

DALIT WOMEN'S SUBJECTIVITY IN BAMA'S SANGATI: EVENTS

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Abstract

Literatures on Caste atrocities, discrimination and counter cultural practices that assert and challenge hegemonic power structures is the fundamental nature of Dalit Writings. The rise of educated men and women from marginalized communities, particularly from communities that were rendered untouchables, in the realm of literary writing provided a space for discussions and deliberations on caste and the various social evils perpetrated due to the four-legged scorpion (caste). The reason for the marginal communities continued downtrodden state is the absence of material possessions that act as powerful tools to emancipation and empowerment. This paper proposes to explore the various material possessions that remain as a far distant dream for Dalit women and analyses Bama's Sangati: Events that portrays the various positions of Dalit women who live as subservient subjects of caste and patriarchy but eventually voice their angst.

Keywords: *caste, discrimination, gender, sangati, dalit women*

Introduction

History has always been written from the perspective of the hegemonic, powerful communities and people groups. The powerful hegemonic forces have a stronghold on various tools that provide power as a fundamental factor that determine who is greater than less or powerful or powerless others. Power structures have operated at various social milieus in various ways – through identities that stem from people's gender, religion, race, caste, creed, ethnicity and the subsets of the various identities. In the Indian context all the above-mentioned identities and several other identities that don't feature such as sexuality and alternative gender normative play a crucial role in who dictates terms to the 'Other(s)'.

Until early 2000s, caste was an elusive idea/ theme in Indian classrooms especially in the context of the English Departments across the country. Ramnarayan Rawat and Satyanarayana in the book titled *Dalit Studies* expound the context how Dalit Studies as a discourse in English classrooms became a reality, thanks to the rise of Dalit intellectuals into academia after their education. (ix) Yet another significant reason for the introduction of Dalit Studies in English classrooms is translation of various Dalit literary works into English. The contributions of Lakshmi Holstrom, Alok Mukherjee, Gail Omvedt, Arunava Sinha, GJV Prasad, Jerry Pinto, Jayashree Kalathil, P Sivakami significantly helped Dalit Writings to reach the global audience. It is noteworthy at this juncture to identify a Dalit

writer herself translated her work from Tamil to English, *The Grip of Change* by P. Sivakami. In an article published by The Himalayan Writing Retreat titled 51 Top Book Translators of Indian languages detail the various translators whose translations have stupendous welcome in the international readership. (np.)

Dalit Writings sprout from Marathi, an offshoot of the Dalit Social and Literary Movement – the Dalit Panthers in the late 1960s. A group of educated Dalit writers began writing their personal and community experiences from caste oppressions and discriminations perpetrated on them by caste Hindus in general and patriarchy in particular. Dalit women were the worst affected by caste practices and they were threefold oppressed – on the basis of their low caste birth, depravity in class and gender (the second and so-called inferior sex). This powerful writing practice permeated far and wide into various parts of the country and experiential expressions from various languages strengthened this body of writing on caste, that merges with the umbrella academic discourse – Dalit literature. (Dangle xi - xiii)

The birth centenary celebration of Dr B. R. Ambedkar (1992), the aftermath of the Mandal Commission and the caste politics deeply ingrained in the Dravidian parties in Tamilnadu and Pondicherry were reasons for the Dalits to digress from such seclusion and subtle casteism. The Dalit Panthers party emerged as a strong force and realised the need to voice the concerns of the marginalised. A host of writers emerged in the literary scene at the same time. Poomani, Imayam, K. A. Gunasekaran, Raj Gauthaman, Azhagiya Periyavan, Ravikumar was some of the writers who realised the power of writing and contributed immensely with their life writings. Educated Dalit women too joined the foray and contributed tremendously. Bama, P. Sivakami and Mu. Jeeva are three writers who contributed during the initial phase (from the 1990s). Almost all the works of these writers are published and are translated to various languages including English. This paper is an analysis of one of the pioneering literary texts written by the first Dalit woman writer from Tamil – Bama's *Sangati*.

The Oeuvre of Bama

Bama was born in 1958, into a Tamil Catholic Christian family and named as Bama Faustina Soosairaj – her Christen name. She is a leading Dalit feminist in the Tamil cicle who dawns the role of a writer and a devout teacher. Her seminal autobiographical novel *Karukku* (1992), chronicles the joys and sorrows experienced by Dalit Christian women in Tamil Nadu. This shocking life narrative elevated her to fame. She also wrote two more novels, *Sangati* (1994) and *Vanmam* (2002) along with two collections of short stories: *Kusumbukkaran* (1996) and *Oru Tattvum Erumaiyum* (2003). She is also the author of twenty more short stories. One of her short stories *Muzhagapodi: Red Chilly Powder* has been adapted and performed as a play. Most of her literary works are meritorious and translated into other Indian languages apart from English.

Snippet of Bama's *Sangati*: Events

Sangati: Events, the second novel of Bama is a anecdote of several generations of women. The elder women are the narrators' grandmothers' generation, *Velliamma Kizhavi's* generation and the later generation. A Dalit woman suffers in three ways – being a woman (gender), being oppressed class wise due to the poverty-stricken condition – physical and labour exploitation in the workspaces (class) and abuse from their own men – father, husband and son (Patriarchal). Bama's novels in general and *Sangati* in particular are unique in their narrative style and exhibit Dalit feminist perspectives. It is the narrative of an individual and the whole community of Dalit women. Stories of individual women and a series of anecdotes and memories that showcase the various events that happen in the life of women belonging to the Paraiyar community in Tamil Nādu. The women presented in *Sangati* are daily wage labourers and they earn less than men do, despite working for equal hours and equally rigorous labour. The men spend their money on their personal selves and primarily on drinking while women bear the financial burden of managing the family. They face sexual harassment and abuse at home and in their work places. One of the stand out narrative is the anecdotes of *Marriamma* who tells a series of sexual assaults faced by her and women from her community women. She also

voices the concern of their inability to stand up against such heinous and torturous atrocities. Some of the realistic physical violence faced by Dalit women in the novel are: lynching, whipping and canning by fathers, husbands and brothers. A total of thirty-five characters feature in the novel.

Material Possessions and Dalit Women's Subjectivity

Dalit men as portrayed in Bama's *Sangati* spend money earned without any responsibility. The onus was on Dalit women to work and at the same time responsibly discharge family responsibilities. *Sangati* is an account of Dalit women's constant struggle against male dominance and lack of material possessions. *Sangati* is the experience of the self (the writer-narrator) as well as the women of her community. In the Indian caste hierarchy, the Dalits (a name coined by Dr B R Ambedkar were called using various derogatory names such as untouchables, *avaranas*, *chandalas*, *Harijans* (Gandhi) and the like. Dalit is a political term that is a denial of caste hierarchy and envisions a resistance and retaliation against oppression and oppressors. Some of the spaces where Dalit women undergo discrimination are: the Dalit woman's own house – physical abuse of father and brother; while playing games - the designated games that are exclusive to girls; daily wages in the work spaces - lesser than Dalit men; choosing life partner - they cannot fall in love or choose their own husband; at the husband's house - in-laws and the subservient position given between the spouses; extra-marital affair - do not have a choice to the sexual advances of the upper caste men; divorcing an abusive husband - she is expected to put up with the torture for the sake of the children and the constant vigil of upper caste men; community panchayat gatherings - she has no voice nor can she talk or express her concerns or opinions. Ranjana Singh in her article "Dalit Women Identity in Bama's *Sangati*" argues that,

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 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. (2)

Apart from the double oppression mentioned in the above quote, there is a third layer of oppression which goes unnoticed always, the lower-class status that Dalit women much like Dalit men belong to in the economic realm. Smita Patel in her essay "Revitalising Dalit Feminism" in the book *Dalit Feminist Theory: A Reader* edited by Sunaina Arya and Aakash Singh Rathore opines:

Dalits have been victimised through the structural hierarchy of caste that perpetuates the ethos of inequality and maintains the segregation of power. Dalits are oppressed, exploited and discriminated against, and are being methodically erased through graded inequality at every level. So, there is hardly any space for Dalit women in either the public or the private sphere. Subjugation of Dalit women persists through the obnoxious linkages of caste, gender and class. (214)

Their low wages push them into perennial drudgery and their economic instability pushes them to become victims of patriarchy and sexual exploitation. Bama's *Sangati*, translated to English by Lakshmi Holstrom, a novel in twelve chapters provides a picturesque portrayal of the milieu the Dalit women belong, a space marred with slur and ridicule. Several anecdotes and memories from the writer's experience along with her own individual experiences depict the realistic situation in the lives of very many women from the Paraya community in Tamil Nādu. The narrator brings out a plethora of day-to-day happenings of the women who undergo abuse, torture and brutality. In the initial part of the novel Bama reveals the wealth of stories loaded within. She states:

My mind is crowded with many anecdotes: stories not only about the sorrows and tears of Dalit women, but also about their lively and rebellious culture, passion about life with vitality, truth, enjoyment and about their hard labour. I wanted to shout out these stories." (9)

The daily wages of women are lesser than men and the scenario is the same till date. Dalit women in the yesteryears were paid far too less than the labour they carry out. The workload for women is just the same as

men. The women in *Sangati* earn less than men, in spite of working the same duration that men work for. They meticulously manage the family and act as the breadwinners. They are constant victims of sexual harassment and physical abuse in the fields they work by ruthless upper caste men whose caste distinction gives them the upper hand to exploit them. In such a scenario, the caste lowliness given to the Dalit women by the society or their untouchability that was contemptuous to caste Hindu men did not come in their way of appeasing their sexual gratification.

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. *Sangati* enumerates the experience of working within an erogenous and appraised society and the series of several interconnected anecdotes, experiences, news and events." (ii) One of the core ideas conveyed by Bama in this novel is, a Dalit in India remains a Dalit no matter they remain within the fold of Hinduism or even after conversion. The plight of converted Dalit women is worse. Among the various sub castes such as Parayars, Pallars, Koravas and Arunthathiyar or Chakkiliyar – the Parayars are predominantly the community with the largest Christian converts – both into Catholicism and to Protestantism. This was largely during the British era that provided converted Dalits with material benefits apart from spiritual upliftment. They lost their Scheduled Caste status due to conversion but their social standing remains the same. Bama critiques this in the below passage:

Everywhere you look, you see blows and beatings, shame and humiliation... Became we have not been to school or learnt anything, we go about like slaves all our lives, from the day we are born till the day we die, As if we are blind, even though we have eyes. (66)

Patriarchal society has always been biased towards girls and women. This stance is a perception inculcated in the minds of girls at a tender age. Girls from the Dalit community face the same experience. They are never allowed to play with friends. They have the burden of responsibility from a young age – to take care of their younger siblings. This is captured in the narrative that addresses the longing of Maikanni to play with her friends

but was unable to do so because she was given the responsibility of taking care of her baby brother. (70) The girls have their plight to share and the grown-up women have worse narratives to share. The leisure times that the Dalit women get also goes in a sort of recounting the innumerable everyday sufferings as Dalit women. Even their casual conversations and discussions revolve around sharing their everyday experiences – that ends up as a venting of their frustrations and these expressions stems from their anger or pain. Dalit women do not shy away from using cuss words and harsh expletives. They are also filled with double entendre. Bama sums up their never-ending troubles due to the continued cruelties they suffer at the hands of men (both caste Hindus and Dalit men) and there is a great outburst that is captured in the passage below:

Everywhere you look, you see blows and beatings, shame and humiliation.... Because we have not been to school or learnt anything, we go about like slaves all our lives, from the day we are born till the day we die, as if we are blind, even though we have eyes. (118)

This pitiable condition of Dalit women is one of agony and Bama exposes the harsh realities of Dalit women with a lot of concern. They appear to be lesser humans who cannot escape this inhuman and arrogant treatment at the hands of patriarchy. This novel is a series of anecdotes and experiences of various Dalit women subjectivities. All women irrespective of their age face the trauma of caste and gender discrimination – a nexus that continues to be nightmarish. Bama, through this novel urges the need for a positive change in the Dalit women's social identity, the rigid sexual status, and gender-neutral stability in spaces such as work, school and places of worship.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Bama's novel *Sangati: Events* serves as a poignant and powerful portrayal of the multifaceted oppression experienced by Dalit women in Tamil Nadu, India. Through her narrative, Bama sheds light on the intricate web of discrimination these women endure, encompassing not only their Dalit identity but also the pervasive influence of gender and class hierarchies. Her work underscores the double and, at times, triple

oppression faced by Dalit women, making them doubly marginalized within a society deeply entrenched in caste-based prejudices and patriarchal norms. The novel's narratives, anecdotes, and personal experiences vividly illustrate the economic, social, and cultural challenges that Dalit women confront daily. Bama's writing reveals the harsh reality of their lives, where they toil for meager wages, endure sexual harassment, and face physical abuse, all while shouldering the responsibilities of their families. The narrative also underscores the disheartening reality that Dalit women remain oppressed even after conversion to Christianity, as they lose their Scheduled Caste status without experiencing a significant change in their social status. Furthermore, Bama's work emphasizes the urgent need for change in the social identity and gender roles imposed upon Dalit women. It calls for a transformation that recognizes their agency, equality, and dignity within various spheres of life, including work, education, and religious spaces. In essence, *Sangati: Events* serves as a compelling literary testament to the resilience and enduring spirit of Dalit women, while challenging the oppressive structures that continue to subjugate them.

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