



**BAMA'S SANGATI AS A UNIQUE DALIT FEMINIST  
NARRATION FROM SUBJUGATION TO CELEBRATION**

**Dr. A. Vignesh Kumar\* & R. S. Sabeetha\*\***

\* Assistant Professor, Department of English, The Madura College, Madurai,  
Tamilnadu

\*\* Assistant Professor, Department of English, Fatima College, Madurai, Tamilnadu

---

**Cite This Article:** Dr. A. Vignesh Kumar & R. S. Sabeetha, "Bama's Sangati as a Unique Dalit Feminist Narration from Subjugation to Celebration", International Journal of Interdisciplinary Research in Arts and Humanities, Volume 2, Issue 1, Page Number 92-96, 2017

---

*"Oppression, ruled and still being ruled by patriarchy, government, caste and religion, Dalit women are forced to break all the strictures of the society in order to live"*

(Preface, *Sangati*)

India is one of the fastest growing countries in the world; yet it is notorious for its rigid caste system. The earliest records of Indian civilization are preserved in Aryan scriptures or what is today known as Hindu Scriptures. The early Indian society was constructed around Varnasrama Dharma, a labour based division of castes in India that inevitably brought racial prejudices. The Brahmins were the topmost in the pecking order. The Sudras were destined to serve the three upper ladders, namely Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaisyas. They remain the 'untouchables' in society. They have been accepted as Scheduled Castes in the Indian constitution after the British use of the phrase. Gandhiji and Ambedkar used two different terms to name them- harijan and Dalit. Their efforts have brought about an upliftment in their social status. They also encouraged education of the Dalits that ultimately lead to a new writing.

Indian Dalit literature began as a concerted movement in the 1960s, though clannish elements were visible as early in the 11th century. It began in Marathi literature and later on infiltrated to Hindi, Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam and Tamil literatures. Dalit writers initiated a realistic, experience based and authentic literature which threatened the upper class hegemony in society and in literature. The anger, sorrow and the indomitable will and hope of Dalit protagonists were offered in a tongue which is often denigrated as vulgar. The writers of different states in India share a collective relationship to a common cause, a common identity and a common political stance.

Dalit is a literature in India is of whole community but of an individual. Many writers, thinkers, social reformers and political figures gave their contribution in the dalit literary movement like B.R. Ambedkar, M.K. Gandhi, Rettaimalai Srinivasan etc. Exploitation or oppression of weaker by stronger is as old as mankind itself. The Indian history has been a vibrant record of conflict and dialectic between two opposite forces like exploiters and exploited colonizer and colonized, powerful and powerless. Dalit literature is always marked by revolt and a great struggle of lower caste, against the high class people commonly known as savarna.

Southern India has witnessed organized attacks against Dalits through Panchami Land issue, Chengara struggle and Muthanga issue. Dalit caste organizations like 'Dalit Panthers of India' in Maharashtra, 'Dalit Mahasabha' in Andhra Pradesh, 'Dalit Sangharsha Samiti' in Karnataka, and 'Arundhatiyar' in Tamil Nadu were formed in response to mainstream atrocities. They demand for equitable shares in opportunities and reservation. Most of the activists are good writers as well.

Dalit issues are recorded in a variety of genres-autobiographies, novels, 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. Their female protagonists are double victimized as condition is analogous to the situation of black women in America. A recent wave of Dalit literature emerged as Dalit Feminism. 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 feminism redefines women from the socio – political perspective of a dalit, taking into account the caste and gender oppression. This paper focuses on the sufferings of Dalit women in two aspects: first, being a woman second, belongs to the lowest community. Therefore they are double oppressed.

From the time they are born, girls are discriminated against just by their sex. A girl-child is neglected at infancy in favour of the boy. The girls play gender-games like cooking or getting married. The women of Tamil Dalit community are on their feet doing back- breaking work from morning till night, all to just barely make ends meet. The men never do their share of the work. Dalit women participate in productive works, earn wages and participate in the economic chain. But they are paid much less. They are also constantly under the threat of Sexual harassments in the field of work. Family, Church and Caste-Courts are usually male-led.

In Tamil Nadu a laudable attempt to couple 'Penniyam' (feminism) and 'dalitiam' (Dalit Studies) has been recorded by Bama, whose *Sangati* speaks of the hitherto unheard annals of dalit women. Through *Sangati*, Bama tries to bounce back the bi-fold oppression of dalit women. *Sangati* is more of a celebration of dalit female identity. Bama's women are no longer subjugated; they assert their individuality through education and

collective action. Their resistance—both passive and active to oppression makes *Sangati* a piquant depiction of the dalit women. In *Sangati* Bama focuses on the double oppression of females. While going through all this caste system some important questions arise in the mind: Who are Dalits? What is feminism? What is women's identity Focused in Bama's *Sangati*? What are the solutions suggested in Bama's *Sangati*? These are some important questions which pressurize us to go through the text. *Sangati* exposes that how a man spend money to earn as they please but on the other hand a woman has to fulfill their family responsibilities.

Bama's '*Sangati*' is a unique Dalit feminist narrative. It is mainly concern with women's movement in India. Literature also contributes in the Dalit movement and to the women's movement in India especially in Tamilnadu movement of 1960s may be noted as the starting point of feminism. But of course before this there already occurred various struggle against male oppression, the privilege systems and inequality. As an exponent of Dalit feminism, Bama has found is *Karukku* the right way to explore the sufferings of Dalit women. *Sangati* carries an autobiographical element in their narrative, but it is a story of a whole community, not an individual. In *Sangati*, many strong Dalit women who had the shackles of authority are also focused. The condition of dalits were very bad as they were not allowed to enter in to the temple, and schools for education. This form of discrimination based on identity akin to racism.

*Sangati* was originally written in Tamil in 1994. It was translated by Laxmi Halmstrom 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 event that takes place in the life of dalit women. *Sangati* deals with several generations of women in dalit community. The book is full of interconnected events – the everyday happenings of dalit community. It goes against the notions of traditional novel. 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 labour. I wanted to shout out these stories."* (*Sangati*, 9.)

In the initial chapters, it's narrated in the first person, then counterpointed by the generalizing comments of the grandmother 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 reflective voice is that of an adult looking back and meditating deeply upon her experience in the past which calls for practical actions. It has no plot in the normal sense but just some powerful stories of memorable protagonists.

As Bama nego-feministically voices out the grievances of the Paraiyya women, there is, in the first place, the question of economic inequality. Women are presented as wage earners as much as men are, working equally as men as agricultural and building-site labourers, but still earning less than men do, thereby highlighting Socialist-feminism. Yet the money that men earn is their own to spend as they please, whereas women bear the financial burdens of running the whole family, often even singly. They are constantly vulnerable to a lot of sexual harassment in the world of work. Within their community, the power rests with men as the caste-courts and churches are male-led. Rules for sexual behavior are brow-raisingly different for men and women. Hard labour and economic precariousness lead to a culture of violence, and Bama boldly explores this theme too.

*Sangati* deals with gender bias faced by dalit women right from their childhood. Girl babies are always considered inferior and taken less care. The narrator of this book is a young girl in the early chapters grows pensive due to the myriad events happening around her. As she grows into a young woman, she stresses on the need for change and is calling out for action against atrocities that happen to the girls and women in her community. Invidious patriarchal distinctions are initially inculcated in girl children within the first ten years of their lives. Gender games act as effective tools to achieve this goal. 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 games like 'kabadi' and 'marbles' are meant for boys, girls play at cooking, getting married and other domestic matters.

*"Even when we played 'mothers and fathers', we always had to serve the mud 'rice' to the boys first. They used to pull us by the hair and hit us says, 'what sort of food is this, di, without salt or anything!' In those days we used to accept those pretence blows, and think it was all good fun. Nowadays, for many of the girls those have become real blows and their entire lines are hell!"* (31).

In Dalit community 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.

Dalit girls are hardly enjoying their childhood. They have little time to play as they have to take care of their younger siblings. "Maikkanni is one such girl who has started to work from the day she learns to walk" (70). She has to go to work when her mother delivers a baby. When her mother becomes fit Maikkanni turn to

take care of the new born baby. The life of a dalit girl was tormenting but the life of a grown up dalit woman was worse. Bama describes the life style of dalit girls as follows:

*“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 face down on our bellies. We always have to walk with our heads bow down, gazing at our toes 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)”*

Bama realistically portrays the physical violence like lynching, whipping and canning that dalit women suffers by their fathers, brothers and husbands. She explores the psychological stress and strains of them. Bama cleverly ropes in the prevailing subordinate condition of women through the ages as a girl, woman, a bread winner for the family and her place in the church. All of these proved claustrophobic to the women folk of the dalit community. The two stories that Bama reminds is that of Mariamma and Thayi whose marital disharmonies are revealed in an attempt to stereotype the dalit predicament. They are ill-treated and beaten up daily by their husbands. Although both the husband and wife came after a hard day's work in the field, the husband went straight to the Chavadi to while away their time, coming home only for their meal. But as for the wife they return home wash vessels, clean the house, collect water, gather firewood, go to the shops to buy rice for cooking and other provision, feed the husband and children before they sleep, eat what is left over and go to bed. *“Even they lay down their bodies wracked with pain, they are not allowed to sleep, whether she dies or survived, she had to give pleasure and enjoyment to her husband” (59).*

In *Sangati*, Bama subverts mainstream legends and asks relevant questions pertaining to her culture. The story of Thiruvallvar, the great Tamil poet's wife Vasuki, perceived as the epitome of chastity and devotion to husband is mentioned to illustrate the subordinate position of women in marriage. The story she feels is a reminder that wives ate after husbands even during Thiruvalluvar's time. Bama offers an alternate folk song about Ananatamma of West Street, who was beaten up for eating crab curry before serving her husband:

*“O crab, crab my pretty little crab, who wandered through all the fields I Planted I pulled off your claws and put you on a pot, I gave the pot a hot and set it down. I waited and waited for him to come home, And began eating as came through the door. He came to hit me the hungry brute , He pounced at me to kill me...”(30)*

These lines are the reminder that wives ate after husbands even in this twentieth century also. The dalit women are an easy prey to the men because of their repressed state. Over worked and exploited in the family these women give vent to their mental agony in their spirit- possessed state.

Veliamma's stories about the spirits that haunted Dalit women make Bama conclude that these stories are concocted to push women to subservient position. Dalit women are an easy prey to these stories because of their repressed state. Overworked and exploited both in the family and in society, these women give vent to their mental agony in their spirit-possessed state. In her attempt to write a 'her story', Bama makes interesting references to food enjoyed by her people. Traditionally in most homes the kitchen is a limited space designated for women. But over the years women have transformed this space into an area of discourse that gives them a semblance of power. In *Sangati*, Sammuga Kizhavi's mouthwatering description of ragikuuzh eating is thought provoking. She describes it as *“nectar from heaven” (37)*. Every sunday, the narrator's patti made a special kuzhambu with cow's intestine which went well with ragi kali. There is also mention of patti's hot kuzhambu with dried fish. In Karukku Bama brings to light the gugapusai at Chinnamalai, the highlight of the festival is slaughter of rooster, goat or pig. There is immense joy in cooking the food and feasting the delicacy. By subverting simple acts of cooking, feeding and sharing food, Bama brings the novel alive before our eyes. KanchaIlliah in his thought provoking work *Why I am Not a Hindu*, mentions that certain kinds of rich food like ghee and milk were seldom available for the economically downtrodden dalits in the rural areas. But Bama celebrates the food that is cooked and served by the womenfolk in her community. There is great joy in discovering other more healthy and nutritious options. The food metaphor helps in the narrating of her stories earlier neglected or misrepresented in mainstream writing.

Bama realizes that the dalit women are constantly under menace and they are not safe in their work place also. They are constantly under the threat of sexual harassments in the field of work Bama asks her women:

*“We must be strong. We must show by our own resolute lives that we believe ardently in our independence... 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).*

The men because they are dalits often undergo dog's treatment in the hands of the upper caste men who are the landlords. In such circumstances these men show off 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 the women who are tormented both within and without their homes. 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. This is the core theme of *Sangati*.

The dalit women are mostly the wage earners of hard labour sweating it out in the fields, construction sites, and in match box industries. The unequal division of labour, a product of first world elite that has been imposed upon the dalit women who are paid less than their men. From *Sangati* we learn that the oppress 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. Bama expresses her agony as:

*"It is not the same for women of other castes and communities. Our women cannot bear the torment of upper-caste masters (mudalalis) in the fields, and home they cannot bear the violence of their husbands" (65).*

Among the other castes like Pallars, Koravars and Chakkiliyars, only the Parayars have been converted into Christianity. This coerced conversion brought nothing but economic deprivation because they had lost their right to reservation. The popular education scheme pronounced by the Christian priests becomes a poor substitute for economic self sufficiency. *Sangati* is in its huge criticism of Indian church. Bama feministically voices out the grievances of Paraiya women. In Catholic Indian churches there is prevalence of Caste-hierarchy within sub-castes of dalit community. The Catholic priests were also gender-biased and treated the converted dalit women as inferior. She expressed this as:

*Everywhere you look, you see blows and beatings, shame and humiliation...Became we have not been to school or learnt anything, we go about like slaves all our lives, from the day we are born till the day we die, As if we are blind, even though we have eyes. [66]*

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 pent up emotions. Bama feels proud that their women have economic freedom from their men folk; they work hard in fields and rear up their children. Sometimes widows are allowed remarriage and their culture never alienates a widow from the mainstream. But the upper class women confine their emotions within the four walls of their homes. But dalit women suffer caste oppression in mornings and gender oppression in nights.

In *Sangati* the child narrator in the early chapters grows 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 exigencies of her companions. She exhorts them to take pride of their (dalit women) caste and march towards social empowerment. Bama draws attention to their immense capacity for hard labour, 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 Marriamma 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 the 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?" (118)*

In *Sangati* the language of dalit women is rich and resourceful giving way to proverbs folklore and folk songs. Bama as a feminist writer, protests against all forms of oppression and sufferings faced by dalit women in the first half of this novel. But later part moves away from the state of depression and oppression. Instead it presents a positive identity of dalit women focusing 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.

Her language is also very different from the other women writers of India as she is more generous with the usage of Dalit Tamil slangs. She addresses the women of the village by using the suffix 'amma' (mother) with their names. From the names of places, months, festivals, rituals, customs, utensils, ornaments, clothes, edibles, games, etc to the names of occupations, the way of addressing relatives, ghosts, spirits, etc; she unceasingly uses various Tamil words.

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 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 added a language of human rights articulated by her liberated protagonist. This new language of political resistance also includes a free use of abusive terms. Women give vent to their feelings by calling their neighbours abusive names or shouting the names of their body parts. This, for them, is an effective defence mechanism to maintain their psychological equilibrium.

The text of *Sangati* as such deals with the variegated experiences and stories of the dalit women strung 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 peoples form



the manner and method of constructing experiences and personal narratives which actually serve to build their history as a community or ethnic group.

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. Unlike other writers who have dealt with Dalit life in Tamil like Sivakami, Vidivelli and Imayam, who use the Dalit language only in dialogues between their characters, Bama writes her whole work in the language of her community through her works especially *Sangati*.

*Sangati* both mirror up the state of depression and also reveals the vigor, courage and the resilience of dalit women even in the midst of all misery. In the end of this novel, the dalit women celebrate their newly found identity and inner strength. The narrator of this novel finally becomes free from clutches of her limitations. She works and lives by herself. Bama realizes that it is up to the dalit women to take their lives into their own hands. She makes an appeal for a change and betterment of the dalit women’s life in various aspects which includes sex and gender discrimination, equal treatment in the workplace, right to education etc. That is why Bama depicted the various stages of dalit women as a girl, women and the old age women.

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. The women stand by each other to help each other when there is injustice meted out not only in society but in family circles as well. Bama doesn’t shy away from describing violent domestic or street quarrels. In *Sangati* we hear the voices of many women, some in pain, some in anger, some in frustration and some out of courage. Sometimes the language is full of expletive with sexual undertones. Bama suggests that it is the sharp tongue of a woman that can protect her against her oppressors. The characters often break in to a song or a chant when the situation demands and there is a song for every occasion.. But what is thought provoking is Bama’s sketching a positive identity for the Dalit woman. An alternate her story as opposed to the mainstream is drawn with vivid descriptions of a marriage ceremony, attaining of puberty ceremony, joy of togetherness, singing songs, cooking and sharing food. In most rural homes the Dalit woman is an earning member, widow re-marriages are possible and tali or the sacred thread worn as a chain during the marriage is not this binding symbol as in other communities. It is interesting that the Dalit woman cannot be suppressed in spite of caste, gender oppression.

**Work Cited:** Bama. *Sangati*. Trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom. Oxford University Press, New Delhi. 2005. Print

**References:**

1. “Dalit woman talk differently’ Economic and Political Weekly. October 2013, P14-21 Print.
2. Prasara V.P. Modes of Resistance in Dalit Feminism: An Insight into Bama’s *Sangati*.
3. “Scholarly Research Journal for Interdisciplinary studies, - An international peer received journal” Vol. I, Issue VI, May – June 2013. Print.
4. Ragamalika, Annam. Caste Gender Dichotomy: a Dalit Feminist Perspective – A study of Bama’s *Sangati*. “IMPRESSIONS – a Biannual Refreed e- Journal” Vol. VI, Issue I. January 2012. Electronic.
5. Rege, Sharmila. “Writing caste/writing gender: Narrating Dalit Women’s Testimonies”. New Delhi, Zuhuan. 2006. Print.
6. Singh. Rajana. Dalit Women Identity in Bama’s *Sangati* “The Criterion – An International journal in English, a Bi-monthly Refreed e- journal” Vol. 4, Issue V, October 2013. Electronic.