

The Voice of Dalit Women in Bama's *Sangati*

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Abstract

Dalit literature has emerged as an important area in the post-colonial India. The major focus of Dalit literature is on the community. Dalit writings are based on the sufferings of the oppressed class. They emphasize on the struggle that they undergo due to oppression and suppression by the upper class people. A dalit woman undergoes two types of suffering, one that she is a women and the other that she belongs to a lowest community. It is these sufferings that Bama focuses in *Sangati*. *Sangati* is a series of events that narrates the lives of Dalit women who face the double disadvantage of caste and gender discrimination. Dalit women are marginalised, discriminated, humiliated and harassed both by their men folk and by the society. Bama through meticulous narration, voices out how the way patriarchy works with Dalit women. Men in their community are free from all sorts of responsibilities whereas women are over-burdened with endless toil throughout the day. Bama portrays the realistic picture of dalit women who hardly retards irrespective of her being treated violently by their fathers, brothers or husbands.

Key Words: Dalit, Patriarchy, Oppression, Paraiyas, Pey, Christianity.

Introduction

Dalit literature is about the sufferings of oppressed class. Dalit fiction and its literary movement are based on the common ground of social oppression. It is a study of marginal and colonized. Dalit literature is always marked by revolt and a great struggle of lower caste against the high class. Bama being a tamil dalit Christian woman is able to express emphatically the woman's identity. Bama examines caste and gender oppression together. She redefines woman from the political perspective of a dalit.

Sangati is a startling insight into the lives of Dalit women who face the double disadvantage of caste and gender discrimination. The theme of Sangati is “Subjugation to celebration”. Bama’s *Sangati* is unique Dalit feminist narrative. Bama’s *Sangati* highlights the gender discrimination and the situation of women in a subaltern community by narrating the life of various dalit women such as Maikanni, Muukkama, Irulaayi and Peechiamma.

This paper is an attempt to study the sufferings of dalit women as voiced by Bama in *Sangati*. Having personally experienced the sufferings of a Dalit, Bama narrates the life of a dalit women right from the child birth to old age. The novel highlights on issues varying from Christian conversion, caste and sexual discrimination, economic inequality, physical violence, disproportionate labour between men and women, rituals of puberty, panchayat system, superstitious beliefs and oppression of women.

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. The novel has no plot. The novel portrays the life of not just one individual but of a pariah community. Sangati is an autobiography of her community, which highlights the struggle of Paraiya women. Bama chooses only woman protagonist for every story in her novel. The book is filled with interconnected events of day to day happenings of dalit community. Bama exposes caste and gender problems both outside and inside the community.

The language of narration is dominated by Dalit Tamil dialect. Bama has made a linguistic leap in reclaiming the language particular to the women of her community. The voices of these women are represented as it is either in anger or in pain. At times a sharp tongue and obscene words are a woman’s only way of shaming men and escaping extreme physical violence. Bama suggests several reasons for the violence of the language and its sexual nature. This type of language might have occurred due to the patriarchy based on sexual dominance and power. Bama has retained the characteristic of this language in songs and chants as well.

Women are presented as wage earners as much as men are, working as agricultural and building site labourers, but earning less than men do. Women bear the financial burden of running the family. They are also vulnerable to sexual harassment and abuse in the work place. Within the community the power rests in men. The theme of the novel is focussed on hard labour and economic precariousness that leads to culture of violence. The violent

treatment of women by fathers, husbands, and brothers are mentioned with reference to violent domestic quarrels which are carried on in public where women fight back.

Bama narrates the cultural identity of a Dalit woman by illustrating the rites of coming-of-age ceremony, a betrothal, a wedding, etc. They do not exhibit any sentimental attitude to the bonds of marriage, for example thali does not have any binding significance. Similarly, widows are not discriminated and they are free to remarry of their choice.

The issue of conversion is also explained in the novel. During her grandmother's time it was only the community of Paraiyas who became Christians because they were offered free education to their children. Other Dalit communities remained Hindus. Bama questions whether the community should have converted at all. The novel deals with several generations of women: the older women belonging to the narrator's grandmother Vellaiyamma Kizhavi's generation to the narrator's own and the generation coming after her the educated move away for better lives. With growing industries, child labour is recruited from the village. The novel explores the needs of woman and the different ways in which they are subject to oppression. Through the experiences of the Dalit woman Bama praises them saying that the Dalit women are not shy and fearful but rather courage, fearlessness and independence and self esteem.

The major focus in the novel is on the life of Dalit women, right from the birth; the description goes on about how the infants are also shown discrimination for example the boy child is fed longer than the girl child. The labour of the boy and girl which is not proportionate is illustrated. The rituals of puberty and the sufferings of women during labour pains fall into the major crunch of the novel. After marriage the women is subjugated to the man beating and working in the fields for longer hours for a very less pay.

Vellaiyamma, the grandmother of Bama narrates how child birth took place in their village. As there were no hospitals the child birth took place at home. Bama's grandmother was an expert in attending every child birth in the village. She never took any money for the help. She was married to Govindan at the age of 14 years, but four years later he disappeared. Bama is fascinated by looking at her patti, who was very strong and never had a fever or illness till her death. She struggled solely to care her children.

The strength of a dalit woman is shown through Pachamuukipillai who went to cut grass during full term pregnancy, where she managed to deliver the child and came home carrying the baby and her bundle of grass. This indicates that pregnant women do not take

rest. They are taxed up with responsibilities. Even Bama's mother spent all day transplanting in the western fields and then went into labor.

The boys are given more respect and they will eat as much as they wish and run to play. Girls must stay at home and keep working. Bama's grandmother was no exception, in the words of Bama,

She cared for her grandsons much more than she cared for us. If she brought anything home when she returned from work, it was always the grandsons she called first. ..if she brought mangoes, we only got the skin, she gave the best pieces of fruit to the boys. Because we had no other way out, we picked up and ate the leftover skins (7).

Maturity is another major ritual celebrated by them. When Bama's cousin Mariamma attained puberty she was kept in a Kuchulu, a small hut where she was made to sit for 16 days. All brought her many sweets. They believed on evil possessing therefore she is supposed to hold a small iron rod or something made of iron in her hands. On the sixteenth day a small pandal decorated with banana trees in front of the house would be erected to celebrate the occasion in a grand style.

The disputes in the community are solved through panchayat system led by nattammai. Bama mentions one incident when Mariamma and Manikkam were found in the fields of Kumaraswami Ayya which was reported to nattammai. The judgement is that a fine of Rs. 200 was imposed to Mariamma and Rs. 100 to Manikkam. Thus women are under more punishment. Bama ponders on why women are always pushed aside. They are not even allowed to talk loudly, or laugh noisily.

Bama narrates the life of Bhakkiyam who had 17 children and out of them 11 died. On Sundays when women used to carry grains or beans as offering to the priest, Bakkiyam offered a hen. Similarly, in the west street there was a woman Thaayi, who was beaten up every day. Her people made a lot of fuss and forced her into marrying a man she did not like. Her husband used to drag her along the street and flog her like an animal with a stick or with his belt.

The Dalits believed in the superstitious belief which is narrated eloquently by Bama. The belief that women were possessed by pey is narrated through Manacchi and Esakki who were possessed by a pey. Patti cautions the girls not to go and see Manacchi because pey always grabs hold of young girls. A ritual of driving the pey on Mannacchi takes place in

front of St. Anthony's Shrine and a huge crowd draws to watch her. Bama being curious to know goes to watch Manacchi. Meanwhile, Manacchi has just finished dancing with wide eyed and hair unkempt. Similarly Irulappan's wife Virayi was possessed by Esakki. Soothsayer was called and he beat his Kodangi drums. Bama retains the rhythm of the folk as it is. As the soothsayer began to beat his kodangi drum there was a rhythmic sound

Dayin dayinda dayin dayinda dayin dayinda'. As soon as Virayi heard it, her head began to sway in time to the rhythm.....The soothsayer beat his kodangi drum faster and faster. Virayi tossed her head about and whirled round and round. Her face was beaded with sweat. As Virayi swirled and whirled, my own head began to sway, without my being aware of it. When I looked around me, I realized that it wasn't just my head that was swaying about, but the heads of older women, too (48).

Virayi spoke and people thought that it was Esakki speaking through Virayi. The soothsayer plucked a lock of hair of Virayi's, nailed it to the tree trunk and offer turmeric, kumkumam and flowers and then bring Virayi home. The story of Esakki becoming a pey is heart rendering. She fell in love with a fellow of Vanaan caste. She ran away and lived happily with that person. The brothers found that she is pregnant and went to call her home for the first delivery. They took her straight to the forest and killed her despite being full pregnant. Since then Esakki wandered as a pey. Whoever she possess she asks for a cradle. People believed in peys. According to them, if it is not a natural death, suicide or road accidents their souls would wander about recklessly as peys.

The peys always seem to set on women from the pallar, paraiyar, chakkiliyar and koravar communities. This is so because it is these women who go to work in the jungles and in the fields where peys wander about. The peys catch the woman when they are alone. Bama decides to strengthen herself and not be broken in the belief that it is their fate.

The relationship between husbands and wives are commonly expressed through fights. Even pregnant woman are not an exception, once Bama watched a woman running on the street and her husband chasing with a stick of fire wood in his hand. He caught her, carried her to home, locked the door and beat her. Bama ponders on why men in their street went about drinking and beating their wives. As they are Dalits they cannot show their strength in their fields, they have to show it at home. Because of caste and poverty everyone

seems to treat them with contempt. Most of the women are put up with all that violence and suffering. Bama questions when will they be free of all this. The women survive without going crazy by fighting back. These women also have abundant will to survive till their last breath.

Bama narrates the loss of childhood in their community. She narrates the child labour through the character of Maikkanni. Right from the day Maikkanni learnt to walk, she started to work. Slowly she started to work in the match factory. When her mother delivers a child, she stays at home to take care of the child. Every Saturday she brought her wages home and handed it to her mother. It was Maikkanni who brought up all the five children who were born after her.

The ritual of marriage that takes place in the month of Vaigasi is also illustrated. The church hall is dominant of bridegrooms and drummers. As soon as all the couples are seated the samiyaar began the puusai. At the time of tali tying the musicians sitting outside broke into a loud beating of drums and blowing of pipes. Then they received communion. The couple was gifted with Rs. 2 or 5 to the groom. Thus marriages take place without any kind of grabbing in the name of dowry. Instead the man gives a parisam, a bride price. They are not sentimental of thali, pottu, bangle or turmeric. Even if her husband dies she will follow the same routine. She can even marry for the second time. In other communities the widows suffer, whereas for them widows are not treated differently.

The practice of Marriages and divorces in Hindu and Christians are shown through Pecchiamma who hails from Chakkili community. Pecchiamma married twice: she has two children from her first marriage and one child from the second marriage. Bama wonders that in their Christian community a woman can marry only after her husband dies. But this woman has married twice when her husband is alive. Bama was shocked but it is good that women had the option of ending their marriages. Moreover they do not abuse women who live apart from their husbands.

But the case is different in Christian religion where they make a solemn promise “in sickness and in health, for better for worse, for richer for poorer.” The advantage of being a Hindu is that you can get rid of a man you can’t stand. Bama thinks “Had we stayed as Hindus, our women would have had the chance of divorce at least” (97).

Bama narrates the election system and the poor knowledge that women have on it. When Bama asks patti to whom did she vote Patti says, “Ei, di, they give you a sheet and tell

you to put a rubber stamp on one of the pictures there. As for me, I went and stamped all the pictures there like a blind old bat. As soon as I came out, the teacher's wife told me that my vote won't be valid." Patti says many would have stamped 4 or 5 and not one. Malayandi gave few rupees and told to stamp some picture. She forgot while standing in the queue and stamped some picture. People brought their cars from house to house and drove them to the voting booths.

The ignorance of the politics is shown here,

Whatever it is, what do we know about it? Whether it s Rama who rules, or Ravana, what does it matter? Our situation is always the same. I wouldn't have even gone to cast my vote. It was only because of that macchaan Malayandi that I went in the first place. He gave me a couple of rupees and told me to put a stamp on some picture or the other. I stood in the queue and went in, but completely forgot which picture he told me to stamp. So then I decided on my own to put one stamp on the cycle picture and one on the elephant picture. Then I bought myself some *mocchai payiru* with the two rupees he gave me.'

The gender discrimination is shown at every stage of life. Women had to lead a restricted life while men are free to live as they like. They were never allowed to go to watch a cinema. In fact patti has not seen one movie. Similarly, if a girl studies a little they can't stand it. In terms of marriage, men can marry a woman out of the caste but woman cannot do that. If she marries outside the caste then there will be caste riot.

Bama recollects the best thing they have in their caste.

Although there are many good things about us, we tend to forget it all and believe that to be upper caste is best. The grass is always greener on the other side, isn't it? The way we wear our saris with the pleats at the back and the way we pull our hair back and knot it to one side-all these have their own beauty. But because others have called these uncouth, we have believed that and have wanted to copy upper-caste ways and customs (113).

Towards the end of the novel Bama narrates her own bitter experience as a Dalit woman. In spite of being educated and working she seems to face many difficulties. Above all the biggest problem she faced is being alone as an unmarried Dalit woman. She had to face questions such as

What caste are you? What's your religion? Where do you work? How much do you earn? How old are you? Are you married? Why haven't you married yet? Are you going to marry at all? Why not? They will keep on pestering away like this (120).

Next it becomes hard to find a rented house. Moreover she lives alone because she is unmarried. People gossip about her. Bama questions why it that a woman can't live on her own is.

They seem to 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. They assume that otherwise she is the common property of many fellows, and they will leer at her suggestively. Why? Why shouldn't a woman belong to no one at all but herself (121)?

According to Bama her people suffer for the fact that they are born as Dalits. Moreover, just because she is a woman her battle is hard. The worse is even the women colleague who not tolerate her lifestyle.

Is it our fault that we are Dalits? On top of that, just because I am a woman, I have to battle specially hard. Not only do I have to struggle against men, I have to also bear the insults from women of other castes. From how many directions must the blows come! And for how long! (122).

Therefore, Bama enlightens people of their community to educate boys and girls alike, without showing any difference. She wishes that girls should be brought up in new way so

that in future there will be a day when men and women will be treated with equal rights.
Bama concludes the novel in an optimistic note.

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