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Transgression of Boundaries: A Dalit Feminist Insight into Bama's *Sangati*

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Abstract

This paper is a study or the analysis of Dalit marginalization, discrimination, isolation and humiliation from common tradition of life especially the tragic condition of Dalit women in Indian society. Dalit literature is about the sufferings of 'the oppressed class'. Dalit fiction and its literary movement are based on the common ground of social oppression. It is a study of marginal and colonized. Dalit literature is a form of post-colonial literature. The form of Dalit literature covers a wide range of literary genres. It is a literature of whole community but of an individual. Many writers, thinkers, social reformers and political figures gave their contribution to the Dalit literary movement like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Rettaimalai Srinivasan etc.

Keywords

Fragmented Humanity; Celebration; Belongingness; Globalization.



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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, the powerful and the powerless. Dalit literature is always marked by revolt and a great struggle of lower caste, against the upper caste people commonly known as Savarna or caste-Hindus.

Hindus can be divided into Savarna Hindus- the touchables and Avarna- the untouchables or Dalits, who are not regarded as Hindus in true sense. There are four major divisions among the Savarna Hindus in India- Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. Dalits are oppressed, humiliated, exploited, discriminated, marginalized, ostracized, raped, assaulted and lynched by Savarna Hindus. These people are also regarded as untouchables/ Achool/ Harijan. In Indian society some communities are at the lowest step of the socio-economic and political ladder like Dalits, eunuchs, women etc. If the woman is a Dalit, she suffered two fold oppression: first for being a Dalit, and second for being a woman. Therefore it could be said Dalit women are "doubly oppressed."

Women movement was started in 1760's. There were a number of writers who contributed to the movement like: Mary Wollstonecraft's

Vindication of Rights of Women (1792), Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex (1949)*, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, Fredrich Engels' *The Origin of The Family (1884)*, John Stuart Mill's *The Subjugation of Women (1869)* etc. These writers speak out for the real women who struggle with social norms, condition, which are extremely propagated by patriarchal societies. Toni Moi explains, "The first is a political position the second a matter of biology and the third, a set of culturally defined characteristics."

Being a Tamil Dalit Christian woman, Bama is able to express her views emphatically in her writings. Bama examines caste and gender oppression together. She redefined 'woman' from the perspective of a Dalit. According to Frantz Fanon, "The class of oppressed is invariably inimical to the autonomy of the oppressed and their culture". Despite this, in *Sangati*, Bama focuses on the double oppression on women.

Sangati exposes how men spend their hard earned money as they please but on the other hand women have to fulfill their family responsibilities. The theme of *Sangati* is "Subjugation to Celebration." Bama's *Sangati* is a unique Dalit feminist narrative as it is mainly concerned with women's movement in India.

As an exponent of Dalit feminism, Bama has found in *Karukku* the right way to explore the sufferings of Dalit women. Dalit feminism points out repeatedly that Dalit struggle has tended to forget a gender perspective. In Dalit community every women live under the double oppression of caste and patriarchy. They are doubly oppressed. *Sangati* carries an autobiographical element in her 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 focused. The condition of Dalits is very gruesome as they are not allowed to enter into the temple, and schools for education. This form of discrimination based on identity is akin to racism.

Sangati was originally written in Tamil in 1994 and 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 events, that take place in the life of women in Paraiya community. *Sangati* deals with several generation of women: the older women belongs to narrators grandmothers' generation Velliamma Kizhavi's generation, and downward generation belongs to narrators, and the succeeding generation of the narrators.

Sangati is an autobiography of her community, which highlights the struggle of Paraiya women. Bama chooses only a woman protagonist for every story. *Sangati* contributes both to the Dalit movement and to the women's movement in India. *Sangati* is a look at a part of those Dalit women who dared to make fun of the class in power that oppressed them and through these they get the courage to revolt.

Sangati is full of interconnected events—the everyday happenings in 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.

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)

Women are presented in *Sangati* as daily wage earners as much as men working as agricultural labours and building site labours, but earning less than men do. Yet the money that men earn is spent as they please, whereas women bear the financial burden of running the family. Women are

also constantly victim to sexual harassment and abuse in their world of work.

Bama exposes caste and gender problems both outside and inside the community. *Sangati* focuses generally on Dalit women on various issues such as gender, sexual discrimination. According to Bama “All women in the world are second class citizens. For Dalit women, the problem is grave. Their Dalit identity has given them a different set of problems. They experience a total lack of social status. Even they are not considered dignified human beings. My stories are based on these aspects of Dalit culture”.

Sangati encapsulates the author’s experience of working within an erogenous and apprised society and the series of several interconnected anecdotes, experiences, news and events as narrated in the book, from an autobiography of the community. This narration accommodates more than 35 characters most of whom are female, but in conventional sense there is no individual who may be tagged as hero or heroine. Bama gives another picture of the community:

Although both men and women came after a hard day's work in the field, the men went straight to the bazaar or chavadi to while away their time, coming home only for their meal. But as for the women they return home wash vessels, clean the house, collect water, gather firewood, go to the shops to buy rice and other provision, boil some rice, make a kazhambu or a kanji, feed husband and children before they eat what is left over and go to bed. (*Sangati* 59)

Even they lay down their bodies wracked with pain; they were not allowed to sleep. Whether she dies or survives, she had to finish his business. Women were not allowed to take part on any occasion, the man themselves would dress up and act as women rather than allow them to join in.

The book deals with gender bias faced by Dalit women right from the childhood. Girl babies are always considered inferior and taken less care. Dalit girls hardly enjoy their childhood. They have little time to play as she has to take care of their younger siblings.

Maikkanni is one such girl who had started to work from the day she learned to walk. She had to go to work when her mother delivers a baby. When her mother becomes fit Maikkani had 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. The story of narrator's cousin Marriamma tells a lot about the sexual assault and the abuse faced by Dalit women and their inability to stand up against it.

Bama realistically portrays the physical violence, like lynching, whipping and canning of Dalit woman by fathers, husbands, and brothers. Bama explores the psychological stress. Her language is very different from other Indian women writers as she is more generous with the use of Tamil Dalit jargons. She addresses the women of village by using suffix 'Arnim' (mother) with their names. She unceasingly uses various Tamil words for 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.

The voices of many women speaking and addressing one another, sharing their everyday experience with each other are sometimes expressed in anger or pain. The language is full of explicit sexual references too. Bama bridges the spoken and written styles of Tamil by breaking the rules of written grammar and spellings. Bama says that man can humiliate woman many times, he can disrespect a woman, it is very normal. But in this partial double minded society woman has no right to speak out anything. This is acceptable to all.

The postcolonial thrust of her book is in its huge criticism of Indian

churches. Bama voices out the grievances of Paraiya women. Characters like Vellaiyamma Patti and a small girl and the narrator herself, who learns the story from her grandmother which becomes development of the novel. In the novel many strong Dalit women had courage to break the shackles of authority. Bama said they live under pressure and get to enjoy their life fully. There is a prevalence of caste-hierarchy within Dalit community. In *Sangati*, the Catholic priests were also gender biased and treated the converted Dalit women as inferiors.

Bama has personally experienced marginalization. She sums up the situations of Dalit women in the following lines: “Everywhere you look, you see blows and beatings, shame and humiliation. Because 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”.

In the novel 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 *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. She also attracts our mind towards the education of Dalit community. She gives the example of Pecchiamma, who belongs to Chakkili community, studied only up to fifth class. The girls of that community do not go to school all that much.

Through *Sangati* Bama holds a faithful mirror to Dalit women. She makes an appeal for change and betterment of the life of Dalit women in the variety of fields, including gender discrimination, equal opportunity in work, education, rights etc. The narrator becomes both omniscient narrator and a controlling agent of their story, who speaks out historical aspects of Dalit community through variety of characters. Bama is clear that no one is

going to help the hopeless women in her community, it is up to the woman themselves to take their lives into their own hands.

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