



BAMA'S SANGATI: A VOICE FOR VOICELESS DALIT WOMEN

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Abstract:

This article is a study of Dalit marginalisation, discrimination, isolation and humiliation from the common tradition of life, especially the tragic condition of Dalit women in our Indian society. Dalit literature is about the sufferings of 'oppressed class'. It also stresses that Dalits are not oppressed class, but oppressed by those who claim themselves as high class. Dalit literature is always marked by revolt and a great struggle of lower caste, against the high class people. Dalit fiction and its literary movement are based on the common ground of social oppression. Exploitation or oppression of the weaker by the stronger is as old as mankind itself. Bama as a Dalit female writer outlines the various issues and problems faced by Dalit women, which they are experiencing from long period due to their caste and gender. This paper is an attempt to delineate the different issues of women in the course of novel Sangathi. While exploring the novel, we can come across different issues of women such as the injustices, inequality, the formation of identity, sexual exploitation, economic backwardness, ignorance, lack of employment, illiteracy, and trafficking of Dalit women have been elaborated closely. She has used various events of the daily life of her own community which portrays the typical life of Dalit women. This article also implies with some serious steps to be taken in order to stop cruelties and atrocities against Dalit women in our society. This study on the atrocities against Dalit women in our unjust society is to create awareness among the readers, literates, and scholars and to treat them equally irrespective of caste and gender.

Key Words: Dalit, Caste Discrimination, Gender Discrimination, Unified Community, Literature of Resistance, and Narratives of Pain

Introduction:

India is a largest democratic country in the world, yet a section of people are living a life of suppression, unendurable and intolerable sufferings. The word "Dalit" comes from Sanskrit. The meaning - distressed, crushed and downtrodden people. Various people have given various names to Dalits. For example, Mahatma Gandhi named them "Harijans". Britishers called them "Scheduled Caste". In the Vedas, they are described as "Panjamar", "Sandalan" and "Avvarna". But these most unfortunate people who were called by various names have named themselves as "Dalits". Over the past five years, Tamil Nadu has witnessed a sharp rise in atrocities against Dalits. This section of people is termed as an oppressed class, and the sufferings are caused because of our society which is strongly structured by the caste system. They are oppressed, neglected, the downtrodden, and exploited by the people who claim themselves as higher caste.

Dalits face caste and gender based violence and discrimination as they are placed in the lowest strata of caste, gender and class hierarchies. In India, though we have constitutional and legislative safeguards to protect women from discrimination and violence, they have been ineffective due to the deep-rooted caste and gender biases within the enforcement agencies. The plots are often strung together by a series of painful events that are outcomes of caste discrimination and gender discrimination. In fact, the shared pain is what binds the community together. Even now in the duly advanced world and in liberated India, they are still barred to use the free amenities; such as water taps, schools, temples, hotels, coffee shop, if they are allowed also the way of treatments towards them is pathetic.

Dalit Literature:

When Dalits themselves write about their situation, it accounts in the literature a new strength and idiom. Dalit writer's experiences are meant to represent the experiences of her entire community. The Dalits are trying to write themselves into the Indian narrative. Dalit writers convey every Dalit entity into a 'unified community' of fellow sufferers. Dalit autobiographies not only help to recover the history of the community, but also necessitate a rethink of Indian history. Whereas tales told by upper-caste (Non- Dalit) writers may not create that much impact since they do not experience the pain and sufferings of Dalits. They are such as, Premchand wrote of Dukhi in Sadgati (1931), Mulk Raj Anand of Bakha in Untouchable (1935), Arundhati Roy of Velutha in The God of Small Things (1997) and Mahasweta Devi of Doulati (1994). Dalit literature can be traced back as Bhanu asserts that

Dalit literature is a literature of dispute, pain, and anguish. Its beginnings can be traced to the undocumented oral folklore and tales of the past decades. Dalit literature as a genre was established in the 1960's and 1970's. There have been numerous

writings on the caste system by authors from different disciplines in social sciences in India and outside the country. (1)

Dalit literature has developed an aesthetics of its own that could powerfully depict the issues of marginalisation and exploitations against Dalits in the society. Unlike other literary expressions, this genre of literature draws its materials from the social realities of the communities in which the writer is embedded and hence these writings are autobiographical to a certain extent. Dalit literature can be called as a 'literature of resistance' and 'narratives of pain' as this literature challenges the existing structure of oppression and raise a call for equality. Dalit writers are re-scripting the conceptions of Indian society and history while challenging prevailing literary conventions.

Dalit women face the worst expressions of caste and gender discrimination. Violence is used against women to reinforce caste and gender norms. It is socially legitimized through the impunity which the perpetrators enjoy. The perpetrators use their social, economic and political powers to silence women in accessing justice. India's community carries with it a memory of trauma and oppression at the hands of the caste system that dictates who gets to go to school, get educated, escape poverty, become a leader or be remembered in death. This continues to fester despite our claims of modernity and the digital age. Massive public rallies by people never show up on national television channels, our literature is kept out of upmarket bookstores and our cultures are co-opted or erased. The only time a person makes the news is when they are thrashed or dead. Even after death, they are not disclosed by the mass media.

Bama's Writing:

Bama is one of the prominent Tamil Dalit Christian writers whose works portray the plight of Dalit people in her community. Born in 1958 in a Tamil Dalit Christian family, Bama as a feminist who holds her grounds deeply rooted into the indigenous soil and Indian traditions which seem to have become more than just contaminated with the ever-prevailing, vitiated and cursed casteism. Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati* are the first contribution to subaltern writings and prescribed in marginalized, autobiography, feminist and literature. *Sangati* (1994) is the second work of Bama that was originally written in Tamil and Lakshmi Holmstrom translated it into English nearly after a decade of its publication in Tamil. As Lakshmi Holmstrom points out in her introduction to the text:

Sangati means news, events, happenings, and the book is one of the interconnected anecdotes These individual stories, anecdotes, memories of the personal experience are narrated in the first person . . . (xvi)

Bama raises the issue related to double patriarchy that Dalits women's oppression –the covert patriarchal stance subsumed within the gender relations of their own community and the overt patriarchal system of the upper castes. Bama as a feminist writer protests against all forms of oppression and sufferings faced by Dalit women in the first half of *Sangati*. But the later part of *Sangati* moves away from the state of depression and frustration. Instead, it presents a positive identity to Dalit women focusing their inner strength and vigor.

In the beginning, she narrates in the first person as young girl woman and later as a woman. Her reflective voice is that of an adult looking back and mediating deeply upon her experience in the past which calls for practical actions. Her language is also very different from the other women writers of India as she is more generous with the usage of Dalit Tamil dialect. Bama smartly suggests that sometimes a sharp tongue and obscene words are the women's only way of shaming men and escaping extreme physical violence which gives a violent and sexual nature of the language.

Cruelties Against Dalit Women:

Women suffer both gender and caste-based violence at the hands of the dominant caste men due to their social, economic and political status. Women are considered as easily available for all forms of violence. Bama highlights the "difference" of Dalit women from the privileged upper caste women and, more importantly, celebrates their "identity" in their strength, labour and resilience. Though the Dalit women are oppressed, subjugated and looked down upon as inconsequential creatures both by the upper-class people and by their own men, these women exhibit an amazing strength of resistance and survival potential. She 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.

Women face violence from their own community and family, which is obviously the manifestation of the patriarchal order and gender discrimination. Gender inequality sanctified by religious and cultural norms subordinate women to face discrimination and violence. Women face gender-based violence from within their home in public places in the hands of their family members and non-family members. In the interview with the daily *The Hindu*, Bama also says, "Because Dalits have been told again and again of their degradation, they have come to believe they are degraded... they have reached a stage where they themselves, voluntarily, hold themselves apart... The consequence of all this is that there is no way for Dalits to find freedom or redemption." It is true that *Dalit* made to believe that they are filthy and outcasted.

In Sangati, as a child, she is exposed questioning the unequal treatment meted out to her at the hands of her own maternal grandmother- Vellaiyamma kizhavi in comparison to her brother. She also argues that she is asked to eat after every male member in the family finishes eating. In fact, even the quality of food served to the girls is much poorer than the kind of which is served to the boys. She throws several questions on an unequal treatment of female at home and outside.

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 bowed 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, Paatti aren't we also human beings? (29)

Bama vehemently presents that all the household works like cleaning, cooking, laundry, baby-sitting, etc. are done by the girls whereas the boys enjoy playing games or hanging out with their friends in the village. Despite this, the girls in the village are deprived of a good education, unlike the boys. The boys are kept free from all sorts of responsibilities that they should take up, whereas the girls are over-burdened with numerous endless toilsome everyday activities. Though being an educated woman, Bama faced the biggest problem as an unmarried woman. She narrates the cultural identity of a Dalit woman by illustrating the rites of a coming-of-age ceremony, a betrothal, a wedding, etc. They do not exhibit any sentimental attitude to the bonds of marriage, for example, thali does not have any binding significance. Similarly, widows are not discriminated and they are free to remarry of their choice. She questions that why a woman can't live on her own. Bama's Paati surmises the situation of women in a subaltern community when she explains to a query from her granddaughter as to their plight that

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 have finished in the fields. If you are born into this world, it is best you were a man. Born as women, what good do we get? We only toil in the fields and in the home until our vaginas shrivel . . . (Sangati 6-7)

She also presents the Socialist –feminism in the form of the unequal division of labour and wage in the hands of an elite that has been imposed upon the lower caste women who are paid much less than their men. 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 women on the basis of fixed gender roles. Through this, hard labour and economic precariousness lead to a culture of violence. The worse struggles she faced is that even her woman colleague who do not tolerate her lifestyle.

Is it our fault that we are Dalits? On top of that, just because I am a woman, I have to battle specially hard. Not only do I have to struggle against men, I have to also bear the insults from women of other castes. From how many directions must the blows come! And for how long! (122).

Bama boldly explores that 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-raising different for men and women. With regard to the gender violence by her family and community, domestic violence is the major form of violence faced by women from their families. Physical and sexual violence are also the common forms of violence faced by them from their community members. 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. When they humiliate us, we do get furious and frustrated . . . because we haven't 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. (118)

Therefore, Bama enlightens the people of their community to educate boys and girls alike, without showing any difference. She wishes that girls should be brought up in a new way so that in future there will be a day when men and women will be treated with equal rights. We have a vibrant record of disparity and dialectic between two opposite forces like exploiters and exploited colonizer and colonized, powerful and powerless.

Conclusion:

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. Through *Sangati* Bama holds the mirror up to the heart of Dalit women. She makes an appeal for change and betterment of the life of a

Dalit woman in the variety of fields, including sex and gender discrimination, equal opportunity in the workforce, education rights, etc.

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