



BAMA'S SANGATI: A SAGA OF SUFFERINGS OF DALIT WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

Dalit literature is a protest against all forms of exploitation based on class, race, sex, caste and community. Dalit literature is about the sufferings of "oppressed class". Dalit writings help the reader to look in to the sufferings and problems of Dalit people under the clutches of the upper cast. If the woman belongs to dalit community they suffered of two types: first being a woman, second belongs to the lowest community. Therefore it could be said they are "doubly oppressed." For centuries they have been suffering mutely. It does not mean that they were immune to the pain they have been inflicted. On the contrary, the fact is that they wished to resist but they were not empowered to do so. Some Dalit writers dare to raise their voices to the bitter and painful experience of those who belong to a community of downtrodden. Bama expresses the common experiences of exploitation of her own paraiya community in her works of fiction and especially the text *Sangati* deals with the vulnerable condition of dalit women. The present research article is an attempt to discuss the abject misery of dalit women and the inhumanity of upper caste on them depicted in the novel of Bama's *Sangati*

Key words: Dalit, Women, Sufferings, pain, community, condition, Oppression.

INTRODUCTION

Literature is considered as the mouthpiece of the society in which it is written. So, it was the power of words that empowered Dalits to put across their voice, so that people may understand what wrongs have been done to them. Words are used as weapons to express their trauma as well as anger against the wrongs and ill-treatment meted out to them. Literature, since the time it has been written, has tried its best to entertain the readers and it also mirrors the evils like casteism and untouchability. Dr. Jugal Kishore Mishra avers that Dalit is not a caste; it is a symbol of change and revolution (Mishra). The aim of Dalit writings is to bring about a change and revolution in the society where plight of Dalits is brushed aside with indifference, and construct an identity of their own for them.

The Indian writers in English have ignored the Indian reality for a long time. But on the other hand the regional writers, writing in their own languages present a comprehensive and crystal clear picture of her community. Bama, one of the pioneers of Dalit feminist literature, is a significant regional voice among the subcontinent women. Bama's '*Sangati*' is a unique Dalit feminist narrative. It was written in Tamil by Bama and translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom. Bama says: "After a gap of nearly ten years, the chance to read *Sangati* in English has arrived. The first edition of *Sangati* in Tamil appeared in 1994 and the second edition followed in 1995" (vii).

When Bama published her first novel, *Karruku*, she wasn't allowed to enter her village. People realized their folly and it was after seven months they allowed her to enter the village. Her narrative style and her language earned her many enemies. It is after many years people accepted her as a writer. She is bent on fighting against the injustice meted out to her people. *Sangati* carries an autobiographical element in their narrative, but it is a story of a whole community, not an individual. In *Sangati*, many strong Dalit women who



had the shackles of authority are also focused. The conditions of dalits were very bad as they were not allowed to enter in to the temple, and schools for education. Bama is very careful in portraying the picture of a dalit woman. Bama, through her novel depicts the sufferings of Dalit women who are considered triply marginalized by caste, society and gender. She laments: "It's one justice for men and quite another for women" (Bama24).

Sangati was originally written in Tamil in 1994. It was translated by Laxmi Halmstrom into English. The whole narrative is divided into twelve chapters. 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 also reveals how Paraiya women double oppressed. *Sangati* deals with several generation of women: the older women belongs to narrators grandmothers generation VelliammaKizhavi's generation, and downward generation belongs to narrator, and the generation coming after as she grows up. *Sangati* is an autobiography of her community, which highlights the struggle of Paraiya women. Bama chooses *Sangati* also refers news and the book is full of interconnected events—the everyday happenings of dalit community. It goes against the notions of traditional novel. The book does not carry any plot in the normal sense, but it is a series of anecdotes. The author herself says the purpose of writing the book in her acknowledgement.

"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." (Bama9)

Sangati encapsulates the author's experience of working within an erogenous and apprised society and the series of several interconnected anecdotes, experiences, news and events as narrated in the book, from an autobiography of a community. *Sangati* is a portrayal of many trouble witnessing stories as ones writers Paatti said "Once you are born a woman can you go and confront a group of four or five men?" Should you ever do it? (Bama28). This narration accommodates more than 35 characters most of whom.....female, but in conventional sense there is no individual who may be tagged as hero or heroine.

Bama realistically portrays the physical violence, like lynching, whipping and canning that dalit woman by fathers, husbands, and brothers. Bama as a feminist writer, protests against all forms of oppression and sufferings faced by dalit women in the first half of *Sangati*. But later part of *Sangati* moves away from the state of depression and frustration. Instead it presents a positive identity to dalit women focusing their inner strength and vigor.

Dalit women are humiliated and molested by men at work places. They are neither allowed to enact nor allowed go to theatres. They are ill-treated both by upper caste and by the Dalit men. Rakkamma, a Dalit woman in the text, shouts in a revolting way and shames her husband by lifting her sari in front of the crowd, when her husband drags her to the street by the hair and stamps her belly. It is clearly a means of survival and escape. Thayyi, one of the most beautiful women, is beaten up wickedly by her husband and he goes to the extent of cutting off her hair in order to diminish her beauty.

Child labour is most common among Dalit people. Female children are not encouraged to get even a basic education, without which they are indirectly forced to lead life of ignorance and poverty. Even the health's of female children are not given priority when compared to the opposite sex. Society and parents consider educating a female child as pointless. Female children, from their young age, are trained to take care of the household chores and their siblings. One of such cases is Maikkanni in the text, which is compelled to work in fields, factories and do household chores at home. Narrator mentions her pathetic situation as: From the time she woke up, she sprinkled the front yard with water and swept it, and then carried on with all the housework: swept the rest of the house, scrubbed the cooking pots, collected water, washed clothes, gathered firewood, went to the shops, cooked the kanji. She did it all one after the other. (Bama70)



Women are not allowed to marry out of their caste which is not the same for men of Dalit, about which Bama condemns “when it comes to inter-caste marriages, our people are not bothered if boys make a marriage outside their caste. But if a girl marries out of caste no one will accept it” (Bama106). Bama pities the condition of Dalit women, though educated, suffer by the physical harassments thus, “That girl was beaten up in her house every day by her father and her brother. And they weren’t light slaps that she was given, either. For all this, mind you, she was an educated girl who worked for her living” (106). An inhuman activity towards of a Dalit child by the land owner is cited by Bama to bring to light the atrocities committed by the upper caste. Her mother says, “That *ayya* had brought a small pot of drinking water for him. One of the children from our streets went and touched it by mistake, so the *ayya* picked up some young groundnut stalks and beat up the child cruelly” (Bama118).

The suppression and oppression of Dalits by the society made them feel inferior and only few are ready to overcome that, who bravely calls themselves as Dalits. One such person is Bama who shares her determination as: I often get angry enough to shout it out aloud: I am a *paraichi*; yes I am a *paraichi*. And I don’t like to hide my identity and pretend I belong to a different caste. The question beats away in my mind: why should I tell a lie and live a false life? Women of other castes don’t face this problem. They can move where they choose, take a house, set up a livelihood. But we are denied the basic right to pay our money and rent a house. Are we so despicable to these others? (Bama120)

The suffering of Dalit women starts from their infancy. They live “hard lives” as Bama recalls. Their suffering starts even when they are babies. 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, 7) She continues saying that the case doesn’t change even after they have grown old, “boys are given more respect. They’ll eat as much as they wish and run off to play. As for the girls, they must stay at home and keep on working all the time...”

On the other hand, boys enjoy playing games and chatting with others. Nobody dares to ask all these. Even in education, women are not sent out from their villages whereas men were sent for good schools and good education. Whatever men say is bound to be right while whatever women say is to be always wrong. “Whether it is right or wrong, it is better for women not to open their mouths. You just try speaking out about what you believe is right.” (Bama 29) The writer angrily continues, “I’m not talking about kanji. Why can’t we be the same as boys? We aren’t allowed to talk loudly or laugh noisily; even when we sleep we can’t stretch out on our backs or lie face down on our bellies. We always have to walk with our heads bowed down, gazing at our goes. You tell us all this rubbish and keep us under your control. Even when our stomachs are screaming with hunger, we mustn’t eat first. We are allowed to eat only after the men in the family have finished and gone. What, Paatti, aren’t we also human beings.” (Bama29)

Bama recalls how she ate the “leftover skin” of the mangoes her grandmother brought.

“If she brought anything home when she returned from work, it was always the grandsons she called first. If she brought cucumbers, she scooped out all the seeds with her fingernails, since she had no teeth, and gave them the remaining fruit. If she brought mangoes, we only got the skin, the stones and such; 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.” (Bama8)

The young Dalit girls hardly enjoy their childhood. She recounts how a young Dalit girl’s life starts. In our streets the girls hardly ever enjoy a period of childhood. Before they can sprout three tender leaves, so to speak, they are required to behave like young women, looking after the house work, taking care of babies, going out to work for daily wages. Yet, in spite of all their suffering and pain one cannot but be delighted by their sparkling words, their firm tread, and their bubbling laughter. (Bama75)



Lack of education breaks the spirits of Dalits. Bama understands it clearly and says, "Because we haven't 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." (Bama118) Bama proclaims how her father was particular to educate his children. Even when the society expected her to stay at home he took the courageous step to send her to the school. "Her father won't allow her to stop off now. He wants her to study at least to the tenth. He says, we didn't learn anything, and so we go to ruin. He says;"let them at least get on in the world." (Bama 9)

The episode of Mariamma in the beginning chapters creates deep feelings she stands as an example in experiencing the hardships of Dalit Woman in every stages of life. Her irresponsible father lives with another woman. He does not take care of his children. His cruelty and sexual harassment causes the death of his wife. He represents the life of a husband and a father in every Dalit family of that village. Mariamma as a motherless child takes care of her two sisters and earns restlessly in order to feed them. One day, while working she fell into the well and she was hospitalized for months. But poverty forced her to work; she went into the hill to gather firewood. She was attacked by an upper caste landlord, Kumara Swami Ayyah. In order to defend himself from his illegal deed, he himself complained against Mariamma and Manikkam. This case was brought before the community panchayat. The male dominated panchayat, which could have given justifiable verdict, gives more importance to that upper caste man. The leaders of this panchayat raised the questions only to Mariamma and penalized her more. This is an example of feudal deception which has worked to entrap especially the Dalit women. The poor Mariamma was insulted publicly which injured her future and made her to suffer through her life. She was forced to marry a wicked young man, Manikkam. Through this event of Mariamma, Bama shows how Dalit woman miserably suffers, when she has careless father and an irresponsible husband.

The mistakes of men fall on women and, even though the women knew it, their words fell on deaf ears. Look how unfair these fines are. Even last week, when my granddaughter Paralokam went to pull up grass for the cow the owner of the fields said he would help her lift the bundle on to her head. That was his excuse for squeezing her breasts, the barbarian. He's supposed to be the mudallali's son. He's supposed to be an educated fellow. The poor child came and told me and wept. But say we dared to tell anyone else about it. It's my granddaughter who'll be called a whore and punished. Whatever a man does, in the end, the blame falls on the woman." (Bama, 26)

From Bama's view only the Dalit women suffer this kind of molestation. Bama wonders why the dalit women alone suffer in the hands of men and the society. She questions if it is "... because of our caste and because of our poverty, every fellow treats us with contempt. If ever there is a problem or a disturbance, everyone, starting with the police, chooses to blame and humiliate the women of our community." (Bama66) Again from Bama's view, spirit possession or pey happens only to Dalit women. She is bewildered to know that even evil spirits "peys" possess only women and not men. "I began to wonder how a man could even strike at a pey bravely, while a woman is easily caught and becomes its prey. And even among women, I never heard of upper-caste women becoming possessed or dancing in frenzy. The peys always seem set on women from the pallar, paraiyar, chakkiliyar and koravar communities." (Bama58) She doesn't stop with questioning alone but comes out with the answer too.

... I thought about the fact that only women – and Dalit women in particular – become possessed. And when I examined the lives of our women, I understood the reason. From the moment they wake up, they set to work both in their homes and in the fields. At home they are pestered by their husbands and children; in the fields there is back-breaking work besides the harassment of the landlord. When they come home in the evening, there is no time even to draw breath. And once they have collected water and firewood, cooked a kanji and fed their hungry husband and children, even then they can't



go to bed in peace and sleep until dawn. Night after night they must give in to their husbands' pleasure. Even if a woman's body is wracked with pain, the husband is bothered only with his own satisfaction. Women are overwhelmed and crushed by their own disgust, boredom, and exhaustion, because of all this. The stronger ones somehow manage to survive all this. The one who don't have the mental strength are totally oppressed; they succumb to mental ill-health and act as if they are possessed by peys. (Bama59)

The position of Dalit women is both pitiful and humiliation. In the fields they have to escape from upper-caste men's molestations. At church they must lick the priest's shoes and be his slaves while he threatens them with tales of God, Heaven, and Hell. Even when they go to their own homes, before they have had a chance to cook some kanji or lie down and rest a little, they have to submit themselves to their husband's torment. (Bama35)

Bama also talks about the torments of Dalit women relating to health. Dalit women are notable to get proper food and drink. They never go to the hospital even at the time of childbirth.

However, almost all the female characters in this narrative have been portrayed with surgeon-like precision to make this text a realistic document. Dalit women like Pachamuukipillai are so occupied in their daily chores that they end up giving birth to their kids in the fields without realizing the exact timing of their delivery. She herself cut the umbilical cord with the sickle to bring her son Kaatturaasa on this happy planet. Even the narrator's mother gave her birth without realizing the exact time of the birth. Patti states

"Even your mother spent all day transplanting in the western fields and then went into labour just as she was grinding the masala for the evening meal" (Bama6).

What could be more pathetic and inhuman treatment meted out to Dalit women who cannot even beget their children in proper surroundings and hygienic hospitals. Most of the times their homes become maternity hospitals where the midwives like the narrator's grandmother help in delivering the baby with the dexterity of a gynecologist. The hard Indian reality is that women still deliver babies in open corridors in many govt. hospitals without showing any concern for privacy. Then patti, the narrator's grandmother pours out one of the most insecure statement about women in general and Dalit women in particular "If you are born into this world, it is best you are born a man. Born as women, what good do we get? We only toil in the fields and in the home until our very vaginas shrivel" (Bama6).

This text comprises the galaxy of dalit women characters of different age groups. Almost all the female characters are subject to religious, patriarchal, and casteist oppression. But some of the dalit women show resistance against upper-caste landlords and domestic violence. The dalit womenfolk like Mariamma, Thaayi and Esakki are beaten by their own husbands. These ladies of the lesser God do their jobs religiously both at home and in the fields. The home that is considered the safest place for them is just like a legal brothel to satisfy the carnal desires of their husbands. But there are also women like Raakkamma and Kaaliamma who cannot assume silence at the violent attitude of their husbands. She is so much disturbed that she crosses all the boundaries of decency "Instead of drinking toddy every day, why don't you drink your son's urine? Why don't you drink my monthly blood" (Bama61).

In the tenth chapter, the imagination of Bama takes flight to electoral scene which shows the inability of Dalit women to cast their vote to the candidates of their own choice because they have to toe the lines of their husbands. The writer reveals the ground reality "Whether it is Rama who rules, or Ravana, what does it matter? Our situation is always the same" (99). Even education can not entirely liberate the dalit men and dalit women from the evil shadow of casteism. The tag of casteism is so dominant that even the high class officials belonging to low caste have to bear the casteist taunts. This kind of predicament has been expressed by Balwant Singh in his book 'An Untouchable IAS Officer'. Bama expresses here the same kind of predicament "Later, when I finished my studies and began to look for jobs, I realized that even with an education one has to face many difficulties when trying to earn a livelihood" (Bama119).



Conclusion

The sufferings of the Dalit women cannot be expressed better than this, even though one should also note that similar experience is not uncommon, in fact it is similarly widespread, among the poorer and socially supposedly lower castes among the non-Brahmin communities in Tamilnadu. All the twelve chapters are thus the odyssey of Dalit women revealing the multiple forms of oppression as well as agency but who are still miles away from leading a respectable life. Bama very pathetically speaks about her community's present state. She also gives very supportive encouragements for the new generation of her community. Bama asks her community to follow a few things to put an end to the suffering women. She asks them to treat both "boys and girls alike, showing no difference between them as they grow into adults." Girls too must be given freedom and make them realize their strength. Then she is sure that, "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 she is sure that the saying „Women can make and women can break". (Bama123) will come true and "such a day will dawn soon."

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