

SUFFERINGS OF THE MARGINALIZED AS MIRRORED IN BAMA'S *SANGATI* AND ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE*

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ABSTRACT

Black American writings and Dalit Literature are propagandist in nature because they are written to bring about social change and the experience is articulated in a collective form. Both are full of anger because of the torments of marginalized life that can not be expressed in sweet poetic stanzas. These marginalized people who suffer from many disabilities such as Blacks suffering from slavery, apartheid, racism, colonialism; Dalit suffering from untouchability, humiliation, oppression, casteism; proletariat suffering from joblessness, poverty and hunger; aborigine and indigenous people suffering from loss of nationality, the tribals suffering from dispossession, dislocation and loss of identity- all these subaltern groups are included in the wider context of marginalized writings. The conditions of women in the African American and Dalit communities are much worse as they are illtreated badly by the men of their community as well as by the men of the other communities. The article "Sufferings of the Marginalized as mirrored in Bama's *Sangati* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*" attempts to show how Dalit women and the Black African American women are marginalized and oppressed by other caste men/ white men and also by their own men.

Keywords: marginalized, apartheid, oppressed, casteism, dislocation

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. Black American writings and Dalit Literature are propagandist in nature because they are written to bring about social change and the experience is articulated in a collective form. Both are full of anger because of the torments of marginalized life that can not be expressed in sweet poetic stanzas. These marginalized people who suffer from many disabilities such as Blacks suffering from slavery, apartheid, racism, colonialism; Dalit suffering from untouchability, humiliation, oppression, casteism; proletariat suffering from joblessness, poverty and hunger; aborigine and indigenous people suffering from loss of nationality, the tribals suffering from dispossession, dislocation and loss of identity- all these subaltern groups are included in the wider context of marginalized writings. The article "Sufferings of the Marginalized as mirrored in Bama's *Sangati* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*" attempts to show how Dalit women and the Black African American women are marginalized and oppressed by other caste men/white men and also by their own men.

The Black literature, also called African American literature, is a literary work created by Americans of African descent or literary work written about the African experiences. In America, Blacks were deprived of all the opportunities and fundamental rights which would have been theirs as human beings. What they got from their new owners is the inhuman treatment and deprivation of human dignity. They were not only deprived from their African culture to pass it to their children but they were also not

given a chance to absorb the American culture. Education, laws and politics were denied to them. They were thrown to live in social and cultural limbo that eliminated their past and offered them neither present nor future.

Just like racism which is a prominent factor in dividing people in Western history, the caste system, a deep-rooted factor which is a shame for Indian culture, affects the socio-economic and socio-cultural systems of Indian society. The Dalits occupy the lowest position in Indian society. Dalit Literature, literature about the Dalits, the oppressed class under Indian caste system forms an important and distinct part of Indian Literature. Dalit Literature emerged into prominence and as a collective voice after 1960, starting with Marathi and soon appeared in Hindi, Kannada, Telugu and Tamil languages, through self-narratives, like poems, short stories and most importantly autobiographies known for their realism, and for its contribution to Dalit politics. It is primarily a literature of protest and a demand of the oppressed for social equality. It focuses on fundamental human rights and human values. Dalit writers are desirous to remove the social exploitation and caste inequalities. They wish to change the world. Through their writings, they are re-examining and redefining their place in Indian society.

Sharan Kumar Limbale observes certain differences in the treatment rendered towards both:

The plight of African Americans and Dalits can be compared in number of ways. While the African Americans were slaves, they could buy their freedom with money. Though Dalits were technically not slaves, they could not even pay to rent a house. The White masters were responsible for looking after the Black slave. Since untouchables were not slaves, the savarnas had no concern for them. Untouchables are societal slaves. The cause of the African slavery was economic. The cause of the Dalit's untouchability is social. African American can do any type of labor but their labor was not considered undignified, while dalits can perform the lowest type of the job but his labor is always termed 'undignified'. While

African American cannot hide the color of his skin, dalit cannot hide his caste.” (86)

The historical subjugation of people based on their race and caste assume a further paradigm of gender discrimination when the women struggle for identity and respect not only against the respective supremacists who have historically exploited them sexually but also against the men of their own groups who often fail to acknowledge their rights and contributions in the struggle against oppression. Moreover, economic issues have also informed the struggles of underprivileged women and have divided feminists of colour from white feminists in USA and Dalit feminists from upper caste and urban feminists in India. Angela Davis, Alice Walker, Bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldua and Cherrie Moraga, among others, have discussed the experience and need for organization among women of color. In India, Dalit feminism emerged with the writers like Anna Bhai Sathe and some other writers.

Dalit writers in the 1980s make use of literature to express their sufferings, cultural exploitation and also their political positioning. The self-expressive writings by Bama, especially her novels *Karukku* (1992) and *Sangati* (1994) in Tamil unraveled the miseries of a Dalit woman. Through the novel *Sangati*, Bama took a bold step in announcing the world, the silent sufferings and unheard agonies endured by the Dalit women in Tamil Nadu. *Sangati*, originally written in Tamil in 1994, was translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom into English. The whole narrative is divided into twelve chapters. 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 paraiya community. It deals with several generation of women: the older woman belongs to the narrator’s grandmother’s generation Velliamma Kizhavi’s generation, and downward generation belongs to the narrator, and the generation coming after as she grows up. In the process of narrating the incidents, Bama discusses the many atrocities committed against girls and women in her community.

Like all the African American novelists, Alice Walker's works are praised for her insightful and riveting portrait of black life in particular, the experience of black women in a sexist and racist society. A theme throughout Walker's work is the preservation of black culture, and her women characters forge important links to maintain continuity in both personal relationships and communities. The Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Color Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker examines in the novel the estrangement and violence that have marked relationships between her black men and women. The novel is epistolary in nature and there are 90 letters covering the story of two sisters Celie and Nettie through their letters to each other and to God. The novel exposes the gender bias and the racial and sexual oppression as powerful themes. It is a historical novel drawn upon Walker's great-grandmother's life, who was raped and impregnated at the age of eleven by her master. She gave to the story of her great-grandmother a happy ending. Celie is modeled after Walker's great grandmother.

Bama in *Sangati*, realistically portrays the physical violence like lynching, whipping and canning that the Dalit women face. She writes of the violent treatment of women by fathers, husbands and brothers, and the violent dominant quarrels which are carried on publicly, where women rarely fight back. Bama's grandmother tells her of her aunt's death, "I reared a parrot and then handed it over to be mauled by a cat. Your *Periappan* actually beat her to death." (10) In Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, a man whom Celie, the central character calls 'Pa' gets tired of waiting for sex from her own mother, starts raping Celie. As a result of repeated rapes by 'Pa', she gets pregnant and as a child of fourteen years, she is unable to understand what is happening to her. She expresses her feeling, "And now I feel sick every time I be the one to cook. My mama she fuss at me an look at me." (3) As a result of repeated rapes, Celie delivers two children whom she guesses, were sold to some family by Pa. She becomes sterile not only sexually but also emotionally. After the death of her mother, she was forced to assume her duties. As a child, she endures mental, physical, sexual and emotional assaults inflicted upon her by Pa. She says, "He took my other little baby, a boy this time.

But I don't think he kilt it. I think he sold it to a man an his wife over Monticello.” (5)
Thus women in both the Dalit and African American communities suffer mentally and physically by their own family men.

In *Sangati*, Dalit women work hard as labourers. Besides preparing food for the large family, the Dalit women workers graze in the field with the cattle. Ultimately, the tired women often may reject sex to their boozed men. As a result, they were severely beaten by their husbands. They are also exposed to sexual harassments by the upper caste men. Incidents such as one that happened to Mariamma could leave one broken and affected for life. Mariamma, Bama's cousin, one day after having collected firewood from the forest encounters the landlord Kumarasami Ayya who tried to take advantage of the girl sexually. In a fear that his own image would be tarnished, Kumarasami Ayya went and complained to the headman of the paraiya community that he had seen Mariamma and Manikkam together in the fields “behaving in a very dirty way” (20). A meeting was called by the head of the paraiya community and both were summoned. All the village women knew that the story was false for they had seen the two going back home at different times. But in the meeting the women were not allowed to speak. Mariamma was fined two hundred rupees and Manikkam was fined a hundred. The father of Mariamma was angry and he started hitting her as hard as he could. The naattaamai in the trial made a verdict by saying: “It is you female chicks who ought to be humble and modest. A man may do a hundred things and still get away with it. You girls should consider what you are left with, in your bellies” (26). In *The Color Purple* too though Celie works hard, she is constantly illtreated by her ‘Pa’, the step father. Alphonse, her step father has brought home a new wife, though his marriage does not end the physical and sexual abuse Celie endures. Alphonse beats Celie for winking at a boy in church, though she may have just had something stuck in her eye. Later, he beats her again for dressing “trampy”. The only living person who provides Celie with friendship and comfort is her sister Nettie. Women in both the Dalit and African American communities endure physical and mental pain in matters to which they are not at all involved.

Of the many women who live in the paraiya street, different women have different reasons to suffer. Bama narrates these aspects. On her way back home from school, she found a Dalit woman called Thaayi weeping. Thaayi of West street is a good-looking and a light-skinned woman. Her husband, to keep her in control almost beats her to death. Bama writes, “Thaayi’s husband was beating her up again and again with the belt from his waist. She didn’t even have a chattai on. Everywhere the strap fell on her light skin, there were bright red weals” (42). Then there is Raakkamma from Kuppacchipatti whose regular fights with her husband is different from Thaayi. If Thaayi has resigned to her fate, Raakkamma is not ready to do so. She does not let off her husband easily when beaten up. She uses abusive and obscene language with equal vindictiveness. Lifting her sari when everyone starts calling her shameless, she shouts at all of them and says, “Why don’t you lot just go off and mind your business? It is I who am beaten to death everyday. If I hadn’t shamed him like this, he would surely have split my skull in two, the horrible man”(62). The narrator after pondering over the incident says that perhaps using uncouth language was Raakkamma’s only means of escape.

In Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, Mr. _____, a man to whom Celie refers to has shown interest in marrying Nettie. The man is recently widowed because his first wife was murdered by her lover. Alphonso refuses to hand Nettie over to Mr. _____, stating that she is far too young and inexperienced to marry a man with children. Alphonso claims that though Celie is ugly, a liar, and “spoiled twice,” she is older and hardworking and owns her own cow, which she could bring into the marriage. Mr. _____ eventually accepts the offer, and takes Celie into a difficult and joyless married life. For a time, Celie is more a slave to her husband than she is a wife. Celie spends her wedding day bandaging a wound from a rock Mr. _____’s son throws at her.

On the other hand, Nettie runs away from Alphonso and takes refuge at Celie’s house. Mr. _____ appreciates Nettie’s beauty in front of Celie and so she feels very sad. Celie understands Mr. _____’s evil thought upon Nettie. Mr. _____ still desires Nettie, and when he advances, she flees for her own safety. Later, Celie sends Nettie to meet Samuel, a

missionary man, who turns out to be the person to whom Pa had given Celie's children, Adam and Olivia, away. Celie's life with Mr. ____ remains to be same as it was with Pa. She has to take care of his four children from the previous marriage. In one of her letters, Mr. ____'s two sisters, namely Carrie and Kate come to meet Celie. They gossip condescendingly to Celie about Albert's love affair with Shug and about how they thought Annie Julia was a bad housekeeper. Kate visits the house again by herself and insists that Celie be bought new clothes. Kate takes Celie clothes shopping herself, marking the first attempt to make Celie comfortable in Albert's home. Despite Kate's advice, Celie bears the inhuman behavior of her husband because she is unaware of any other form of behavior and she does not have any other purpose in her life and she has lost the sense of her individuality. The introduction of Kate, a bold female into the house marks the beginning of change away from male dominance; it signals very clearly that Albert will have to fight to maintain his role.

Mr. ____ also ill treats Celie by beating and as a result she turns herself to "wood" with no emotions, feelings whatsoever. She reveals her bad condition:

He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don't never hardly beat them.
He say, Celie, git the belt. The children be outside the room peeking
through the cracks. It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to
myself, Celie, you a tree. (23)

Celie's life continues to be miserable. She is beaten, abused, exploited and humiliated by Mr _____. Mr. _____ feels that the only way to keep a woman in her place is to beat her, and he beats Celie very often. Mr. _____ does not love Celie. He simply wanted a wife because he needed someone to take care of him and his wild children. Through all these traumatizing events, Celie has lost respect for herself and forgets how to love. Her life is full of darkness without a single trace of light. Women in the Dalit and African American communities attain endless torture from their husbands. The husbands feel that the only way to keep their wife under their control is to beat them severely. But there are

some bold women like Raakkamma from Kuppacchipatti in *Sangati* and Kate in *The Color Purple* fight for a change from the male dominance.

African American and Dalit societies and their literatures are very much alike. The reason for this resemblance is that the emotional worlds of the two societies are similar. There are commonalities in their pain, their rebellion, their hopes and desires. Though their languages are different, the state of mind and the emotions expressed through these literatures are parallel. Besides, the histories of these societies, literatures and movements share a common direction. Both the literatures are searching for self-identity. The experiences narrated in both literatures are based on inequality and have been drawn from social life. The article “Sufferings of the Marginalized as mirrored in Bama’s *Sangati* and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*” has thus attempted to show how Dalit women and the Black African American women are oppressed and marginalized by other caste men/ white men and also by their own men. Women fight against odds for their survival and for the survival of their families. In *Sangati*, Bama takes the readers into the elemental, impoverished and most often violent world of the Dalit women. Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* explores the female African American experiences through the life and the struggles of its narrator, Celie.

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