



DALIT FEMINISM: A PERSPECTIVE ON BAMA'S *SANGATI*

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Abstract

Women have been marginalized almost all times and all places, but the women of a subaltern group have been more oppressed than the women of a privileged group. Like her earlier novel *Karukku*, Bama's *Sangati: Events* focuses on the oppression of women of a subaltern group known as Dalits. Bama captures Dalit women's oppression with total consciousness and deeper involvement and expresses her inner outrage in this novel. The novel is an autobiography of a community and records the experience of the double oppression of caste and gender faced by Dalit women. Bama shows the oppression of women by double patriarchies--discreet patriarchy of their own caste and overlapping patriarchy of the upper caste and the church. The novel presents a new insight into the lives of Dalit women who face the joint oppression based on caste and gender. The novel *Sangati* is primarily a community's identity, not about the single self. The Dalit woman, once she steps outside her community, enters a caste-ridden and hierarchical society which incessantly asks questions about caste identity. The novel deals with the variegated experiences and stories of the Dalit women strung together. Dalit women are victims of sexual harassment and indecent treatment outside in the society and even in their own community. Bama is very much pained to see that society is not sensitive to the plight of Dalit women.

Keywords: Dalit Feminism, Oppression, Patriarchy, Caste, Gender, Education, Strength

Like her earlier novel *Karukku*, Bama's *Sangati* (1994) focuses on the oppression of women of a subaltern group known as Dalits. Bama captures Dalit women's oppression with total consciousness and deeper involvement and expresses her inner outrage in *Sangati*. The novel is an autobiography of a community, not of the single self. It records the experiences of the intersectional oppression of caste and gender faced by Dalit women. Bama shows the oppression of women by double patriarchies---discreet patriarchy of their own caste and overlapping patriarchy of the upper caste and the church. The novel presents a new insight into the lives of Dalit women who face the double

disadvantage of caste and gender discrimination. Bama uses the art of repetitive discourse to lay emphasis on the continued and unending oppression of Dalit women. B. Mangalam writes in his essay *Caste and Gender Interface in Tamil Dalit Discourse*: "The gender and caste identity of the writer helps formulate a disturbing discourse that aims at resisting oppression by upper castes as well as masculinity discourse within the Dalit family." (Mangalam 110)

Bama's novel *Sangati* (translated from Tamil into English as *Sangati: Events* by Lakshmi Holmstrom), serves to frame an aesthetics of not

only Dalit fiction but also a Dalit feminist polemics that is inclusive of a clarion call for action and transformation. Belonging to the oppressed group herself, Bama has personally experienced the marginalizing condition which is at once two-fold, one, she falls within the marginalized caste and two, she is a woman, a condition of 'being', that is similar to a black woman. In spite of being doubly 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 not-represented in the postcolonial literary discourse. In writing the subjective self, she is no more the subaltern that listens to or is spoken of but the one who shouts out, thereby relocating to the centre and making heard the silenced other.

The text as such deals with the variegated experiences and stories of the Dalit women strunged together, thus breaking the normative literary narrative of a single plot or story. It falls closer to the narrative pattern of ethnographic/anthropological studies wherein testimonials of the concerned people's form the manner and method of constructing experiences and personal narratives which actually serve to build their history as a community or ethnic group. As Lakshmi Holmstrom points out in her introduction to the text:

Sangati flouts received notions of what a novel should be...It has no plot in the normal sense, only the powerful stories of a series of memorable protagonists. '*Sangati*' means news, events, happenings, and the book is one of interconnected anecdotes....These individual stories, anecdotes, memories of personal experience are narrated in the first person. (xvi)

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 marginalise their women on the basis of fixed gender roles. Bama's Paatti measures the situation of women in a subaltern community when she explains to a query from her grand-daughter as to their plight. Dalit feminist critic Sharmila Rege says: "The Dalit feminist standpoint is about historically locating how

all our identities are not equally powerful, and about reviewing how in different historical similarities between women have been ignored in an effort to underline caste-class identities or at other times difference is ignored for the feminist cause." (27)

In *Sangati*, Bama exposes the plight of Dalit women workers. The women are described as wage-earners, working as agricultural and building-site labourers. They are paid less than men. Bama writes about the unequal payment:

The women, in any case, whatever work they did, were paid less than men. Even when they did the very same work, they were paid less. Even in the matter of tying up firewood bundles, the boys always got five or six rupees more. And if the girls tied up the bundles but the boys actually sold them, they got the better price. (18)

Women are victims of sexual harassment and indecent treatment in the field of work. Paati forbids her granddaughter to go alone to gather firewood. Bama writes about the impending danger: "Women should never come on their own to these parts. If upper caste fellows clap eyes on you, you are finished. They'll drag you off and rape you, that's for sure." (8)

In talking about the particular, Bama cleverly refers to 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, work-place, all of these proved claustrophobic to the women folk and proved hazardous to their life. The stories of Mariamma and Thaayi, whose marriages have ended up in their being beaten up everyday and being humiliated at the hands of their husbands who consider it their right to beat and kill their wives, stirs up emotions of anger, fury, resentment and hatred in Bama. Bama motivates the Dalit subaltern women:

We must be strong. We must show by our own resolute lives that we believe ardently in our independence. I told myself that we must never allow our minds to be worn out, damaged, and broken in the belief that this is

our fate. Just as we work hard so long as there is strength in our bodies, so too, must we strengthen our hearts and minds in order to survive. (59)

Playing the role of a 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 life style of those women and that of the Parayars. She takes pride in saying that her 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 obscene names. Bama observes that shouting and shrieking are tools of survival for these women. She only hopes that they would realize that they too have their own "self-worth, honour, and self-respect" (68)

Bama's mind is engrossed with many anecdotes of sorrow and misery. One day Mariamma, leaning her firewood bundle against the Bunyan tree, goes to drink water running from an irrigation pump set in Kumarasami's field. The upper caste Ayya seizes her hand and pulls her inside the set shed. When she tells her friends at home, they suggest her to keep mum. Otherwise she will be falsely blamed and called a whore. Afraid of his reputation being tarnished, the upper caste fellow lodges a complaint with the headman of the Parayar community, the Naattamai, that the girl Mariamma and the boy Manikkam have found behaving indecently in his field. At the meeting of the headman with the villagers over the ugly event, Mariamma, admitting her innocence, accuses the Mudalaali for his bad conduct. Manikkam is not asked to prostrate. Mariamma is asked to pay a fine of Rs. 200 and Manikkam a fine of Rs. 100. The

Naattamai concludes the meeting with warning: "It is you female chicks who ought to be humble and modest. A man may do a hundred things and still get away with it. You girls should consider what you are left with in your bellies." (26) Within the Dalit community, power is accumulated in the hands of men. Caste-courts are male-dominated and rules for sexual conduct are framed differently for men and women. Bama writes about the double standard treatment:

Everybody in the village knows about her father's kept women, even a baby who was born just the other day. Did anyone call a village meeting and question him about it? They say he's a man, if he sees mud he will step into it; if he sees water, he will wash himself. It's one justice for men and quite another for women. (24)

The narrator is aggrieved to know that women are marginalized in the village meetings. She says that women who have gone to collect firewood with Mariamma should have spoken the truth. The narrator also asks Paati why she has not spoken the hidden truth. Paati reacts that it has been agreed from the ancestor's times that what men say is right and contrary to this what women say will be wrong. Paati says:

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. You'll only get kicked and beaten and trampled on for your pains. And it's not just here that it happens, you know. It's the same throughout the world. Women are not given that kind of respect. (29)

The narrator points out that the boys and girls are treated differently from the very childhood. The girls are not allowed to talk loudly or laugh noisily. They cannot stretch out in their backs or lie face down on their bellies during sleep. They are asked to walk with their heads bowed down. Bama writes: "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." (29)

Bama criticizes patriarchy and casteism within the church. She is very critical of the church rules against divorce and church ways to keep women under control by shrewd religious mechanism. According to her, parish priests are negligent of women's personal choice of life partners and they are roped in the meanest jobs of the church. The narrator is never successful to peep into the vestry of church for once. On the other hand, the tiniest boys are allowed to get in. But the church authority never allows the girls to join. Bama writes about the Dalit women:

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. (35)

Dalit women are the worst sufferers. Bama writes about the violent treatment of women by their fathers, husbands and brothers. If a woman is slandered that becomes her fate. Because of some upper caste man's foolishness, her whole life is destroyed. Mariamma is married to a disreputable fellow. She receives blows and kicks and beatings from her husband every day. In addition to this, another woman Thaayi is beaten shamelessly by her husband. Bama writes: "Her husband used to drag her along the street and flog her like an animal with a stick or with his belt." (42)

In the novel, Pachaiamma is shown as a heroic woman setting an example of how women should assert her freedom and thereby becoming a source of hope to all Dalit women who undergo the same suffering under the patriarchal ideology. Pachaiamma is a victim of domestic violence as her husband beats her mercilessly after drinking alcohol. The novel presents the assertive and expressive reaction of Pachaiamma to the treatment given to her by her husband. She decides to divorce her husband and, through this bold decision, she tries to defy the patriarchal order which has assigned a subordinate position to the women. Thus, she

refuses to accept the social values of the community attached with the institution of marriage. In addition to it, she decides to live with another man without the sanction of the community. Through her second choice, she subverts the social order of the community which gives the right to choose a life-partner to only the men. Pachaiamma, thus becomes an exemplary source of motivation for the other Dalit women who undergo the same fate. From the suppressed and silenced Subaltern woman, she turns into an assertive and expressive modern woman.

Bama is very much pained to note that society is not sensitive to the plight of Dalit women. Dalit women are not only victims of patriarchal society but also of caste-hatred. Bama brings in the autobiographical element full circle at the end of the book when she says that being a woman and a Dalit woman at that, being unmarried has posed great difficulty for her in everyday life. She asks the basic question as to why a woman can't belong to no one but herself. She not only speaks for herself but for her community at large when she says: "I have to struggle so hard because I am a woman. And exactly like that, my people are constantly punished for the simple fact of having been born as Dalits. Is it our fault that we are Dalits?" (121) She 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 and unliterary discourse so far, Bama has linked together the caste as well as the gender oppression, in the process of redefining woman from the socio-cultural perspective. She has made herself hard in her attempt to move from the position of the subaltern to the centre.

Thus, Bama makes a fusion of the personal and social in her novel. There is a fusion of autobiography, cultural history and fiction. Various events have been put together. Bama has hybridised various incidents in one whole. Behind this hybridization, Bama's purpose is to defy the conventional structure of oppression as well as the

fiction, and establish a new form. This hybridization shows her way of postcolonial resistance towards an androcentric discourse. Like postmodernism, Bama's fiction celebrates the fragmented, the plural, and the local while rejecting the universal and totality. Thus she has assumed the role of a feminist, particularly a Dalit feminist and social activist for the Dalit women.

Being a responsible and educated member of her community, and as a Dalit feminist writer, Bama gives a clarion call to all the people of her community to provide freedom and education for girls so that they may realize their inner strength and potential. Bama also appeals to the people of her community to follow a few things to end the problems of women. She pleads them to treat both girls and boys equal, showing no difference between them as they grow adults. Then she is sure about the time when there will not be any kind of discrimination with the girls and women. The concluding line of the novel serves the message of the novel:

We should educate boys and girls alike, showing no difference between them as they grow into adults. We should give our girls freedom we give our boys. If we read our children like this from the time they are babies, women will reveal their strength. Then 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 the saying will come true that 'women can make and women can break.' (123)

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