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JOURNEY FROM SILENCE TO ELOQUENCE: SPECIFICITIES OF GENDER AND PATRIARCHY IN A DALIT WOMAN'S TESTIMONIO

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ABSTRACT

The term 'Dalit' refers to the people of India who are outside the pale of the hierarchal caste system, and, therefore deemed outcastes and a Dalit Woman's life is the most unprotected and insecure in Indian Society. They suffer on three counts – caste, gender and patriarchy. But, after centuries of suppression, Dalits are now finding their voice, in literature as well as through political activism. Dalit autobiographies, where the routinized violence of everyday existence are described, may be treated as testimonies, as they are eye- witness accounts of atrocity, and document trauma as well as strategies of survival. They claim the right to speak for as well as beyond the individual, and contests explicitly or implicitly the 'official forgetting' of histories of caste oppression, trauma and struggle.

In spite of being triply pushed to the periphery, Bama in speaking her 'self' in *Sangati* (2005) has not only invented her own narrative discourse but at the same time has sought to represent the so far non-represented ones. In writing the subjective self she is no more the subaltern that listens to or is spoken of but the one who shouts out her "I", thereby relocating to the centre and making eloquent the silenced other. *Sangati* shows a move from 'I' to 'We' as Bama moves from the individual to the community. Here Bama has slotted in all the issues of caste, gender and patriarchy which are complimentary to each other. Where economic exploitation is the result of caste, class and patriarchy, patriarchy is the patron of gender discrimination or better to say, gender discrimination is the central feature of patriarchy. Taking *Sangati* as an illustrative text, this paper attempts to show how in telling/speaking their own stories and thereby resisting the shackles of caste, gender and patriarchy, these women including the author Bama regain their silenced/marginalized identity and establish their sense of individual eloquent self.

Key Words: Dalit, testimonio, caste, gender, patriarchy, self

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Gender is a term denoting the cultural constitution of notions concerning femininity or masculinity and the ways in which they serve ideologically to maintain gendered identities and patriarchy includes the systematic exclusion of women from rights of inheritance, to education, the vote, equal pay, equal rights before the law and it also includes the ways in which even more liberal regimes tend to leave women out of structures of power even when they claim to be regimes based on equality. And commenting on patriarchy Adrienne Rich says, "Patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men- by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor- determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male." (57) Rich shows how male power permeates every aspect of women's lives. She argues that male sexuality is forced on women by institutions and practices as different as sexual violence, literature and psychoanalysis.

In the Indian context, caste, gender, and patriarchy are the three hierarchal axes of social structure which are very essential for the understanding of caste Hindu, Shudra and Dalit women. It is caste which shapes the integral part of the gender status and identity of Dalit women. For example, a derogated Dalit female laborer/slave, doing a menial service work constructed as polluting and inferior. This dualistic construction of Dalit women in gender ideology legitimizes the sexual subordination and subjugation of them. Caste oppression, gender subjugation and class exploitation, all are interlined together. Caste uses gender to construct caste status, power relations and cultural differences and thereby oppressing these women. Thus, three interlocking systems of caste, gender, and patriarchy create a multidimensionality, simultaneity, and intensity of oppression, which is destructive to the experiences of Dalit women.

In case of patriarchal social order, Simone de Beauvoir states: "Humanity is male and defines woman not in herself but as relative to him. She is not

regarded as an autonomous being. Man is the subject, he is the absolute. She is the other. He sets himself up as essential as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object." (16) Thus women in general are 'others', the object of the males and a Dalit woman is considered as 'Other' under the impact of the centuries-long alienation and loneliness created by patriarchal and Brahmanical values at all levels in society, which in turn causes the high level of exclusion, structured and domestic violence which she experiences throughout her life. Thus, even among women, she is perceived as 'Other'. She belongs to the 'lowest' category manifested in her condition of social, physical, economic, and political vulnerability. Even in literature, the Dalit women writers are as marginalized as they are in their community. They are other and alien even to the western feminists and therefore, cannot be represented by western feminist patterns.

The Indian Brahmins with the help of their dominant culture and ideologies have established their hegemony over the Dalits and have made them completely dependent, helpless, passive, docile, complacent and powerless. In the light of this, it could be stated that in Indian Hindu society one is not born but becomes a Dalit. In fact, it is the Indian Brahmin's monopoly over the knowledge-generating enterprise which subjugates them. Through an absolute control over the creation of ideas, myths, symbols, fables, legends, customs, traditions, rituals and religious practices these powerless groups of humanity are subordinated. Not only this, they are suppressed through the imposition of racial and caste roles, and normative prescriptions and proscriptions designed by the master classes. Consequent, they become what the ruling classes aim to make them. But after centuries of silence, they are being able to resist the patriarchal as well as caste chains by finding their voice in literature as well as through political activism.

Dalit autobiographies, where the routinized violence of everyday existence are described, may be treated as testimonies, as they are eye-witness accounts of atrocity, and document trauma as well as strategies of survival. They claim the right to speak for as well as beyond the individual, and contests

explicitly or implicitly the 'official forgetting' of histories of caste oppression, trauma and struggle. Beverley observes:

By testimonio I mean... a narrative... told in the first person by a narrator who is also the reop protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts..... The situation of narration in testimonio has to involve an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, and so on, implicated in the act of narration itself (65).

Here the aim of the narrator is merely not to achieve literariness, but even more so to communicate the pain, struggle, oppression and angst as well as spirit and agency of the members of the community. The writers experience their ordinary selves not as a unified whole which is in harmony with its surroundings but in a constant state of conflict with the power structures established by the caste hierarchy.

Since testimonio has emerged as important document of subaltern struggle for existence, it has been aptly viewed as an answer to the pertinent question that Spivak raised – Can the Subaltern Speak? The subaltern, when they speak, speak in testimonies. The testimonio is the voice of one who witnesses for the sake of an 'other', who remains voiceless. The speaking subaltern subject of the narrative gives voice to the lived experiences of herself and of those who are victims of multiple marginalizations. Here, the narrator stands in for the whole social group. Unlike autobiography where the narrator is a person of some social status, testimonio is about the common man or woman, but the common wo(man) who metonymically stands in for the community.

In India Dalit writing by women function like testimonio because they are narratives of trauma, pain, resistance, protest and social change. These writings proceed from a lived experience of poverty, violence, rejection and suffering. They reveal the structure of the traumatic experience while also gesturing at the ways in which the victims have fought, overcome, and survived the event. These narratives

challenge the bourgeois genre of autobiography and pull at the boundaries of what are considered the parameters of the life-world. Rather than searching for plurality of reasons and plurality of 'notions of female subject', Dalit women's testimonies display an older or a more traditional kind of narrative where one is able to discern a form of confession "offering to its readership an intimate and frequently painful experience which was also seen as a part of a progressive revelation to the self and others of women's fate under patriarchy and that need for change" (Anderson 121). As subjects of historically and culturally specific understandings of memory, experience, embodiment and identity, narrators of such texts both reproduce the cultural modes of self narrating and critique the limits of these modes and in doing so they create new generic possibilities and invite different ways of being read.

Born as Fatima in 1958 in Puthupatti village in Viruthungar district in Southern Tamilnadu, Bama wrote *Karukku* in 1992 which brought with it the force of whirlwind to whip the literary world with its quintessentially Dalit theme and language. Her second work, *Sangati*, which is called an autobiography of her community, is originally written in Tamil and translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom in 1994. The word 'sangati' denotes news or events or happenings, so accordingly, it makes us delve deep into the life of Dalit men and women through the occurrences and confrontations to which they come across. This novel is unconventional, in the sense that it has neither a plot nor protagonist rather day-to-day cases and events of Dalit community incorporated in the framework which the novelist has herself witnessed in her real life.

Sangati explores the changing perspectives from generation to generation as it is the story of three generation of women- the narrator's grandmother, the narrator herself and the generation coming after her. In spite of being triply pushed to the periphery, Bama in speaking her 'self' has not only invented her own narrative discourse but at the same time has sought to represent the so far non-represented ones. In writing the subjective self she is

no more the subaltern that listens to or is spoken of but the one who shouts out her 'I', thereby relocating to the center and making eloquent the silenced other.

Sangati shows a move from 'I' to 'We' as Bama moves from the individual to the community. It expresses the inward turmoil of the Dalit women who are considered Dalits in the hands of religion, upper caste men, the rich, the politicians and educational institutions and also among the Dalit community as well as the Dalit man. The novelist has traced the role of caste, gender and patriarchy in the lives of Dalits. Dalit men, though they are the patriarch of their women, have no identity of their own outside their caste region. They have to keep their mouth shut in front of the upper class people whether they are true to their words or not. Bama incorporates one such incident in the texture of this novel; when a girl named Mariamma goes to collect firewood in the scorching heat; bare feet, exhausted and thirsty, while returning from the field, she drinks water from a pump set. Eventually an upper caste fellow finding her in his field, molests her. Anyhow, she escapes and rescues herself. But this is not the end of the story. To save himself, this man Kumarasami Ayya alleges Mariamma to be with a village boy, Manikkam in very awkward position. Finally, the men folk gathers to punish the culprit but no one asks for any clarification from Manikkam and Mariamma rather her father Samudrakani has to pay fine for Rs. 200 on her behalf. Her father knows that nothing such his daughter has done but being a Dalit, he keeps his mouth shut and shouts at Mariamma, "Well girl, you heard what he said, didn't you? Why are you standing there like a stone then? Beg forgiveness, you bitch, I have suffered enough shame because of you." (23) This sexual harassment with Mariamma by upper caste man also brings forth the fact that caste role becomes more intense when it comes to Dalit women. Mariamma is accused, abused and made a scapegoat because of some upper caste man's wilful maliciousness. Even in such cases, a woman can't speak rather she hides the incident to save her from a blot. But Bama has made an attempt to make them aware about their rights, to

face the challenges so far their life in their particular Dalit world is concerned.

Dalit women are the victim of oppression and subjugation in multiple ways- firstly; upper caste men keep an evil-eye on them as Patti tells: "If upper caste fellows clap eye on you, you are finished. They'll drag you off and rape you, that's for sure. If you go on a little further, there will be escaped criminals lurking in the plantation."(8) Secondly, their husbands' treatment towards them is worse than anything; various incidents of wife-beating and domestic violence can be found in the novel. Thirdly, their Dalit status showers all kinds of remaining exploitation over them. Examples of Rakkamma and Thaayi are worth noticing in this regard. They are badly beaten with chappals and belts by their husbands.

In the novel, Bama sheds light on the issue of economic exploitation by the superior people on the part of Dalit men as well as Dalit women. Dalit women are real wage earners but they do not get their due; do the hard work inside or outside the house but whatever work they did, were paid less than the man. Their plight is evident as Patti explains that, "We have to labour in the fields as hard as men do and then on the top of that, struggle to bear and raise our children. As for the men, their work ends when they've finished in the fields... We only toil in the fields and in the home until our vaginas shrivel." (6) It is worth noticing here that Bama has slotted in all those issues which are complimentary to each other. For instance, the economic exploitation is the result of caste, class and patriarchy, while patriarchy is the patron of gender discrimination or better to say, gender discrimination is the central feature of patriarchy. In *Sangati*, from beginning to the end, Bama has dealt with gender issues at large.

A line of demarcation has been drawn between sex and gender since 1970s. Sex is biological difference between males and females whereas gender is socially constructed. Marta Lamas defines gender in this way by recording Hawkesworth in her *Feminism: Transmissions and Retransmissions*:

Gender was used to analyze the social organization of relationships between women

and men; to refer to human differences; to conceptualize the semiotics of the body, sex and sexuality; to explain the differential distribution of responsibilities and benefits between women and men;... Thus, in the final analysis, *gender* was seen as an individual attribute, an interpersonal relationship, and a means of social organization (98).

Thus, it is used to denote the roles, responsibilities and status, which as a result of social conditioning have come to be associated with a given sex and gender relations are constructed by an interplay of several factors like religion, media, mythologies, law, economy, education, etc. These institutions, time and again, put the female sex down in the hierarchy, snatch all the rights which can help them to upgrade and uplift themselves. Bama's cry on the grounds of gender discrimination is audible in *Sangati*:

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 nor lie faces 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 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, Patti aren't we also human beings? (29)

This testimony urges for a break from the oppressive Brahmanic culture, which talks of Gods and glorifies life and their literature which has no representation of the lower caste Dalits. But *Sangati* is neither an ideal representation of life nor an individual commitment but a social commitment. The events here not only expose the evils of caste system and injustice done to the Dalits by the higher caste but also refer to the inner strength of the Dalits to face the world. The author/protagonist deftly traces her reactions to her growing knowledge about her caste, community and the fact that they come under the lowest rung of the hierarchy of patriarchal power structure. At the very outset of *Sangati* we learn that the oppressed class

too has its own gender discrimination wherein Dalit men who are on the margins of the structured society in turn marginalize their own women on the basis of fixed gender roles. Playing the spokesperson for the women of her community, Bama states that it is on her to speak out the truth that though all women are slaves to men, her women are the worst sufferers: "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" (65). The writer also comments on how the upper-caste women treat them with contempt. This is where Bama draws a comparison between the lifestyle of those women and that of the paraiyar. She takes pride in saying that here women at least work hard and earn their own money and do not depend on their husbands for economic freedom. In spite of being subjugated in body and mind to men, these women resist their men through means of shouting names of their body parts, and obscenities. Shouting and shrieking is tools of survival for these women, observes the author. She only hopes that they would realize that they too have their own "self-worth, honour, and self-respect" (68), which would enable them to lead their own lives in their own way.

Bama as a young girl of twelve learns that boys have different roles to play than girls which are perpetuated in the form of gender games that they are made to play as children. While kabadi and marbles are meant for boys to play, girls even when small had to play only cooking or getting married, home keeping, minding babies as in real life as well. The system cared more for the boy baby than for its girl child. Elders consider boys as permanent members in a family because they are supposed to take care of their parents. On the other hand, female children are transient members who are to be transplanted to another family and so have no role to play in their families. This causes gender prejudices even in the minds of parents. It reminds us of Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* which talks about historical patriarchy in modern terms and interrogates it as a controlling political institution built on status, temperament and

role, a socially conditioned belief system presenting itself as nature or necessity.

In talking about the Dalit woman in particular, Bama cleverly ropes in the prevailing subordinate condition of women through the ages thereby touching upon the history of gender issue that is universal. Bama registers the fact that church, home, marriage, workplace, all of these proved claustrophobic to the women folk and to add to this the poor health facilities that available to these women of lower caste proved hazardous to their life. She also discusses the superstitious beliefs that prevail among the paraiyar community wherein women are said to be possessed by 'peys'. She tries to logically examine and question the conditions under which the women of her caste succumb to the oppression caused by their men. Bama decides that it is up to them to be aware of their situation, "We must be strong. We must show by our own resolute lives that we believe ardently in our independence." (59)

In *Sangati*, Bama also deftly brings out the ignorance and innocence of her women when it comes to voting and electing the government. Every aspect of society is discussed, analyzed, issues including cinema, inter-caste marriage, of how it's not for a woman to marry outside of her caste while enjoyed the power of doing so. Even when a girl writes or speaks in public places at once the men condemn her saying that she is after all a girl. They don't credit her with any kind of achievement. Bama realizes that she is rather proud to belong to her caste and that lack of education has actually perpetrated their slave like situation. She sums up their situation thus: "Everywhere you look, you see blows and beatings; shame and humiliation. If we had a little schooling at least, we could live with more awareness." (118) Bama also speaks for women on the whole when she says that women too as individuals have their own desires, and wishes, that if women do not speak for themselves, come forward to change their condition then who else is going to do it for them. A change in attitude is the need of the hour, and with this she is optimistic of inequalities coming to an end. Therefore in speaking the unrepresented in literary discourses so far, Bama has linked together

the caste as well the gender oppression, in the process redefining woman from the socio/cultural perspective. She has made herself heard in her attempt to move from the position of the subaltern to the center.

Bama realizes that Dalit women occupy an existential position in the world and are constantly under menace. They are not safe in their home, agricultural fields, in church and even in public spheres. They are constantly under the threat of sexual harassments in the field of work. Family, church and caste-courts are usually male-led. Justice and rules for behaviour are different for men and women. While Mariamma pays 200 rupees as fine, Manikkam pays only 100 rupees for an equal offence. But Bama feels that as women they must somehow dare to take control of their lives. Instead of becoming meek, Bama in her anger proclaims: "I am a Paraichi: Yes I am Paraichi." (121) She thinks that Dalitness is essentially a means towards achieving a sense of cultural identity and the inferiority complex based on being a Dalit must be wiped out. She and her people are punished constantly for the simple fact of having been born a Dalit: "Is it our fault that we are Dalits? On top of that, just because I am a woman, I have to battle especially hard. Not only do I have to struggle against men, I have also to bear the insults from women of other castes. From how many directions must the blows come! And for how long!" (121-22) But Bama suggests a solution: by treating boys and girls equally and educating both and providing the girl child enough freedom would then eradicate the evils of injustices, violence and inequalities. She observes: "women can make and men can break." (123)

Dalit women resort to variegated tools for survival. While Mariamma accepts what comes to her, Pechiamma protests by walking on without her husband. Language is also one of the effective tools they deploy against their oppressors. The folkloric native language of the Dalits itself becomes a language of protest and political challenge. To this Bama adds the language of human rights articulated by her liberated protagonist. This new language of political resistance also includes a free use of abusive terms. Bama uses a language unfamiliar to the mainstream,

upper caste society to write her works. She discards the so called "chaste" Tamil made unavailable for her people but employs the oral folk language, which is familiar to her society. She opines that the language full of expletives might evolve out of a life devoid of pleasure and filled with frustration or the use of such language might be the result of male domination.

Though the beginning of the novel displays a state of depression and hopelessness of the Dalit women; the latter part reveals the vigour, courage and the resilience of women even in the midst of all misery. They face the problems by their solidarity. They chatter and laugh to forget their sorrows; they celebrate their newly found identity and inner strength. The narrator, finally, becomes free of the clutches of her limitations. She works and lives by herself. Therefore, *Sangati* shows how in telling/speaking their own stories through testimonies these Dalit women including the author Bama regain their lost and silenced identity and able to establish their sense of individual eloquent self.

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