

**Treatment of Double Marginal Issues in the Select Works of
African American and Dalit Literatures**

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Abstract:

This paper entitled, **Treatment of Double Marginal Issues in the Select Works of African American and Dalit Literatures** purposes to analyze various forms of oppressions executed on the African-Americans of American and Dalits of Indian societies by the privileged people of these societies. Generally, our society is guided by the man-made binaries namely man/woman, man/animal, rich/poor, West/East, privileged class/ unprivileged class, and superior race/ inferior race and so on. As these binaries are man-made, man is not ready to shed these binaries to live an equal sharing peaceful life. Hence, it is clear women suffer in the hand of men and inferior race suffers in the hand of superior race. Therefore, the present paper will focus on the women characters of the select works of Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, P. Sivakami, and Bama in order to trace the portrayal of double oppressions executed on them as they belong to the under-privileged groups and how they voice against the ill-treatment meted on them. Their voice is the microcosm for the macro change.

Introduction:

Dalit literary criticism has included a comparative discussion of African American literature and Dalit literature. In comparing the two literatures, it has also been necessary to compare the African American and Dalit societies as well as their liberation movements. Since both societies are engaged in similar kind of movements, examining them is an important component of the comparison of these two different communities and their literatures. Given that the two societies are different in terms of place and time, it is understandable that there should be certain limitations and differences in their literatures. On the other hand, there are similarities too. Hence this paper traces the characteristics of and the similarities and contrasts between, the two literatures from a comparative, cross-cultural, and feministic point of view.

In America, the African American society has suffered much oppression because of the racial prejudice. In India, Dalits are marginalized because of the *varna-based* caste system. In both cases a woman is very much deeply in shadow, firstly because of being a woman and secondly because of being a dalit. African women are oppressed by the privileged American society first and their own African male counterparts next. A dalit woman in an Indian society is suppressed by the upper class society first and by the dalit menfolk next. Alice Walker and Toni Morrison are prominent figures in the contemporary Afro-American literature. They treated the feministic issues in their novels. They have presented the problems of women particularly the mutilated self of the Black women who are subjected to brutal treatment by the whites as well as by their own groups. In India, dalit issues are recorded in a variety of genres- public speeches, autobiographies, novels, poetry and essays. Writers like Bama, and Sivakami explore the disadvantages of being women and dalits.

This paper is proposed to analyze the theme of double marginality that gets contextualized in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* and Bama's *Sangati*.

The Color Purple

In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker does not only portray the ill-treatment meted on African-American women by the American society but also by the African society. The issues of racism and sexism are pulled together in Walker's *The Color Purple*. It is about being a Black woman, living in the midst of male civilization and subject to all possible forms of oppression. As Walker writes in her essay, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," a black woman is "the mule of the world, because (she has) been handed the burdens that everyone else— everyone else refused to carry" (237). Celie's life in the novel *The Color Purple* is the index of sufferings. Her victimization at the hands of her father is too appalling and not different from other victimized characters of Alice Walker as they all are victims of sexual and communal abuse. Celie is depicted as a barely educated Black woman, who is raped by her step father and then married off to Mr. Albert. She is sexually abused, verbally dominated and physically beaten for almost thirty years. After getting impregnated by her step father, she is asked not to share it with anyone except God. The unscrupulous man sells her children and stigmatizes her image and gets her married with an older man who needs a worker on his farm. She becomes a surrogate mother of his children and a receptacle for his passions. Being an existential character, she shares her grief with God and writes letters to Him. But later on her faith in God lessens as she holds God responsible for her sufferings and stops writing. When Celie looks back on her life, she gets frustrated and says,

"What God do for me?He give me a lynched daddy, a crazy mamma, a lowdown dog of a step Pa.....The God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown" (Walker, *Color Purple* 173).

Celie is the representative of several women as found not only in Afro-American literature but also in world literature and she pictures the naked truth of uncountable oppressed women in several uncivilized societies. Her picture represents not merely a particular territory but is a universal story of all the oppressed women of the world. Maimed physically through rape, scarred psychologically through inhuman and beastly treatment, Celie has no one in her life

except her sister and friend, Nettie and perhaps also God in whom she can confide and disclose all her emotions. The whole body of the novel's text consists of Celie's letters to God, then to her sister Nettie, and of Nettie's letters to Celie. Celie moves toward her own self-acceptance and self-definition on the day she announces that she will leave Mr. ____ to live with Shug in Memphis. She states, "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook But I'm here"(Walker, *Color Purple* 187). Later, in a letter to Nettie from Memphis, Celie clearly articulates a new and more positive vision of herself: "I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time. And you alive and be home soon. With our children" (Walker, *Color Purple* 194).

Beloved

Toni Morrison is one of the strongest voices of African-American society that gave voice for the upliftment of African-American in the American society. Her *Beloved* is more powerful in its theme as it faithfully brings out the picture of slave trade and various Slave Acts of American government. Yet the African-Americans are treated inferiorly by the Americans. *Beloved* is a story of pain, suffering and atrocities. It is the saga of the black men whose backs are lacerated by the white men. It is the tale of the black women who were manhandled by their white masters. It is the woeful narrative of the African mothers whose milk is pilfered from them. *Beloved*, depicts the marginalization inflicted on the black by the white. The whites hurt or injure the blacks in many ways. The Africans are whipped, sexually assaulted and separated from the members of their own family quite frequently. In other words, physically, sexually and psychologically, the Negroes are harmed by their white masters. Physical violence is deployed as a strategy by the white to intimidate the Africans in America. The blacks are abducted by force from their own land by the Europeans. Their main target is to use them as cheap labour. Now, in order to instill their domination, they use physical force to ensure that there is no resistance or revolt.

Whenever any slave becomes recalcitrant, he is punished savagely. Any reaction or retaliation is deemed as blasphemy by the masters and it results in the most severe punishment i.e. death. For example, Sixo is tied to a tree and shot and burnt later. Paul A is also hanged on a www.ijellh.com

tree with his torso. Sethe, similarly, is flogged ruthlessly when she grumbles against the stealing of her milk before Mrs. Garner. Beloved divulges her tale of sorrow in the recollections of her past life. When she along with her mother was picking flowers, she was forcefully kidnapped and was brought to America in the most unhygienic circumstances. The food and water provided to the Africans on the slave ships was adulterated. The list seems endless. The white left no stone unturned in beating, whipping and mutilating the skin of the black slaves. In addition to physical tortures, sexual tortures were also quite frequent. The masters took undue advantage of the female bodies who were working under them. In fact, the oppression which was directed against the black women was greater than that directed against the black men. Elizabeth Fox Genovese astutely maintains; “Since the nineteenth century, it has been common to assert that slavery was necessarily worse for women than for men, since they were subjected to special brutality and indignity on account of their sex.” (98)

When a person is marginalized physically, sexually and psychologically, one generally ceases to think. In fact, one can become almost moribund. But, in the novel, Sethe and Baby Suggs are exceptions to this general notion. Sethe has faced too many hardships in life. She is beaten, her milk is stolen, her back is scarred, she has to deliver on the boat, her husband is not with her yet she never loses her capacity to think. She resolves that she will save her offspring. She slays her daughter so that she might not be killed by the violence which she herself has experienced. With sheer confidence and sense of possession, she speaks to Paul D, “I took and put my babies where they’d be safe” (Morrison, *Beloved* 193). Wilfred D Samuels and Clenora Hudson Weems remark quite pertinently: “clearly, her (Sethe’s) intention here is not denial but rationalisation; yet, it is rationalisation based on conviction.”(18).

The Grip of Change

The picture of double marginal treatment meted on Dalit women in Indian society gets contextualized in P. Sivakami’s works namely, *The Grip of Change* and Bama’s *Sangati*.

P. Sivakami is highly authoritative as well as critical while demanding equal right for Dalit women through her novels. The title of the novel, *The Grip of Change* is ironical as the author dreams for a changed society in which women will be treated equally on par with man. In *The Grip of Change*, Sivakami applies a self-critical and deconstructive technique and exposes the deplorable realities of Dalit patriarchy. The protagonist of the novel is Thangam, a poor Dalit widow who suffers not only for being a Dalit but also for being a woman. Ironically, she is victimized even by her own Dalit community. She faces double marginalization, namely, women suppression and discrimination based on her caste. Clutched in the jaws of patriarchy, she is abused, raped and beaten frequently. She does not articulate against the oppression inflicted upon her. Thangam is treated as 'body' in this novel. She is often assaulted physically, verbally and sexually not only by the upper caste patriarchs but also by her own community men. After the death of her husband, she becomes a 'surplus woman' for her brothers-in-law and they force her to become a prostitute. Even her right over her husband's ancestral land is denied as she is a childless widow. She can get her share of the property only if her body can satisfy their lust. As she tells Kathamuthu, —My husband's brother tried to force me, but I never gave in. They wouldn't give me my husband's land, but wanted me to be a whore for them! I wouldn't give in... (Sivakami, *Grip of Change* 7). But she is unable to save her body from the jaws of hierarchy. Devoid of money, the destitute and dispossessed Thangam moves outside her home to earn her livelihood by working as a laborer in the fields of an upper class landlord Paranjothi Udayar, who rapes her. She narrates, —I didn't want it. But Udayar took no notice of me. He raped me when I was working in his sugarcane field. I remained silent; after all, he is my paymaster. He measures my rice... (Sivakami, *Grip of Change* 7). The brutality of class and caste hierarchy made her subaltern who cannot even speak.

Caste is the most demoralizing aspect of the Indian society. Caste disparities lead to violence against lower caste women, who are expected to yield to the upper caste male chauvinism. The cruelty of caste discrimination is exposed when a Dalit woman moves from passivity to active assertion against the sexual exploitation of masculine brutality but she has to

suffer social indignation. When the liaison between Udayar and Thangam is disclosed, Udayar's brothers-in-law attack her and beat her doggedly and even she is threatened to be killed (6). The duality of the upper class is exposed when Udayar abuses her,

“Ungrateful whore! Even if she was hurt by the hand adorned with gold! A parachi could have never dreamt of being touched by a man like me! My touch was a boon granted for penance performed in her earlier births (Sivakami, *Grip of Change* 31).

These words reveal the hypocrisy of caste-Hindus, who on the one hand hate the lower caste considering them untouchables, and on the other hand gratify their carnal hunger by sexually exploiting them. Thangam's saga of sexual exploitation is not complete yet. She faces oppression for particularly being a woman. She is also exploited at the hands of the rich of her own Dalit community. Her money is grabbed by her so called guardian Kathamuthu and she is also sexually abused. The rich and influential Dalit Panchayat leader Kathamuthu who earlier gave shelter to Thangam turns into an animal and rapes her. And then she becomes a mistress to him forever. Ironically, Thangam epitomizes the dilemma of all the subjugated women as the novel projects her in a wretched condition of an outcaste from the beginning to the end.

The Grip of Change not only voices the plight of an exploited Dalit woman, it records the waves of change present in the Dalit consciousness. Thus it provides a kind of cure for the ailments of the society through the character of Gowri. Kathamuthu, a Dalit patriarch allows her daughter Gowri to study. Being enlightened through education, she is able to realize the exploitation of women in a patriarchal set-up. Thus, she protests against her early marriage, —The sufferings that my mother underwent in her marriage! I don't want to be tortured like her by some man. (Sivakami, *Grip of Change* 124). She openly condemns her father's the inhuman treatment on Thangam. When Kathamuthu rapes Thangam she vehemently shouts, —Dogs! Dogs in this house! Shameless as dogs (Sivakami, *Grip of Change* 93). Gowri detests her father's two qualities — his polygamy and his coarseness. The antitheses, monogamy and refinement are the basic signs of human evolution into 'civilisation'.

Although the novel is fictitious, the characters and incidents are realistic enough to verbalize the reality of modern society. If women do not speak for themselves and come forward to change their conditions then who else will to do it for them? A change in attitude is the need of the hour. Therefore, in speaking the unrepresented in literary discourses so far, Sivakami has linked together the caste as well the gender oppression in the process of redefining women from the social, political and psychological perspective.

Sangati

Bama in her work presents the theme of oppression that is executed on Dalit women and their consequent suppression to 'nothing' and how women folk raise by themselves to become at least human beings. Bama in her novel *Sangati* gives vigorous voice for the Dalit women, who are oppressed, ruled and still being ruled by the patriarchal, upper-caste government and religious Indian society. Bama through this novel forces the Dalit women to break all strictures of society to live. Bama's *Sangati*, published in 1994 in Tamil is a series of local anecdotes strung through a female narrator. "Sangati" means news or events or happenings. This novel is unconventional, in the sense that it has neither a plot nor a protagonist. Day-to-day events of the Dalit community are incorporated in the framework which the novelist has herself witnessed in her real life. Lakshmi Holmstrom, in the "Introduction" of this book, makes it clear:

"Sangati moves from the story of the individual struggle to the perception of community of paraiya women, a neighbourhood group of friends and relations and their joint struggle. In this sense Sangati is perhaps the autobiography of a community." (xv)

In *Sangati* the author deftly traces how the sufferings of the Dalit women start from their infancy. They live "hard lives" as Bama recalls. Their sufferings begin in their infancy. The case is different for boys, "if a boy baby cries, he is instantly picked up and given milk. It is not so with the girls." (Bama, *Sangati* 7). The plight of most of the characters in *Sangati* is also awfully miserable because they are poor and female. In her "Introduction" to *Sangati*, Holmstrom writes: "Hard labour and economic precariousness lead to a culture of violence..." (xvii). Women work

away “like dogs before we can afford to buy wheat and milk-powder from the priests, and look at the good luck that falls upon those pigs!” (Bama, *Sangati* 13). Women in *Sangati* are wage-earners as much as their male-counterparts but they earn less than the menfolk. They do not have their own rights to spend the money they earn. In the language of Holmstrom:

“Yet the money that men earn is their own to spend as they please, whereas women bear the financial burden of running the family, often singly (xvii)

Bama throws light on various aspects such as economic inequality, authority of men, traumatic situation of women, child labour, helplessness, bitter experience and ceremonial occasions through, *Sangati*. The observation and experience from the childhood and the questions which arose in her mind about the problems of the Dalit women inspired her to write the novel exposing the Dalit characters and their predicaments effectively. Velliayamma Kizhavi, the grandmother of Bama is the central character in *Sangati*. She is introduced as a social worker especially attending deliveries without expecting any benefits. Ironically enough, though she is good at attending deliveries, the upper caste women do not invite this lady because of caste discrimination. After the disappearance of her husband Goyindan, she lived independently and brought up her two daughters. She worked restlessly till her death. She described the prevailing customs and rituals of her community. This helped Bama acquire knowledge about the historical situations from her grandmother’s time to her age. This old lady was converted into Christianity. As a result of it, Bama’s mother Sevathi studied up to the fifth class. In dalit community whether a husband is alive or dead, the family burden rests upon the helpless woman.

According to Bama, a Dalit woman suffers from double marginalization. Apart from experiencing frequent threats and menaces of rape, sexual assaults, physical violence and damage at work places in public arena, Dalit women face mental torture and violence at home from their husbands. Without any specific reason husbands beat up Dalit women. The entire Dalit community is also under the reigning patriarchal system whereby dalit men who themselves are marginalized by the upper class land owners in turn marginalize their womenfolk

at homes. Therefore, Bama captures the double marginalization suffered by the dalit women thus: “It is not the same for women of other castes and communities. Our women cannot bear the torment of upper-caste masters in the fields, and at home they cannot bear the violence of their husbands” (Bama, *Sangati* 65)

Summation:

Thus, this paper projects the depiction of double marginality found in the works of Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, P. Sivakami, and Bama in American and Indian context and how these writers vent out their strong feelings for the freedom of women folk of their societies for their decent living. Oppression has been an issue that has affected the lives of women for a very long time. A society based on cooperation and balance rather than dominance and hierarchy is necessary for survival on this planet. A black woman in an Afro-American society and a dalit woman in the Indian context suffer double oppression. Firstly, the hierarchical superstructure suppresses them. Ironically, the second challenge springs from the male counterparts of their own clan. Irrespective of the nationality or race, women suffer oppression and this is a challenge to their sustenance and growth. The solution against double oppression lies in the suppressed women fighting against the evil jointly. Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, P.Sivakami and Bama suggest the metaphor of sisterhood and collective effort to fight against the double oppression. These writers have given the Amazonian picture of women who wrestle with the brutal world and ultimately assert themselves. In this context, *The Color Purple*, *Meridian*, *Beloved*, *A Mercy*, *The Grip of Change*, *The Taming of Women*, *Karukku* and *Sangati* become literary icon that enlighten and empower women.

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