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A TALE OF DALIT WOMEN'S AGONY IN BAMA'S "SANGATI" AND SIVAKAMI'S "THE GRIP OF CHANGE"

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ABSTRACT

Since ages women by men dominated society are viewed as 'easily available toy' to play with and manipulate in whatsoever way according to their interests and conveniences. Hence women have to suffer under gender discrimination. Their lies another sphere to this gender discrimination, that is caste discrimination. In Indian social system, there lies vicious caste institution where the lower caste called Dalits have to suffer under the strong flinch of upper caste men and have to go through vivid torments. If a powerful man himself becomes 'a powerless human being' in the world of caste, then the condition of already powerless women in this caste system is wholly unimaginable. She has to go through two phases of discrimination; one by gender institution and another by caste institution. The present paper sheds light on two works, P.Sivakami's "The Grip of Change" and Bama's "Sangati" which exposes this bi-fold suppression of women in strikingly realistic way and unleash the agony of Dalit women in much astonishing tone.

Key Words- Caste and Gender Discrimination, Agony, Poverty, Callousness, Relentlessness

Introduction

Dalit literature, whether oral or written, has been an integral and enlivening part of Indian literary traditions for centuries. For the depressed classes like tribals and those destined to live in the lower rungs of social hierarchy literature had always been a means to achieve "self-respect. Dalit literature first found its voice in Marathi in the 1960s and 70s, and then soon appeared in other languages like Hindi, Tamil, Telugu and Kannada. Using autobiography as a literary genre, writers could share personal experiences of caste discrimination, making its existence undeniable for the middle classes. Even genres like fiction, poetry and drama became largely autobiographical in the hands of Dalit writers. Caste was seen as the definitive aspect of Indian society and raising

political consciousness turned into a literary goal. Initially Dalit male writers stated writing about their dilemmas and representation of Dalit women by these male writers was based on empathy and sympathy. Even Progressive Indian writers gave sympathetic, instead of realistic, portrayal of Dalit Women. As they were not given truthful illustration, so these women tried to form their own representation. They wrote about their agony and tried to put forward their position in front of the whole world. Dalit women writers such as Bama, Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, P.Sivakami, Shantabai Kamble powerfully portrayed the lives of Dalit women which kept burning in the furnace of Caste and Gender.

Dalit women's Agony in P. Sivakami's "The Grip of Change"

P Sivakami- the first Dalit woman to write a novel- stands differently from the rest of the contemporary Dalit feminists due to her presentation of Dalit life in realistic way. Being a woman and then a Dalit, she knows well the experience of each dalit woman and she has given their plight a voice in her novels. Instead of suffering in the pit of vicious caste system, she audaciously resisted the indifference of caste and gender institutions by becoming IAS officer. Later she announced her self-retirement and turned to be a full-term writer and began to unfold the savage layers of discrimination being meted out on dalit women relentlessly. In the present novel "The Grip of Change" she undauntedly presents the vivid layers of gender and caste discrimination.

Sivakami in her novel presents a Dalit woman Thangam who represents the whole women community out there who are being oppressed under acrimonious society. Thangam is a lower caste woman being resided in cheri in Athiyar village. A well built body with feminine beauty, she always remained the center of attraction by men gazers. She got married to Kaipillai, the lower caste man. But soon he died due to the excessive drinking. As Thangam turned to be a widow, her worst days begin to enter into her life. Firstly, she has to find her own livelihood in order to live. Secondly, she has to save herself from all men who now begin to take her granted for she is now 'easily available' to all. The worst condition aggravates when her brothers-in-law refused to give her property share of her husband as she is childless. To inherit her husband's property, she has to fulfill the necessity of men society, i.e., to become a mother. But of her no fault, she has to suffer as her husband died leaving her barren.

The fact is, leave alone giving her financial support, Thangam's brothers-in-law cast their evil eye on her and forced her to sleep with them. "My husband's brothers tried to force me, but I never give in. They wouldn't give me my husband's land, but wanted me to be a whore for them! I wouldn't give in." (Sivakami, "The Grip of Change",07).

Instead of helping her and supporting her to lead a moral life, these men took her for granted as there is none to ask them about their oppression of Thangam. However, she dealt with the advancements of her in-laws. But, in order to live, she has to find some work on her own. Hence she goes to work in the farm of Paranjothi Udayar- the richest and powerful man belonging to the upper caste. The worst nightmare of her life began thereafter as Paranjothi too had casted his lustful eyes on Thangam's body. Without being aware of it, she continued to work in his farm. But, on one fateful day, Paranjothi despite of being upper caste man seduced her in the field itself. Thangam feels shattered by this unexpected physical assault and accepts this assault silently, she writes, "Udayar took no notice of me. He raped me when I was working in his sugarcane field. I remained silent, after all, he is my paymaster. He measures my rice". (Sivakami,07)

The stern side of society can be witnessed here. The helplessness of women particularly dalit women is presented here in the most haunting way. Thangam - in order to live her life on her own - went to work for Udayar. Instead of helping her, he took advantage of her and knows well the fact that none is going to question his sins or authority. Thangam cannot resist him because she is well aware of the fact that Udayar measures her rice and her life depends on him only. So without any resistance she yielded herself to Udayar and her poor body inextricably caught in the claws of the upper caste man. Udayar's physical assault doesn't end in rape, he relentlessly used her whenever he wished to fulfill his lustful wishes and ended up in frequent rape of Thangam who cried for help in silent way. Thangam symbolizes all dalit women who were brutally raped by the upper-caste land lords. These women were forced to wear the mask of silence and never to raise their voice against men, primarily because of their financial dependency on men.

Dalit Women's Agony in Bama's "Sangati"

A significant contribution to Dalit writing in India, "Sangati" is a startling insight into the lives of Dalit women who face the double disadvantage of caste and gender discrimination. Bama weaves brilliantly many narratives together to explore the

social inequities suffered by Dalit women. She took to writing about the exploitation meted out on Dalit women. These dalit women were thrice-bond by their gender, caste as well as economic status. As women, they are excluded from mainstream feminist discourse; as Dalits they are oppressed not only by 'elitist' society, but also by their own community; as the poorest of poor, they struggle hard to meet their daily ends and feed themselves to their thankless husbands and to their ever-increasing children. These women thus become 'dalit' among 'dalits' as well.

Set in a non-descript village in Tamilnadu, "Sangati" is a tale of spectrum of Dalit women all of whom are victims of the significantly oppressive social structure that find contempt in pushing the lower caste people further down the hierarchical ladder. "Sangati" in Tamil means events/incidents and true to its meaning, the novel is interwoven through the series of events and anecdotes that these women share about themselves and others and these anecdotes presents clearly the insight of the suffering of all those women characters.

Pachamukhipilai, the narrator's neighbor, was working in the fields in the ninth month of pregnancy and delivered the child straight way in the field while working without the assistance of any other person. She cut off the umbilical cord with the sickle she had taken with her to cut the grass. She cut off the cord, dug a hole in the field and buried the placenta and then walk home by carrying on one hand her newly born baby which is still drenched in blood and on the other hand, bundle of grass. This horrible tale shows the helplessness of Dalit women who have to work in the fields at any condition, even taking risks of their lives, in order to run the family.

Bma realistically portrays the physical violence like lyching, whipping and canning that Dalit woman of Paraiya community endures by a father, a brother and a husband and even by the unrelative upper caste men. Bama's "Sangati" is full of such Dalit women characters who are being harassed physically and psychologically and whose silent scream none would hear. Periamma, the narrator's aunt, is battered to death by her drunkard

husband. Without concerning the pain she was enduring, he kept beating her severely to the extent that she lost her life. Ananthamma who was beaten mercilessly for the trivial reason of eating dinner before her husband due to the notion that women should not have supper before the arrival of their husbands. Mariamma, the narrators' cousin, suffers continuous blows, kicks, and beatings by her husband every day and was reduced to no more than a half-life or even less. She never experienced the bliss of love life, what she has seen or experienced in her life entire is excruciating pain and suffering. Another character Thaayi, the narrators' neighbor, was a beautiful woman and was beaten by her husband everyday due to the suspicion he has on his wife Thaayi that she with her elegant beauty attracts men in his absence and has many affairs with different men. He even cut off her long charming hair in order to reduce her beauty. Her husband used to drag her to the street and flogged on her like an animal with belt or stick. Her body was replete with beaten wounds and scars.

Bama provides abundance of examples of domestic violence where Dalit women suffer incessantly and shows how Dalit men who were degraded and abused by the upper caste men, lightens their burden of anger and helplessness by degrading and assaulting women of their house. Women were forced to believe that their birth was unfortunate and sinful one.

P, Sivakami and Bama- two distinctive pioneer literary figures of Tamil literature- emerges out to be the keen observers of the surroundings and incidents taking place around which are affecting the society they are living in and people part of their life. Having been in the world of literature, these two writers own the power to expose the contaminated society and its inhuman rigid tradition and customs with undaunted courage and spirit. Sivakami and Bama- being Dalit women themselves - found it to be appropriate to bring out their haunting personal experiences of being a dalit and being a woman in order to show the world the treatment of human beings from other human beings themselves and they indeed excelled in doing that task through their works.

The works of these two women writers mainly focuses on the deteriorating treatment of the callous society in the name of caste, creed, class, gender etc. In the vigorous whirlwind of caste system, Dalits toiled hard each day to survive, by giving up their honor and self-respect, they have to be churned in the hands of those cruel upper caste people who treated these lower caste people not less than animals. The upper caste men feel to be polluted if they come in contact with Dalits, but when the question of fulfilling their lust came, these men give up all the ideals and rules and harassed women belonging to the same Dalit caste. This hypocrisy of society is well presented in the works of Sivakami and Bama. "Sangati" and "The Grip of Change" can be considered as the social documents that present multiple levels of oppressions and marginalization faced by Dalit women in their everyday life.

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