma was once molested by the landlord Kumarasami but in order to save his own skin, he hurried to the village and complained to the headman of the *Paraiya* community that he had seen Mariamma in an unexpected way with another man, Manikkam. “Whatever a man does, in the end the blame falls on the woman” (Bama 26).

So the *Paraiya* community called a meeting where the women were neither allowed to participate nor were they allowed to raise suggestions or opinions. “Do you women have any sense at all? What are you muttering about here, when we men are talking seriously? Go home all of you” (Bama 21). Mariamma gets severe punishment and becomes the scapegoat for the upper-caste man’s cruelty.

The issue that Bama tries to raise through such events is how ones’ minds are conditioned to unthinkingly follow certain stigmas created in a male-dominated society. While the men folk are biased and prejudiced on account of their caste, the female folk struggle to keep their integrity and dignity among people who doubly discriminate them – as a low class and as a woman. When the narrator asks *Paatti* about the unfair judgment of the community meeting, she says that from their ancestors’ time, it has been agreed that what men say is right. Dalit women especially the elders accept that they are subordinate to men. They think they know nothing about justice and scold the younger generation who questions gender discrimination.

Why can’t we be the same as boys? We aren’t allowed to talk loudly or laugh noisily; even when we sleep we can’t stretch out on our backs nor lie face down on our bellies. We always have to walk with our heads bowed down, gazing at our toes. You tell us all this rubbish and keep us under your control. Even when our stomachs are screaming with hunger, we mustn’t eat first. We are allowed to eat only after the men have finished and gone. What, *Paatti*, aren’t we also human beings? (Bama 29)

Paatti replies that the women are expected to eat their meals only after their husbands have. She narrates an incident where a lady was beaten severely by her husband even though she was carrying a child, only because she had eaten her food before the husband came. The narrator herself remembers that even when they played ‘mothers and fathers,’ they always had to serve the mud ‘rice’ to the boys first and the boys used to pull their hair saying ‘What sort of food is this, *di*, without salt or anything!’ (Bama 31). Bama, through such incidents tries to make the readers aware of the social constructions prevalent not only in a Dalit community but also across the world. While the boy child is taught to play with guns and vehicles the female child is trained

to suffer in the kitchen, to wait for the men folk to finish eating and to silently adhere to all their violent rebukes. What Bama tries to emphasise is that these events in one's life lead them to accept certain things as the norms without being able to even question them.

Another socially constructed taboo for the women is based on the issue of entertainment. Dalit women are not allowed to relax. If someone touches the women in the cinemas, there occurs a riot. In order to avoid that, men do not allow them to go to the cinemas. Nobody will touch a woman from other communities because they have caste-power and money power. If ever they go out, it is only to the church and even for that, they should try real hard. They have to face marginalisation even in the church. If men put on a play or something on a festive day, the women were never allowed to take part in it. The men themselves would dress up and act as women. There were women who could sing very beautifully but were not allowed to sing in a public space. Their artistic talents were suppressed deep beneath. The position of women is both pitiful and humiliating.

Readers comprehend through this novel how social institutions such as religion, marriage, education etc serve the purpose of bondage rather than liberation of which its primary aim is. In the fields, they have to escape from the molestation of upper-caste men, at church they must lick the shoes of the priests and be his slaves while he threatens them with the tales of God, Heaven, and Hell. When they reach their homes, before satisfying their hunger, they must submit themselves to their husbands' torment. They are expected to deliver babies continuously; that too in the home itself. They may die at child birth or soon after. Almost immediately, men marry a second wife. As for the birth control, the men will not do it, saying they will lose their strength.

The characters portrayed in the novel are not individuals rather they are types representing the fate of women- the Dalit women in all its reality and fidelity. The narrator, in *Sangati* brings out the cruelty of men by explaining the hardships of yet another woman called Thanyi. She was trod on, at the same time beaten up by her husband using his belt. He abused her in a vile and vulgar way. He cut her hair and tied it onto the doorpost and explained that it was to put down her pride. Seeing this, the narrator gets filled with various emotions: anger, excitement, fury, pride, resentment, hatred which are accurately representations of womanly solidarity.

In the village, at times some women will get possessed by '*peys*' or spirits. They dance vigorously, swaying their heads and cry aloud. When the narrator asks her *Paatti*, why the *pey* catches only women and not men, she replies that men know how to be brave in their hearts. It is women who are always fearful cowards. The narrator wonders how a man could remain fearless, while a woman is easily caught and becomes its prey. *Paatti* says, it is because the women get polluted every month that the *pey* could catch her easily. But the upper-caste women do not get possessed by *peys*. The narrator identifies that the reason behind the possession of *peys* is not cowardice or pollution. She says, from the moment the Dalit women wake up, they start their work in both homes and in fields. At homes, they are pestered by their husbands and children whereas in the fields they have to work like cattle along with the harassment of landlords. When they come back home, they have to prepare food and cannot sleep peacefully as they must give in to their husbands' pleasure. Even if the woman's body is groaning with pain, the husband is

only bothered with his own satisfaction. Women are overwhelmed and crushed by their own disgust, boredom, and exhaustion because of all this. The stronger ones somehow manage to survive all this. The ones who do not have the mental strength are totally depressed and they act as if they are possessed by *peys*.

Bama in this novel does not forget to represent the bold and contradictory type of women as well. Pakkiaraj, the husband of Raakkamma is a drunkard who hits his wife and abuses her in a vicious manner. But Raakkamma does not prostrate in front of him begging not to hit her. Instead she too calls him all the vile words and even lifts her sari in front of all. To these women, the only way to get escaped from their husbands' blows is to act in such a manner. The fight between husbands and wives is a common scene in the village. The narrator's *periyamma* (mother's elder sister) was beaten to death by her husband. Nobody will be able to avoid the beatings. "She is my wife, I can beat her or even kill her if I want" (Bama 10). Even if the woman is pregnant, she is beaten terribly and dragged on to the soil by pulling her hair only because she asked him to give her his wage.

Question of the nature of masculinity and the feminine are discussed to its highest degree in the novel. Men and women do hard work equally. When they return after their work, they go straight to the bazaar or *chavadi*, and come home only for their meal. But as for the women, from the moment they return home they start their household chores and go to bed late at night. The men continue drinking and beating their wives and all these are because, the narrator says, there is nowhere else to exert their male pride or their authority. All the subdued anger gets vented when they come home and beat up their wives to pulp. It is the fate of the women to get tormented both within the house and outside. The man's maleness and power take precedence. "A woman's body, mind, feelings, words, and deeds, and her entire life are all under his control and domination" (Bama 68). They have to bear the torment of the upper-caste masters in the fields, and at home they have to bear the violence of their husbands. Besides all this, upper-caste women show no pity to the Dalit women, but treat them with contempt.

The *Paraiya* community did not allow a second marriage when the first husband or wife was alive. The women had to suffer their husbands' atrocities as they had no other choice. If ever a girl came back to her own house, she was not welcomed whole-heartedly and in the community meeting, her father was asked to give her some slaps and to tell her that she must live with her husband. When the girl refused to go back, her husband would eventually turn up and beat her as though she were an animal and drag her home by her hair. The men cannot stand if a girl studies a little, writes a little or even dares to speak in a public place. Whatever she does or achieves, they give it no credit, rate it as low only because she is born a woman. "If a woman achieves something especially good, they will say, 'Look at her, *Appa*, she is like a man.' Even in this, they are only praising themselves" (Bama 109). Most of the women are uneducated and are unaware of their own rights. When it comes for the time of election, the leaders would pester them to vote for their party often offering them money. But more than half of them would not go to cast their votes. Even if they go, they do not know how to cast votes. When it comes to inter-caste marriages, the community is not bothered if boys marry from outside their caste. But if a girl marries out of caste, it will be unacceptable.

The narrator, unlike other girls in her community manages to get her education and even tries to get a job, but she says one of the major problems is trying to live alone as an unmarried Dalit woman. Everyone pesters her with thousands of questions. She even overhears someone muttering “Put a bridle through her nose and see if everything doesn’t sort itself out” (Bama 120). When they say nose-bridle, they mean marriage tali. They mean that women are like cattle that need taming. If she frankly reveals her caste, no one would rent her their house, and thus make it difficult for her, however much she is willing to pay. Besides all this, an unmarried Dalit woman faces another huge problem. People assume that she has known many men as a prostitute and gossip about her. The narrator says, people think that once a woman is married and has a tali round her neck, she is also signed, sealed, and delivered over to one man. Why shouldn’t a woman belong to no one at all but herself? She even thinks that God has made women for the convenience of men. Women have to make sure that men do not suffer discomfort, all their needs looked after and they must be conscious every second that men are the very centre of their lives.

The novel ends with the narrator’s exhortation toward Dalit women, to give up the belief that married life is a complete service to their men, not to suppress their anger and feelings even if their life is a hell, to bring up the girls giving awareness about these new ways from an early stage, to educate them and to give freedom to them. Then, there will come a day when men and women will live as one, with no difference between them, with equal rights.

‘*Sangati*’ means events, news, happenings and the book consists of several inter connected anecdotes. Through these narratives, Bama vividly portrayed the pathetic plight of Dalit women in *Paraiya* community. Within the community, the power lies in the hands of men. Hard labour and poor economic conditions lead to a culture of violence, and this is the theme that Bama projects through the book. She explains about the violent treatment of women by their fathers, husbands and brothers, and the violent domestic quarrels which are carried on publicly, where sometimes the women fight back. She explains about the psychological stresses and tensions of Dalit women which make them believe that they are being possessed by *peys*. *Sangati* deals with several generations of women: the older women belonging to the narrator’s grandmother Vellaiyamma *kizhavi* who accepts their subordination towards men, the narrator’s generation and the coming generation who questions the supremacy of men over women.

Dalit women suffer unimaginable oppression not only through caste but gender too. Three sets of people constantly exert influence and pressure on Dalit women. First -dominant caste men under whom Dalit women work as laborers and with whom they interact on a daily basis. Second, dominant caste women who are already conditioned by patriarchal ideology pressurize Dalit women into patriarchal ways of thinking and acting. Third, Dalit men, mainly Dalit women’s husbands and relatives exert their control over their women. Caste and gender-based power relations in Dalit women’s social contexts are mainly developed through violence. Patriarchy, practiced by all castes ensures that men exercise power over women and violence flows from male to female. Caste hierarchy on the other hand ensures that the dominant caste dominates the subjugated caste, and violence flows from downward, from the highest castes to the lowest castes or Dalits. Wherever Dalit women interact with dominant caste men, dominant caste women, and Dalit men, the threat of violence remains imminent. (Aloysius, 92)

Adding to the inter-caste tension and dominant caste violence against Dalits, another major violence against Dalit women is from their husbands, in-laws, and sometimes natal families. The most common domestic violence include physical assault, verbal abuse, marital rape, forced expulsion from home, neglect and desertion without any financial support. Bama presents Dalit women primarily as workers who join the workforce right from their childhood and continues toiling through their adolescence, womanhood, old age almost until their last breath. Their work goes unrecognised by the community and they are exploited at every turn of their lives. They are oppressed, ruled, and still being ruled by patriarchy, government, caste, and religion. Dalit women are forced to break all the strictures of society to simply live and exist. Bama's representation of Dalit women's life reflects their struggle for empowerment and realization of a dignified existence.

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