

## Dalit Feminism: Reading Bama's *Sangati*

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### Abstract

*Sangati* an autobiographical work by the well-known Dalit writer, Bama deals with gender bias faced by Dalit women right from their childhood. Girl children are always considered inferior and taken less care. The narrator of this book is a young girl in the early chapters grows pensive due to the myriad events happening around her. As she grows into a young woman, she stresses on the need for change and is calling out for action against atrocities that happen to the girls and women in her community. Undesirable patriarchal distinctions are initially inculcated in girl children within the first ten years of their lives. Gender games act as effective tools to achieve this goal. Bama as a young girl of twelve learns that boys have different roles to play than girls which are perpetuated in the form of gender games that they are made to play as children. The current paper titled as Dalit Feminism: Reading Bama's *Sangati* is a critical enquiry which focus on the gender inequality which has been portrayed in the work.

**Keywords:** Gender inequality, Dalit feminism, patriarchy

*Sangati* deals with gender bias faced by Dalit women right from their childhood. Girl children are always considered inferior and taken less care. The narrator of this book is a young girl in the early chapters grows pensive due to the myriad events happening around her. As she grows into a young woman, she stresses on the need for change and is calling out for action against atrocities that happen to the girls and women in her community. Invidious patriarchal distinctions are initially inculcated in girl children within the first ten years of their lives. Gender games act as effective tools to achieve this goal. Bama as a young girl of twelve learns that boys have different roles to play than

girls which are perpetuated in the form of gender games that they are made to play as children. While games like “kabadi” and “marbles” are meant for boys, girls play at cooking, getting married and other domestic matters. It can evidently seen in the following section in Bama’s work:

Even when we played “mothers” and “fathers”, we always had to serve the mud “rice” to the boys first. They used to pull us by the hair and hit us says, what sort of food is this, without salt or anything! In those days we used to accept those pretence blows, and think it was all good fun. Nowadays, for many of the girls those have become real blows and their entire lines are hell.(31)

Dalit community elders consider boys as permanent members in a family because they are supposed to take care of their parents. On the other hand, female children are transient members who are to be transplanted to another family and so have no role to play in their families. This causes gender prejudices even in the minds of parents.

Dalit girl children are hardly enjoying their childhood. They have little time to play as they have 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 Maikkani turn 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. Bama describes the life style of Dalit girl children as follows:

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 bow down, gazing at our toes even when our stomachs are screaming with hunger, we mustn’t eat first. We are allowed to eat only after the men in the family have finished and gone what Patti aren’t we also human beings? .(29)

Bama realistically portrays the physical violence like lynching, whipping and canning that Dalit women suffers by the male members of the family like fathers, brothers and husbands. She explores the psychological stress and strains of them. Bama cleverly ropes in the prevailing subordinate condition of women through the ages as a girl, woman, a bread winner for the family and her place in the church. All of these proved claustrophobic to the women folk of the Dalit community. The two stories that Bama reminds is that of Mariamma and Thayi whose marital disharmonies are revealed in an attempt to stereotype the Dalit predicament. They are ill-treated and beaten up daily by their husbands. Although both the husband and wife came after a hard day's work in the field, the husband went straight to the Chavadi to while away their time, coming home only for the meal. But as for the wife they return home wash vessels, clean the house, collect water, gather firewood, go to the shops to buy rice for cooking and other provision, feed the husband and children before they sleep, eat what is left over and go to bed. "Even they lay down their bodies wracked with pain, they are not allowed to sleep, whether she dies or survived, she had to give pleasure and enjoyment to her husband" (59).

In *Sangati*, Bama subverts mainstream legends and asks relevant questions pertaining to her culture. The story of Thiruvallvar, the great Tamil poet's wife Vasuki, perceived as the epitome of chastity and devotion to husband is mentioned to illustrate the subordinate position of women in marriage. The story she feels is a reminder that wives ate after feeding their husbands even during Thiruvalluvar's time. Bama offers an alternate folk song about Ananatamma of West Street, who was beaten up for eating crab curry before serving her husband:

o crab, crab my pretty little crab, who wandered through all the fields I  
Planted I pulled off your claws and put you on a pot, I gave the pot a hot  
and set it down. I waited and waited for him to come home, And began  
eating as came through the door. He came to hit me the hungry brute ,  
He pounced at me to kill me.(30)

The above mentioned lines remind the current position of Dalit women even in the twentieth century. The Dalit women are often considered as easy preys to the men because of their repressed state. Over worked and exploited in the family these women give vent to their mental agony in their spirit- possessed state.

Veliamma's stories about the spirits that haunted Dalit women make Bama conclude that these stories are concocted to push women to subservient position. Overworked and exploited both in the family and in society, these women give vent to their mental agony in their spirit-possessed state. In her attempt to write a "her story" Bama makes interesting references to food enjoyed by her people. Traditionally in most homes the kitchen is a limited space designated for women. But over the years women have transformed this space into an area of discourse that gives them a semblance of power. In *Sangati*, Shanmuga Kizhavi's mouth watering description of ragikuzh eating is thought provoking. She describes it as "nectar from heaven" (37). Every sunday, the narrator's patti made a special kuzhambu with cow's intestine which went well with ragi kali. There she also mentioned Patti's hot kuzhambu with dried fish. In *Karukku*, Bama brings to light the gugapusai at Chinnamalai, the highlight of the festival is slaughter of rooster, goat or pig. There she had immense joy in cooking the food and feasting the delicacy. By subverting simple acts of cooking, feeding and sharing food, Bama brings the novel alive before the reader's mind. Kanchalliah in his thought provoking work *Why I am Not a Hindu*, mentions that certain kinds of rich food like ghee and milk were seldom available for the economically downtrodden Dalits in the rural areas. But Bama celebrates the food that is cooked and served by the womenfolk in her community. There is great joy in discovering other more healthy and nutritious options. The food metaphor helps in the narrating of her stories earlier neglected or misrepresented in mainstream writing.

Bama realizes that the Dalit women are constantly under menace and they are not safe in their work place also. They are constantly under the threat of sexual harassments in the field of work Bama asks her women: "We must be strong. We must show by our own resolute lives that we believe ardently in our independence... just as we work hard

so long as there is strength in our bodies, so too, must we strengthen our hearts and minds in order to survive” (59).

The men who belong to the Dalit, often undergo dog’s treatment in the hands of the upper caste men who are the landlords. In such circumstances these men show off their male pride and authority, their suppressed anger that is vented out on their wives who are beaten to pulp by these men. Ultimately the women folk who are tormented both within and without their homes. Playing the spokesperson for the women of her community, Bama states that it is on her to speak out the truth that though all women are slaves to men, her women are the worst sufferers.

*Sangati* both mirror up the state of depression and also reveals the vigor, courage and the resilience of Dalit women even in the midst of all misery. In the end of this novel, the Dalit women celebrate their newly found identity and inner strength. The narrator of this novel finally becomes free from clutches of her limitations. She works and lives by herself. Bama realizes that it is up to the Dalit women to take their lives into their own hands. She makes an appeal for a change and betterment of the Dalit women’s life in various aspects which includes sex and gender discrimination, equal treatment in the workplace, right to education etc. That is why Bama depicted the various stages of Dalit women.

By discussing the narratives of many women from the Dalit community Bama projects the rural Dalit woman’s identity. Though the struggle is much owing to the double oppression of caste and gender, we notice that their strength is also revealed. The women stand by each other to help each other when there is injustice meted out not only in society but in family circles as well. Bama doesn’t shy away from describing violent domestic or street quarrels. In *Sangati* we hear the voices of many women, some in pain, some in anger, some in frustration and some out of courage. Sometimes the language is full of expletive with sexual undertones. Bama suggests that it is the sharp tongue of a woman that can protect her against her oppressors. The characters often break in to a song or a chant when the situation demands and there is a song for every occasion.. But what is thought provoking is Bama’s sketching a positive identity for the

Dalit woman. An alternate her story as opposed to the mainstream is drawn with vivid descriptions of a marriage ceremony, attaining of puberty ceremony, joy of togetherness, singing songs, cooking and sharing food. In most rural homes the Dalit woman is an earning member, widow re-marriages are possible and tali or the sacred thread worn as a chain during the marriage is not this binding symbol as in other communities. It is interesting that the Dalit woman cannot be suppressed in spite of caste, gender oppression.

The text of *Sangati* as such deals with the variegated experiences and stories of the Dalit women strung together, thus breaking the normative literary narrative of a single plot or story. It falls closer to the narrative pattern of ethnographic/anthropological studies wherein testimonials of the concerned peoples form the manner and method of constructing experiences and personal narratives which actually serve to build their history as a community or ethnic group.

As a true feminist, Bama resists all kinds of oppression on Dalit women. The author wants to break all the barriers of social and cultural system and depicts her problems as a Dalit and as a woman. The writer is further oppressed by being a Dalit Christian. Hence, she is oppressed by caste, gender and religion. It is a painful journey with open ending story, and many questions are left as unanswered. The writer mainly concentrates on religion and education, and gives expression to her bitter experiences. It is the depiction of a woman's journey from weakness to strength.

Experiences of Bama Faustina as a Dalit woman and her thoughts about the existent issues of women in her community that comprise of the problems of education of girls, wife or daughter's beating, sexual abuse and dishonour, woman workforce and their daily pays, constrained activities, the liability of maternity and parentage etc. All create her feminist insight while simultaneously her work appears emphasizing the hardiness, strong enthusiasm and untiring life-force of Dalit women to surpass all the obstacles and outlive through "solidarity in the most un-patriarchal condition without male protection and man's earning". (Sailpar: 479) This study is a modest attempt to trigger the literature students and scholars who like to study and research combining interdisciplinary issues hence it covers several disciplines like sociology, psychology, gender studies, and literature etc.

With humanistic approach it will prove valuable in spreading awareness about Dalit women's sufferings and their humiliation with frequent fear of being abused what they have to face due to orthodox mindset in Asian countries like India. Hopefully, in future, more humanitarians and organizations would come ahead to support Dalit women in their fights to make their voices loud enough for the human rights of equality and stand by for altering folks' mentality in the societies not to suppress them further.

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