

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Vol. IV & Issue I (April- 2019)

A Study of Dalit Feminism in Bama's *Sangati*

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DOI: 10.53032/tcl.2019.4.1.01

Abstract

Patriarchy is considered to be a big rival of women literature. In association with this, exploitation or oppression of weaker by stronger is nothing new. Feminism or feminist aspect deals with society in general and woman in particular. 'The Woman' and 'The Dalit' are marginalized, hegemonized and downgraded. This paper examines the varied underlined, invisible ways of sufferings embedded in the lives of the Dalit community, particularly women and their lived experiences portrayed in Bama's *Sangati*. It also discusses how Dalit women are constantly exploited by the powerful caste- Hindus and experiences faced by the two protagonists: Mariamma and Maikkanni in the novel. In the light of this background the paper delineates how Bama analyzed and characterized many individual stories in Dalit life.

Keywords- Patriarchy, Hegemony, Marginalization, Feminism

One of the most important social movements of the past two centuries and certainly the social movement which has brought about the most enduring and progressive transformation of human society on a global scale is feminism. Feminism stands for political, economical and social equality of the sexes. Today feminism means many different things to different people, but at its core, if one goes, back to its origin in the late 18th century, it is primarily a social movement for the emancipation of women . One of the earliest self - consciously feminist works, namely Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) which was written at the height of the French revolution. The other prominent Feminist writers were Simone De Beauvoir, Emily Dickinson, George Eliot, Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath and many more.

Many modern day Indian feminists believe that feminism entered India through West and that India never had its own share of feminists or feminists movements. But Indian feminism traces its roots to way back to 19th century Maharashtra. Indian society has always been highly hierarchical. Yet, Feminism as it exists today in India has gone beyond its western counter parts. In the literature of early Vedic Period, there are several mentions of

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female scholars like Lopamudra, Maitreyi and Gargi. Although patriarchy is deeply entrenched in modern - day India, the country has a long tradition of women who resisted conformity, even under severe societal pressure. Some of the Feminist writers who brought a totally different wave of change in India were Kamala Das, Ismat Chughtai, Kamini Roy, Krishna Sobti, Gaura Pant and many more.

Indian Dalit Literature began as a concerted movement in the 1960s, though clannish elements were visible as early in the 11th Century. Dalit, meaning "broken/ scattered" in Sanskrit and Hindi, is a term mostly used for the ethnic groups in India that have been kept depressed by subjecting them to untouchability. It began in Marathi Literature and later on infiltrated to Hindi, Kannada, Telegu, Malyalam and Tamil Literatures. Dalit writers initiated a realistic, experience based and authentic literature which threatened the upper class hegemony in society and in literature. Dalit issues are recorded in a variety of genres - autobiographies, novel, poetry and essays. In South India there are many Dalit Feminist writers. Among them Bama, Sivakami, Poomani explored subalternity and gender discrimination in their works.

Bama is a representative novelist of Dalit Feminism. Caste and gender are the two important identity building mechanisms that create a Dalit Feminist perspective. Dalit women suffers in two aspects: First being a woman, second, belonging to the lowest community. Therefore they are double oppressed. Bama (born 1958), also known as Bama Faustina Soosairaj, is a Tamil, Dalit Feminist, who rose to fame with her autobiographical novel *Karukku* (1992) which chronicles the joys and sorrows experienced by Dalit Christian women in Tamil Nadu. She subsequently wrote two more novels, *Sangati* (1994) and *Vanmam* (2002). In addition to this she has written twenty short stories. Bama belonged to the Paraiyar community, later she accepted 'Bama' as her pen name, Her ancestors were from the dalit community and worked as agricultural laborers. Bama had her early education in her village. Her early literary influences include Tamil writers Like Jayakantan, Akhilan, Mani, and Parthasarthy. In college, she read and enjoyed Kahlil Gibran and Rabindranath Tagore.

Bama's *Sangati* is a unique Dalit Feminist narrative. It was originally written in Tamil in 1994. It was translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom 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 events that occur in the life of Dalit women. 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 as, "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 labor. I wanted to shout out these stories"

Discussing the social evils of this community *Sangati* also throws light on the tyranny, exploitation, injustices, the cruelty, the trauma and disparity taking place in the

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Paraiyar community. In the initial chapters, it's narrated in the First person, then counter pointed by the generalizing comments of the grandmothers and other mother figures, and later still, by the author- narrator's reflections. The earlier chapters show the narrator as a young girl of about twelve years of age, but in the last quarter, as a young woman. The voice is that of an adult looking back and meditating deeply upon her experience in the past which calls for practical actions.

Sangati deals with gender bias Dalit women face right from their childhood. Bama gives the account of various superstitions regarding the Dalit girls who are born. The belief of community was that it was a good thing for the first, third, fifth, seventh, the odd-numbered one, to be a girl whereas if the second, fourth, sixth, the even - numbered one was a boy, it was a lucky thing. Bama also gives the account of lack of health care institutions for the Dalit people. Bama's *Sangati* is a unique dalit feminist narrative carrying autobiographical elements of the whole community. Women are presented in *Sangati* as daily wage earners, then also they are abandoned by husbands, exploited and sexually harassed at workplace, even during pregnancy the women had to toil hard. Narrator's grandmother Vellaiamma single handedly brought up her children. There was no concept of family planning amongst the Dalit society. In this novel Marriamma tells a lot about the sexual assault faced by her and her community women. The physical violence is realistically portrayed in this novel like lynching, whipping and canning by fathers, husbands, and brothers. Observing all, Bama expresses caste and gender problems both outside and inside the community. According to Bama "all women in the world are second class citizens. For Dalit women the problem is grave. Their Dalit identity gives them a different set of problems. They experience a total leak of social status. Even they are not considered dignified human beings. My stories are based on these aspects of Dalit culture . . ."

Bama uses more Tamil Dalit slogans and addresses the village women as Amma such as Villaiamma, Mariamma and Pecchiamma. She uses various Tamil words to name the places, months, festivals, rituals, customs, clothes and occupations. In this novel, women address one another and share their everyday experiences sometimes anger or pain. The language of this novel is full of sexual references. She bridges the spoken and written styles of Tamil by breaking the rules of grammar and spellings. She feministically voices out the grievances of Dalit women.

The men because they are Dalit often undergo dog's treatment in the hands of the upper caste men who are the landlords. In such situation, these men show of their male pride and authority, their suppressed anger that is vented out on their wives who are beaten to pulp by these men. Ultimately it is the women who are tormented both within and without their homes. Bama becomes the voice of these women of her community and speaks out the truth that though all women are slaves to men, her women are the worst sufferers. This is the core theme of *Sangati*.

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Bama also draws a comparison between dalit and non- Dalit women. According to her the dalit situation is better than that of upper class women who have been forced to live in most vulnerable conditions. Upper class women find no way to express their emotion. Bama feels proud that their women have economical freedom from their men folk, they work hard in fields and bring up their children. Sometimes widows are allowed remarriage and their culture never alienates from the mainstream. But the upper class women confine their emotion within the four walls of their homes. But Dalit women suffer caste oppression in mornings and gender oppressions in nights.

In *Sangati* the child narrator in the early chapters grow melancholic and rebellious due to the events happening around her. When she grows into a young woman she stresses on the need for a radical change and calls out for action against the oppression. She exhorts them to take pride of their (Dalit women) caste and marches towards social empowerment. Bama draws attention to their immense capacity for hard labor, their spirit of protests, their cultures absence of dowry and their rich cultural heritage. She talks about the narrator's courageous grandmother who pawned her 'thali' to feed her children , Katturaasa's mother who bore her son by herself while cutting grass and about Mariamma who came back to work even after she met with an accident . But they have been silenced in the crucial moments of their lives. When Bama's protagonist admonishes her grandmother not for protesting, she replies, "From your ancestors times it has been agreed that what men say is right. Don't you go dreaming that everything is going to change just because you have learnt a few letters of the alphabet?"

In *Sangati* the later part moves away from the state of depression and oppression. Instead it presents a positive identity of Dalit women focusing on their inner strength and vigor. She also attracts our mind towards the education system about Dalit community. Pechiamma, who belongs to Chakkiliyar's community studied up to fifth class, but the girls of that community do not go to school all that much.

The seventh chapter portrays the inconsolable sufferings faced by eleven year old little girl Maikkanni. People say, she was born unlucky because soon after her birth, her father becomes friendly with another woman and so the family responsibilities fall on her shoulder. Her mother is pregnant for the seventh time therefore she finds very difficult to go for a job. However, if she is laid up at home, the children will starve to death. The day Maikkanni learns to walk, she starts to work as well. When her mother goes out to work in the fields, it is Maikkanni who looks after all the tasks at home. Whenever her mother has a baby, Maikkanni goes off to work in the neighboring match factory in the town because her mother cannot go for job. This shows the suffering of a young girl.

As a feminist writer Bama's feminism is focused in the Dalit community .As women are powerless, they accept the patriarchal role of men in their life. All her women characters are never empowered with education, Mariamma and Thaayi have faced inexplicable shame in their family life. Their husbands regularly beat them up and also feel that it is their

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birthright to humiliate and kill their life partners. Mariamma is unlucky in her whole life. She was completely made a victim and people watched helplessly. The Paraya men were speechless when she was victimized for molestation by Kumarasami Ayya. They were afraid of losing their favors especially jobs and don't have the power to question the upper class person. So, Bama says in her novel *Sangati* "We must be strong. We must show by our own resolute lives that we believe ardently in our independence." Bama's autobiographical novel, *Karukku* makes a sense of Bama's life as woman, Christian and Dalit. Both *Karukku* and *Sangati* events focus on feminist perspective of Bama.

To conclude, it would suffice to say that the consciousness of ignorance burning in the heart of Bama is rightly represented throughout the novel. Through *Sangati*, Bama holds the mirror up to the heart of Dalit women and makes an appeal for a change and betterment in the life of Dalit women in different fields including sex, gender discrimination, equal opportunity in work force, education rights, etc. By discussing the narratives of many women from the Dalit community Bama places before us the rural Dalit woman's identity. Though the struggle is much owing to the double oppression of caste and gender, we notice that their strength is also revealed.

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