



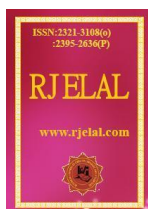
The Predicament of Dalit Women in Bama's *Sangati*: An Appraisal

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Abstract

In this article an attempt is made to examine the predicament of dalit women as narrated through the characters; Vellaiyamma, Marriamma and Pathima in Bama's "*Sangati*". It also analyses how they suffer at the hands of upper caste men and men within their own community, and form and nature of exploitation, in the name of caste and gender in family and the social setting. At the end, the article. Presents the solution offered by the author for the amelioration of Dalit women.

Introduction

Indian social structure is built on Varnashrama Dharma, which categorises people into four Primary Varnas (Castes); Brahmin, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudhra. But, there is a fifth category of people who are referred to as Panchama (Avarna). They are also known as out castes, untouchables. So they are vulnerable to discrimination based on their caste but Dalit women are more vulnerable than their men. Dalit women face discrimination in various forms due to their caste and gender from the time immemorial. Here an attempt is made to analyse the experiences of dalit women, and form and nature of exploitations as narrated in Bama's *Sangati*. In this article, interpretive research method is used to analyse the novel and to realise the theme of predicament of dalit women due to the intersection of disadvantages;

caste, gender, and economic hardship, making the characters as the representative of their own generation.

Sangati (Events) (1994) is the second novel of Bama, a notable Tamil novelist, and her publications include *Karukku* (1992), *Vanmam* (2003) and a collection of short stories, *Kusumbukaaran* (1996). Bama is one of the first dalit woman writers, widely recognized and translated. *Sangati* has been translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom. The novel has no plot in the normal sense, but it has a series of powerful episodes involving memorable characters. In Tamil, "*Sangati*" means news, events, or happenings. These individual episodes, anecdotes and memories of personal experience are narrated in first person. The narrator, in the early chapters, is Pathima, a girl of twelve, and in the last three chapters, it is the

same narrator, but she turns a young woman; the reflective narrative voice is that of an adult intermittently present in all three narrations and it looks into the past and probes the present.

Bama's chief concern is for the dalit problems. The central theme in her creations is the existential predicament of the dalit women, and it is projected through the problems of the protagonist in a caste conscious society. Her protagonists struggle against patriarchy, and she probes deeply the social problems which are responsible for the sufferings of the dalits. Some of the problems of the dalit, which captivate the readers' attention are the upper caste people's degrading the dalit culture, conversion of the dalits to Christianity, Sexual exploitation, gender bias, inequality of women in dalit community etc.

Pathima, the narrator in Sangati, a grand daughter of Vellaiyamma, presents the lives of the dalits in the past. In the opening chapter, she gives a vivid picture of the dalit community from the view point of Vellaiyamma. Vellaiyamma is in her seventies and she is an uneducated midwife at Perumalpatti village. As there is no hospital at the village, people afflicted with illness or disease, go to the free government hospital in the town. So most of the confinement and childbirth take place at home. Vellaiyamma, adroit in her profession, attends to every childbirth at the village. She is a grass widow. Her husband, Goyindan, was tempted by an agent from a tea estate in Sri Lanka with a good job on handsome wages, and so, leaving his wife and two children, he went away with the agent. Never did he come back.

Vellaiyamma waited for her husband, Goyindan's return but she experienced only disappointment. When there was a terrible famine, she sold her tali (mangal sutra) for household expenses, and afterwards she never wore it. Till date she does so because dalit women do not give much importance to sentiments. Vellaiyamma struggles a lot in life to

look after her two children without her husband. She never wears a blouse because, in the past, dalit women were not allowed to wear a blouse, and she continues the social practice. Her elder daughter also does not wear a blouse. But her younger daughter has started wearing it only after her marriage.

The Christian missionaries came to the village in the past and offered free education to the dalits converted to Christianity. Most of the parayas were converted to Christianity. Now they suffer a lot because they do not get any concessions like scholarship, employment reservation etc. from the government. Despite free education made available, children refuse to attend school and take up a job. Boys have little education but the girls remain at home, and do only domestic chores like attending on babies during the absence of their mother. But Vellaiyamma's younger daughter has education up to fifth standard.

After disclosing her past life and the general conditions of the dalits at present, Vellaiyamma turns to narrate the plight of another woman Pachamuukipillai, a mother having five children. She delivered a child while she was cutting grass for her cow in the field. Her last child is named Katturasa. After delivery, she herself cut off the umbilical cord with the sickle, and dug a hole and buried the placenta, and returned home with baby and the bundle of grass. After that she was given a hot bath and other needs.

Dalit women are presented in the novel as wage earners like men. They are landless, uneducated and poor, and they work hard in order to earn their daily bread. Vellaiyamma narrates: "It was not just her, more or less all the women in our street are the same. 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. And that it is how you were born" (Sangati 6)

The novelist discusses gender bias prevailing in the society. Dalits are underprivileged, and gender bias and patriarchy affect them greatly. Bama exquisitely presents women in her novels as site labourers in farming work and building construction. But they are paid less than men:

We have to labour in the fields as hard as men do, and then on top of that, struggle to bear and raise our children. As for the men, their work ends when they've finished in the fields. If you are born into this world, it is best you were 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 (6).

Dalit women are presented as wage earners as much as men are. After a day's hard work in the fields, men go off to the bazaar, with the money they have earned, and drink as much as they like, and eat in the coffee-stands and food-stalls, and come home only for their meal. But as far as women are concerned, they have to feed their children, and do whatever is necessary in their house, and prepare meal for the family. On bed women are not allowed to sleep and they have to satisfy their respective husbands' sexual hunger. Then the next day, they continue their routine without rest. For men, work stops in the field itself.

Bama portrays women characters as more onerous than men in *Sangati*. They find no time to realize themselves, and often suppress their desires for the welfare of their family, children and their monstrous husbands. Unfortunately women themselves are responsible for their being discriminated. Gender bias begins within women from breast feeding itself. They feed male babies more than girls. Male babies are fed longer than girls and such babies grow thin quickly. Boys are nursed with greater care than girls. Grown up boys are given more respect and food, and also they are allowed to play in the street. But girls have to stay at home and do work all the time cleaning

vessels, drawing water, sweeping the house, gathering fire wood, washing clothes, looking after the babies. Even in games, girls are discriminated and they are not allowed to play boys' games like kabadi, marble, etc. and they are never allowed to move with boys. They can just play games like dice only.

Mariamamma, a teen-age girl, works as a well digger. In this work, girls and boys are engaged. But boys are well paid whereas girls are low paid. Even in the case of selling firewood bundles, boys get five or six rupees more. So boys sell bundles made by girls for a better price. The novelist, by portraying the character, Mariamma, and her sufferings, presents how poor dalit women are exploited by the uppercaste landlords. Mariamma, one day, while carrying a basket of rubble, slips into a well, and later, she is admitted to a government hospital. But she is not given any compensation. After being discharged from the hospital, she goes to work in the fields again, weeding or harvesting. When there is no seasonal work, she goes to gather firewood in the hills and sells it to feed herself. One day, after collecting firewood, on her way, she leans her firewood bundle against a banyan tree, and relaxes for a moment. Then she goes to quench her thirst at an irrigation pump-set in Kumarasami Ayya's field.

There Kumarasami Ayya seizes her hand and pulls her inside the pump room to satisfy his lust. Fortunately, she escapes from the lustful landlord before being molested, and she explains to her friends what has happened to her. They advise her not to share this with others because they would blame her and also call her whore. Kumarasami Ayya is cruel and also rich. He belongs to an uppercaste and therefore a poor dalit cannot stand against him. Might is right and Mariamma is helpless. Hence Mariamma and her friends decide to ignore the matter and go ahead with their routine work. They make up their mind so as to accept their fate. On the other hand, Kumarasamy Ayya, an imposter, fears that his reputation might be

ruined, if the wrong deed he has done to Mariamma comes to light. So he complains to the village Headman that Mariamma and Manikkam misbehaved with him in his field. Then the Headman convenes a meeting at night. At the meeting, menfolk sit in the community hall, but women are not allowed in the country court. So they stand here and there outside to watch.

Mariamma and Manikkam come to the centre of the circle in the court, greet the elders by prostrating before them at full length, and go and stand each to one side, arms folded. The village headman forces them to admit the truth and seek pardon from Kumarasami Ayya. Unfortunately they are not given even a least chance to prove that they are not guilty. Women come forward to support Mariamma. Finally, the junior headman pronounces that Mariamma is a culprit and she should prostrate and beg forgiveness from Kumarasami Ayya. Besides, she should pay fine of two hundred rupees to the court. Her father also joins the headman and others, and abuses and advises her to beg forgiveness. Only now, she explains that Kumarasami Ayya tried to misbehave with her. But, her father and village headman and others are not ready to believe her words. But there is Anandamma who lends her a helping hand to dispense justice by explaining the facts.

Unfortunately Mariamma is helpless, because women are not allowed in the country court. They are not given equal right in decision making both inside and outside of their home. This shows that how patriarchy works in the case of dalit women. In the novel, Mariamma alone is penalised but Kumarasami and her father are not at all punished. Her father has an illicit relationship with a woman and she delivers a child born of him, but Kumarasami, escapes scot-free because men do not have any moral code as women. Women have no power to voice their sense of equality with men. Dalit women should submit to the whims of upper caste men because they have no volition, and they are landless and uneducated. If they rise

against the upper-caste people, they will not get any employment in their field. The village Headman says: "Can we bring them to justice, though? After all, we have to go crawling to them tomorrow and beg for work" (25).

Finally, Mariamma prostrates before the headman and apologizes to him for her unproved allegation of Kuarasami Ayya's sexual misbehaviour. But no one asks Kumarasami, the real culprit, to prostrate before Mariamma, and on the other hand, she is asked to pay a fine of two hundred rupees. Manikkam is also fined to the tune of one hundred rupees. Then the village Headman concludes the meeting by saying: "It is you female chicks who ought to be humble and modest. A man may do a hundred things and a still get away with it. You should consider what you are left with, in your beliefs" (26). Padma Narayanan comments on Bama's Portrayal of the dalit problems exquisitely:

The identity, that of Dalit literature, helps bring writings on atrocities committed against a particular section of society, to the attention of literatures and readers word wide. Bama, a noted Dalit writer, is certainly a vibrant recorder of the perpetrators and victims of this unique curse of Indian society, the caste system (The Hindu).

Arokkyam's grand daughter, Paralokam, has also been teased by an uppercaste landlord. But the incident is not revealed to anyone as Arokkyam is afraid of his grand daughter being called a whore and punished. Here the novelist insists that women should have courage to take up the cudgels against the upper caste people. Vellaiyamma is furious and rails at Mariamma and contends that when Kumarasami pulled her into the shed, she should have kicked him in the balls then and there. Then she would not have been summoned to the village court. Mariamma finds a solution to the sexual harassment she suffered at the hands of the landlord and it is to hang herself with a rope.

In general, Mariamma is a representative of dalit women. She simply accepts her fate and wants to put an end to her problems by suicide. However, suicide cannot be a solution to the injustice done by the patriarchy. Had the court allowed other women, who had gone to collect firewood with Mariamma, to speak out at the assembly, all the lies and all the truth would have come out, which would have saved Mariamma from verbal assault and psychological torture.

Pathima contends that Vellaiyamma, being a senior women in the village, could have spoken on behalf of Mariamma at the council. The truth would have come to the light. She is an overseer and an important woman among the dalit women. She says:

You talk as if it's all a game. Big woman, small woman, nonsense! Once you are born a woman, can you go and confront a group of four and five men? Should you even do it? When we were little ones, if ever there was a village meeting, we just stayed inside our homes and drank our Kanji. But just look at what goes on nowadays. Even small children and young girls turn out to watch the fun; no wonder they are chased away and take to their heels, what do we know about justice? From your ancestors' times it has been agreed that what the men say is right. Don't you go dreaming that everything is going to change just because you're learnt a few letters of the alphabet (28-29).

Vellaiyamma is a spokesperson of dalit women. She is an ingenious but illiterate woman who does not want to challenge the authority of patriarchy, which has been existing since time immemorial. Bama, the author, expatiates on sexism through Pathima. Pathima says, "From the time we are babies you treat boys in one way and girls in quite another. It's you folk who put butter in one eye and quicklime in the other" (26). Further, she exquisitely describes how

women are fettered in a chain of taboos in the society, and the taboos are accham (fear), nanam (shyness), madam (simplicity, innocence), and payirppu (modesty). Dalit women should foster courage, fearlessness, independence and self-esteem.

In the novel, Pathima, as a representative of modern women, contends that why dalit women should not feel the same as boys. She wants to enjoy liberty as boys everywhere:

I am not talking about kanji. Why can't we be the same as boys? We are not allowed to talk loudly or laugh noisily, even when we sleep we can't stretch out our backs nor lie face down on our bellies. We always have to walk with our heads bowed down, gazing at our toes. You tell us all this rubbish and keep us under your control. Even when our stomachs are screaming with hunger, we must not eat first. We are allowed to eat only after the men in the family have finished and gone. What, paati, aren't we also human being (29).

Pathima, in the novel, is none but the author herself speaking. She given voice for the voiceless women for equality with men. But Vellaiyamma could not answer the questions raised by Pathima. She says that it is injustice but it has been existing for a long time. She gives an example of Thiruvalluvar and his wife. Women are expected to be submissive to men since the period of Idhikasam. If they try to break the code of conduct framed by men, they will be abused and called immoral. They do not want to be blamed by the society and so, unwillingly they accept their fate as divine law.

Even the games children play signify male domination within the dalit society. The game "Mummy Daddy" is an instance. It is, the female child acting as a wife or mother, has to serve "mud rice" to the boy who is acting as a father or husband. The boy uses to pull the girls (wife's) hair and hit her when the girl challenges him and it is considered good fun. But in real life

also, it is the same for many women and they experience real blows in their every day life. Even in the dalit society importance is given to the male child only. They believe that the male child will look after his parents when he grows up but a girls is not so, and she is born for many only. When she grows up she is married to someone, and after marriage, she has to take care of her husband, in-laws, and her children. The novelist says: "So you can't leave a boy baby to cry, but you can leave a girl to scream on her own. can you?" (31). The misfortune here is that many of the children neglect their parents in their old age.

Even in the "bus" game, boys play as driver and conductor, and allow girls to be in the middle as passengers. Dalit children perform skits at home and the male children play the roles of policemen and shop owners. Girls are not allowed on the stage, and women's part is enacted by men. They are reluctant to allow a girl to perform the role of Infant Jesus. Girls are not given freedom to sing in public. Men alone have freedom to speak and sing in public. Singing and acting expose one's talent, and also it is an outlet for a person to forget the tedium of life. In the dalit patriarchal society women are treated as unpaid servant maids and sexual companions to their husbands. The position of dalit women is always very pitiful and humiliating at home, in the society, and at the religious institutions. At home, a wife has to work round the clock to please her husband, children and other family members. She has to do household duties like cooking and washing. She is the backbone of the family. She bears and rears children and does everything. Unfortunately she does not care for herself, and she is necessitated to belief that it is her fate.

In the dalit society, women are considered impotent and men virile. So men do not follow any birth control practice because they think that they would lose their strength. But women suffer a lot and they even lose their life at childbirth. When a wife dies, a dalit can marry for a second time. But women were not

allowed to marry again until the arrival of the British reformers like Anne Bessant and Rajaram Mohan Roy. They raised their voice for women's liberation, abolished 'Sati,' and supported widow marriage.

From the time of marriage, Mariamma suffers blows and kicks every day from her husband. Before marriage, her life was destroyed by an upper-caste man. There is another woman living in the west street, who also suffers like Mariamma and she is Thaayi. She is a fairly complexioned woman from the Dalit community. When she smoothes her hair down, dresses well, she looks like a Nayakkar woman, and her marriage is also against her wish. Her husband also uses to drag her along the street and flog her with a stick or with his belt as if she is an animal. When Karuthamuthu comes to rescue Thaayi from her husband, he replies: "She is my wife I can beat her or kill her if I wish" (43). Here women are presented as sentimental, and they undergo such sexual, and physical tortures just because man must be respected and he is more powerful than woman. He claims that he has a right to beat and flog his wife, because he has tied a *tali* around her neck. Women become slaves to their husbands from the very moment they are married. That is why men scold their wives and keep them under their control.

Pathima, a modern girl, becomes furious on learning about Thaayi's sufferings and she asks her mother, "Why must she stay with that fellow and suffer so much? Why can't she leave him and go away by herself? (43). It is not easy for women to get away from their family and husband, because they are deep rooted in their culture and tradition. They depend on men. They cannot live without the support of men, like father, brother, and husband. Further a widow or divorced woman is not given respect in the society. So she reluctantly lives with her husband. Women's sufferings last for ever because it is not easy for them to get away from the family. Women must continue to suffer till their death.

Women are the victims in the patriarchal society. Owing to poverty, ignorance and lack of education, they are denied their rights in politics, education and in every sphere of human activities. So the novelist conveys that women should put in efforts to protect themselves and establish that they are also human beings like others. She conveys: "We should educate boys and girls alike, showing no difference between them as they grow into adults" (123). If women are given freedom like men, they will prove their strength. The novelist concludes the novel with the hope that: "men and women will live as one, with no difference between them, with equal rights" (123), Bama's portrayal of the plight and predicament of the dalit women is authentic, and it proves that she is a committed writer, Padma Narayanan resolves;

Bama's stories vividly bring to mind nostalgic experiences of rural Tamil Nadu, even while they speak of harsh realities. The lives of underprivileged people, the indignities they suffer, and the altered perceptions of the educated younger generations among these victimized groups-these are the refrains that echo through Bama's works (The Hindu).

Bama's portrayal of the dalit's problems elevates her as a novelist par excellence.

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