

A Rigor Anecdote of Tamil Dalit Woman: A Study of Bama's *Sangati*

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Abstract

India has produced many Dalit writers, and Bama stands at the forefront of Dalit literature after publishing her debut touchstone novel *Karruku*. Later she published yet another significant work *Sangati* which is also known as a strong Dalit feminine narrative in Tamilnadu. It projects the Dalit women's oppression during the 1960s in Tamilnadu; it also reveals the individual memories of Dalit women and deals with several generations of Dalit women. *Sangati* in which Bama unveils caste and gender bias faced by the Dalits right from their childhood, discloses the brutal atrocities that happened to children and women in her community, as she pinpoints the double oppression of Dalit women. Hence, this present paper is an attempt to scrutinize the hardships, sufferings, and pain faced by Dalit women right from their childhood, Besides, it also inspects Dalit marginalization, isolation, and dreadful conditions, particularly the tragic conditions of Dalit women in India. The paper investigates how Dalit and Dalit women are exploited in the name of caste.

Keywords: Bama, *Sangati*, Dalit Woman, Double Oppression, Gender-bias, Caste, Marginalization and Exploitation.

Introduction

The term *Dalit* comes from Sanskrit language that has various meanings: broken, scattered and so on. In India they have been given several names. For instance, M.K. Gandhi called them Harijans (Children of God), and the Indian Constitution calls them Scheduled Castes. In the Vedas they were named as Sandalan, Panjamar, etc. These people are called collectively as Dalits. Moreover, they are called as Chura in Punjab, Bhangi in North India, Mahar in Marathi in Central India, Mala in Telugu, Paraiyan, Chakkiliyar in Tamilnadu and

Pulayan in Malayalam. These names came under one umbrella Dalit, which reveals the hardships of their condition of life. The term is also a kind of expression of Dalit's identity.

The picture above describes the Hindu caste system in which the Dalits have been placed out of the system and they are called outcastes.

Bama

Dalits themselves write about their life experience and express their own feelings and pains. Dalit literature depicts anti-caste struggles, agitation for reserved places in the interests of social justice and political protests for economic equality.

Being one of the renowned female Dalit writers Bama has defined Dalit literature in which she says:

It is the literature of oppressed people, telling about their pains, agonies, disappointments, defeats, humiliations, oppressions and depressions. It also speaks about their vibrant culture, dreams, values, convictions and their struggle for annihilation of caste in order to build a casteless society. It reveals their resistant and rebellious character, their strength and stamina to live amidst all odds and their resilient nature to love life and live it happily. It brings out their inborn tendency to celebrate life and to fight against the caste ridden society by breaking through this inhuman system without breaking themselves. It liberates them and gives them their identity. It heals them and strengthens them to fight for their rights. (Bama 2)

Bama as a Tamil Dalit Writer and Her Writings

Bama is a distinguished Tamil Dalit writer; her works primarily focus on the suffering of the Dalit people in India, Tamilnadu in particular. She was born in a Tamil Dailt Christian family and experienced discrimination based on her caste identity. This drew her into the literary field. She believed that she could help bring the awareness to people, for which Bama contributed through literature. Her works mainly focus on freedom, social justice and Dalit identity. Being a Dalit woman, she is against patriarchy, caste and religion and questioned the position of women in our patriarchal society. Her *Karukku* (1992) is considered as a testimony of Dalit literature, which is her autobiography. *Sangati* (1994) is her second work, originally written in Tamil and later it was translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom. Moreover, she wrote *Vanmam* (2002). She also published two short story collections, *Kusumbukkaran* (1996) and *Our Tattvum Erumaiyum* (2003).

Bama and *Sangati*.

Sangati means news, stories, events, etc. The book presents interconnected anecdotes. It is a tale of individuals' struggles, sufferings and discrimination of Paraiya women, a group of

friends, a neighborhood, their relations, and their struggles. Thbout ese stories, anecdotes and memories talk much about Dalit women, not only about their unhappiness, but also about their identity, their livelihood and rebellious culture.

Bama's writes:

My mind is crowded with many anecdotes: stories not only about the sorrows and tears of Dalit women, but also about their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter them, but rather to swim vigorously against the tide; about the self confidence and self-respect that enables them to leap over their adversities by laughing at and ridiculing them; about their passion to live life with vitality, truth and enjoyment; about their hard labour. I wanted to shout out these stories. (xvi)

These stories, events, news, memories of individual experiences and anecdotes are narrated in the first-person. The events are narrated by Bama's mother and her grandmother and the latter part of the novel is narrated by the author with her reflections on the society. Moreover, it talks about social injustice, economic inequality, and traumatic situations of Dalit women, gender bias and their bitter experiences from childhood to old age.

Gender Bias

Bama vividly portrays a few major themes of gender bias in the opening line of the novel in which she projected the real picture of gender inequality in Tamilnadu. She writes that in her family and neighbours, there is not any great difference at birth between boys and girls but when they grow up, little by little discrimination is seen to be increasing. The family members had taken more care about male children than female children. In addition, she writes the people had gotten some stereotypical beliefs within their minds which say that for a male child belonging to the even or odd numbers is considered a lucky person, whereas a female child is lucky only with an odd number; this kind of discrimination still exists in many parts of the country particularly in villages. It clearly shows that the women have been looked upon with a different perspective than men have been, in the Indian context. The following passage portrays:

If the third is a girl to behold, your courtyard will fill with gold...My mother told me that in our village, they didn't make any difference between boys and girls at birth. But as they raised them, they were more concerned about the boys than girls. She said that's why they went about bossing over everyone. (3)

Bama recalls her grandmother's bitter experience as midwife while helping the women give birth to children; she did not face problems until taking care of the births among her own people. Though she was expert in delivering babies, she was not allowed, or attend upper caste people's child birth, the only reason behind being that of caste. Bama's grandmother

belongs to the lower caste community (Paraya) of Hindus, for which reason people denied her. She puts it in her novel, “in our village it was my grandmother who attended every child birth. Only the upper castes never sent for her because she was a paraichi” (3).

Sangati demonstrates the toil of the Dalit women and their lives, it proves that men are free and have not have any responsibility, whereas the women of this community have to do much work at home as well as in the field. They are self-dependent because they are Dalit women. *Sangati*, further depicts the childhood life of Dalit girls; they did not have enough time to play like the boys rather they have to look after their younger siblings. For instance, Maikkami experienced this difficulty during her life, she does not have any leisure time to share her feelings to others which results in making her lonely and hopeless. Maikkami works in her home around the clock; her responsibility increases when her mother gives birth to a baby, whereas the boys were not required to do these kinds of chores.

Double Oppression

Bama’s characters have encountered the double oppression since they came from a Dalit family. Dalit women have been faced with much more hurdles compared with other community women. They have been looked down upon as low caste characters by the other upper caste community people.

1) Casteism and Sexism

This novel has also portrayed the character Mariamma who experienced the double oppression and is the victim of casteism combined with sexual exploitation by the upper caste landowner Kumaraswami Ayya. She is humiliated, disgraced, cursed and fined by this upper caste landowner. The landowner Kumaraswami Ayya sexually harassed and tried seducing her while she was at the pump set where she went to drink water. This happened when she went out for collecting fire wood. When Mariamma went to drink water, the landowner came and pulled her and tried to molest her; after some struggle she escaped. When she shared this cruel incident with her friends and family, they ordered her not to share this with any other person, because the upper caste landowner is a mischievous, wicked man, having a large amount of money, and so he could do anything. Moreover, people might not accept the fact as truth, since she is a Dalit. Besides this, she would be humiliated and insulted. The thing is that the landowner was never punished, but Mariamma got punished and was fined for about Rs. 200. This happened because she belongs to the lower caste, a Dalit. She was treated like an animal in front of village people and abused with vulgar words.

Eventually, the village Nattamai finished the proceedings 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) This is clearly

stressed that man can do anything, get whatever they want. Nobody can question them, whereas women should be quiet and calm whatever a man might do against women. There is no way to raise their voices against such an inequality. In other words, it shows the patriarchal ideology imposed upon women.

Caste discrimination continues to oppress her life, she displays her agony seeing it in Indian churches. The society had marginalized communities like Pariaya, Pallars, Chakkiliyars and Koravars who had converted to Christianity, in order to reduce the pain born of caste discrimination. This conversion did not bring any great change to the Dalits, and they lost their special scholarships and job reservation. In addition, *Sangati* has contended that in India Churches are gender and caste based. In the churches, they were treated as low caste and seated separately from upper caste Christians in the early s. Bama experienced bitter gender and caste discrimination inside churches and she left. Then she started her writing against the evil practices. But Indian churches are not any more caste oriented within the sub caste of Dalit community. Nowadays the Dalit communities have built their own churches within the traditional church denominations. Among the born again believers' there is no caste discrimination anymore.

Dalit Women and Non-Dalit Women

Bama distinguished Dalit women and non- Dalit women. According to her Dalit women are far better than the upper caste women. Though they belong to the upper caste, they are exploited by men within the four walls and there is no room to express their emotions. Further, she felt happy for their women have got some economic freedom from their husbands. They are working in the fields and look after their children. In addition Dalit widows can be allowed to remarry. However, the upper caste women cannot do this, they are ignored, and restrained from their emotions within the four walls, whereas the Dalit women fight for it. This situation has changed somewhat these days, because many upper caste women have been educated and many of them now can work and stand on their own feet and not be too dependent on the men in their families as before. They also do fight for women's causes in this 21st century. Bama expresses:

Upper caste women, thought, keep it all suppressed; they can neither chew nor swallow. they lose their nerve, and many of them become have an abundant will to survive however hard they might have to struggle for their last breath...in the upper caste, too, a woman can't lead a life on her own if she has left her husband. (68, 95)

Conclusion

This paper investigated the various bitter experiences of Dalit women who try to be unleashed from class, caste and gender discriminations, get equal opportunities in the job markets, and educational rights. In the last twenty years or so many more educational rights and

job reservations have been given to Dalit men and women and many women have risen to great heights in politics, medicine, the corporate world and so on. Bama has well portrayed in this novel *Sangati*, the double oppression in the lives of Dalit women. It is evident that it is a strong Dalit feminist document in which Bama's women characters shared their joy and sorrow without any hesitation. Dalit women should not be any more afraid of the caste and gender inequality. *Sangati* vividly presented the physical violence such as lynching, raping, whipping and caning of the Dalit women.

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