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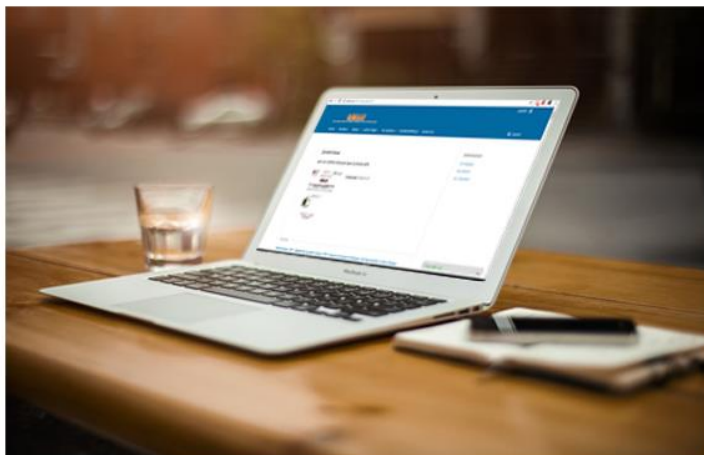


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*A Study of Sangati Events by Bama : An Attempt to Carve Self- Assertion
for the Diminishing Identities of Dalit Women*

Abstract

Language and literature have proved to be a very effective and powerful medium of self-expression of the suppressed identities and individualities of the dalits or the outcasts. *Sangati* is an excellent effort in this direction. It is a startling insight into the lives of dalit women who face the double disadvantage of gender and caste discrimination. It weaves various narratives together to explore the oppression, atrocities and the unfair treatment of these women within their own caste and society in a larger perspective. Some of the narratives also depict strong female characters who try to break the long with held conventions of passivity and subjugation due to the factors like caste and gender. Through this work Bama has tried to put forth the agony, the heart rendering struggles of the suffocated and ignominious existence of dalit women. The language used by the author is lucid, expressive and realistic, challenging the conventions of language as well. It very well suits the social and emotional ambience and undertone of the situations and characters thus presented. It is a feminist work brimming with realism, voicing the rights and the freedom of the people who have been marginalized and considered as an outcast by the society which is caste and gender dominated. Females have always been treated as an inferior sex by the so called patriarchal society of India irrespective of the caste and creed. Similarly, the weaker and backward sections of our society have also been oppressed and denied

equal rights by the upper caste people. *Sangati* deals with the expected hardships and difficulty of survival when a person has the double misfortune by being both.

Keywords: Outcasts, Marginalized, Dalit Women, Oppression, Identity

As we are already aware of the wretched and precarious existence of the subalterns who, are denied equal rights of existence by our society even today. The present paper deals with the condition of the dalit women who suffer exploitation due to the double disadvantage of being both- a subaltern and a female at the same time. Dalit literature is about the sufferings of the oppressed class also called “subalterns”. Spivak borrows the term “subaltern” from Gramsci, to refer to the unrepresented group of people in the society (Gramsci 55). In the Indian cultural context, the term, “subaltern” acquires more significance as the people have struggled hard for Indian independence. Exploitation or oppression of weaker by stronger is as old as mankind itself. The Indian history has been a vibrant record of conflict and dialectic between two opposite forces like exploiters and exploited colonizer and colonized, powerful and powerless. In India there is a huge campus of religion situated in the society. There are four major caste divisions in India, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. The lowest caste people came under Shudra’s. They are regarded as dalits. These people are suppressed, humiliated, exploited, discriminated and marginalized in every sphere of life. These people are also regarded as untouchables/ Achool/ Harijan.

Literature and language have no doubt proved to be very important tools and medium of expression for those who have been considered inferior and down caste by the society. *Sangati Events* by Bama can be considered as a work where the Subalterns (here the dalit women) are made to speak and express themselves. The work is a collection of events which describe the story of different dalit women and their struggles. The author through the different female characters in the story, brings to the fore the exploitation, the sufferings, the struggles and the hardships that these ladies face in their lives. Out of these few of them follow silently the conventional path of tolerance and silence, while some of them dare to revolt and voice their concerns by asserting their lost and diminishing identities.

Either being a dalit or a woman means the person is entitled to willful subjugation and exploitation. Such an individual has no independent identity of his/her own. Both these entities are dependent on the gender and caste biased society for the assertion of their ignoble existence. For a female who is also called as 'fair sex', nothing is fair as she has no distinct individual existence of her own. Though she performs many important roles –of a dutiful mother, a wife, a daughter, a sister and a beloved yet she is considered as a secondary being. Her character is judged by stringent norms of society and she has to fulfill all the parameters satisfactorily. She is not considered as an autonomous entity. She cannot be seen as separate from a man. To be with 'him' adds meaning to her existence otherwise she is no one. This has been expressed by the author very well in the end of *Sangati*:

I wanted to rent a small house thinking it would be convenient to live there on my own, fending for myself, and going to work every day. But it isn't such an easy thing to live alone like this, as an unmarried woman. The owner of the house and the neighbors around pestered me with hundred of questions and tore me to shreds (120).

This very well show the discrimination which still prevails in our society which boasts of its women empowerment where unlike a woman, a male can live alone without anybody to question his character and background. Similarly, the society is cruel and harsh for the person born in an inferior or low caste. Such individuals are bound to perform menial jobs and duties as they are economically backward and uneducated. They are not entitled for any kind of meaningful existence as they are backward in their class, mannerisms, culture, education and very existence. Thus, they are bound to serve and suffer only. They live in a miserable and ever submissive state, devoid of any right to lift their heads or desire to achieve something good in their life. Their only purpose is to feed the ego of those whom they serve with full loyalty. They are very well aware of their exploitation at the hands of their masters but still they can't stand for their rights. Their brains have been conditioned with this kind of negativity, inferiority and suppression since ages as the condition of the subalterns have been very well described by Aravind Adiga in *The White Tiger*:

Go to Old Delhi, behind the Jama Masjid, and look at the way they keep chickens there in the market. Hundreds of pale hens and brightly coloured roosters, stuffed tightly into wiremesh cages, packed as tightly as worms in a belly, pecking each other and shitting on each other, jostling just for breathing space; the whole cage giving off a horrible stench-the stench of terrified, feathered flesh. On the wooden desk above this coop sits a grinning young butcher, showing off the flesh and organs of a recently chopped-up chicken, still oleaginous with a coating of dark blood. The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. They see the organs of their brother lying around them. They know they're the next. Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop (Adiga173).

Adiga uses - "The World of Dark" for the subalterns and "The World of White" for the rich and the upper caste people. The word 'dark' here symbolizes many things like-poverty, destitution, submissiveness, pessimism etc. that can be associated with the downtrodden section of the society. On the other hand, the word 'light' stands for strong, rich, opportunity, optimism etc which can be very well associated with the rich and powerful section of the society.

Sangati tries to break this convention by throwing light on the lives of those Dalit women, who dare to make fun of the class in power that oppressed them i.e the males belonging to their caste and outside their caste (the upper caste). These women do not let their menial or secondary existence to crush or shatter them. They try to swim vigorously against the tide with self confidence and courage that helps them to overcome all the obstacles and hardships by laughing at them or ridiculing them; and with their passion to live life with vitality, truth and enjoyment and with their hard labor. The work is written on a dalit feminist perspective. The language adopted is full of expletives and explicit sexual references which again shows the rebellion of the females who have long been suppressed by the sexual dominance and the power games of the so called patriarchal society. This obscene and sharp tongue is a way to vent out the frustration for the torture that they suffer at the hands of males. But the other aspect of this language is its distinct vigor and variety due to its closeness to the proverbs, songs and folklore. Thus, it also brings to light the culture, traditions, customs and the various superstitions practiced by the dalits which are again gender biased. Bama has tried to create a new aspect of language which voices the assertion of their identities and individualities. The work is written as a biography where the

stories related to the lives of different women whom the author knows personally have been woven meticulously. The author, who is also the omniscient narrator and one of the major and strong characters in the work, raises several questions against the injustice and violence inflicted on the dalit women. They are not treated with respect, love or care by their husbands or the men belonging to the upper castes who consider them as mere commodity to satisfy their lust. On one occasion, when Mariamma was falsely accused with charges of adultery (seducing an upper caste man) and the ladies accompanying her try to justify the charges as wrong, they were not allowed to speak:

Even as she was saying this, four or five of the men got up once again and shouted at us. ‘Will you she-donkeys get out of here or do we have to stamp on you?’ (23).

But still the ladies dare to speak and express their views without paying much heed to the protests of males although they were not heard by anyone and their voices were reduced to mere whispers. In *Sangati* as well as in society there are separate rules for males and females. A husband is free to have an extra marital affair or to beat his wife in front of public or to satisfy his physical needs without the consent of his wife and also he has a choice to feel responsible or not responsible towards his family:

‘Everybody in the village knows about her father’s kept woman, even a baby who was born just the other day. Did anyone call a village meeting and question him about it? They say he’s a man: if he sees mud he’ll step into it; if he sees water, he will wash himself. It’s one justice for men and quite another for women’ (24).

Contrary to this, a female is bound to fulfill all her duties without questioning, she has to worship her husband like a god, even in her dreams she can never think of compromising her loyalty at any cost, she has no right to stand against the violence inflicted on her. But in *Sangati*

characters like Rakkamma, Kaaliamma, Sammuga Kizhavi etc are courageous enough to challenge the existing false notions of the society. Then there are characters like Paatti, Maikkanni etc who find happiness and optimism even amidst the hardships and adverse circumstances. Further, there are characters like Thaayi and Mariamma which again depict the weak and conventional image of women who fail to break this glass ceiling due to the dual disadvantage of being a woman and a dalit at the same time. These are women who have accepted their subjugation silently without any retaliation or signs of rebellion. Through presenting two contrast kind of characters- strong and weak, the author has silently conveyed the message regarding the right choices to be made by inculcating a strength within one's character in order to end the age old exploitation and suppression due to the prevailing factors like gender discrimination and class discrimination in society. Bama has generalized the condition of women belonging to the upper and lower caste through *Sangati*. It tells there is hardly much impact of the factors like caste or class on the condition of females in the society as it is almost the same everywhere:

In the upper castes, too, a woman can't lead a life on her own if she has left her husband. On all sides, they'll call her an abandoned wife and her life will be finished. It does not matter whether she comes from a wealthy family, whether she is beautiful, whether she is educated or ignorant; the day she leaves her husband, she loses everything. She won't be given any respect or value. Even if the men leave her alone, the women devil will keep on calling her names until her spirit is broken and her life is gone (95).

Through the life of these characters, the discrimination, subjugation and the exploitation which these females face at the hands of the males and other people in almost all the spheres of life i.e domestic, social, economic and religious is shown by the author. At home they are tortured by their husbands. Throughout the work we see instances of different women who do work outside and earn money just like men and perform all the household chores, including the take care of their kids and husbands but still they are not expected to express themselves or to raise their voice against the injustice. Even in religious places like Church also this kind of gender discrimination is found rampant. As is very well evident in the incident where everybody was

against the proposal of the role of Sesu or Jesus as a new born baby to be played by a baby girl. But finally the organizers had to agree as they could not find anyone else. The way ladies defend their points for the role of Christ to be played by a girl, notably shows the slow revolution and change in their thinking. These lower caste women are also exploited by the people of upper class who think of exploiting them with their power, money and influence. They are not allowed to attend the meetings and they never went to vote as they are not considered to be worthy to be aware of any such practical information. But few daring people in the society like Balram in *The White Tiger*, Vellaiyamma Kizhavi, who brings up the narrator's mother as a single parent, Sammuga Kizhavi, who dare to piss in landlord's drinking water, Raakkamma and Kaaliamma who dare to stand against the physical violence and exploitation by her husband could raise their voice against the subjugation and exploitation of the weak and oppressed people. *Sangati* as a work of literature is successful in creating new ripples of self assertion or individual assertion through its courageous and strong female characters who despite of all the oppression and criticism, dare to swim against the tide with a smile on their faces. These iron ladies, do not stumble over the marbles of the customs and conventions scattered by the patriarchal society rather they stand with their feet firmly dug in the ground to assert their identities and raise their voices against the injustice inflicted on them. Though as readers we feel disappointed at the sad and miserable condition of the women but at the same time we get impressed by the manner with which these ladies overcome all the hardships and struggles and hence, prove their metal as an individual with independent existence and identity. As *Sangati* ends on beautiful lines full of optimism and courage:

If we ourselves do not change our condition, then who will come and change it for us? We must give up the belief that a married life of complete service to a man is our only fate.....We must bring up our girls to think in these new ways from an early age. We should educate boys and girls alike, showing no difference between them as they grow into adults. We should give our girls the freedom we give our boys. If we rear our children like this from the time they are babies, women will reveal their strength. Then there will come a day when men and women will live as one, with no difference between them; with equal rights. Then

injustices, violence, and inequalities will come to an end, and the saying will come true that 'women can make and women can break' (122-123).

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