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Deconstructing Power Structures in Bama's *Sangati*: A Dalit-Feminist Critique

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Abstract

Bama's *Sangati* (1994) serves as a potent narrative that unveils the systemic oppression experienced by Dalit Christian women in Tamil Nadu. More than a collection of episodic events, the text functions as a dynamic site of resistance where caste, patriarchy, religion, and economic marginalization intersect to shape the lives of its women characters. This article deconstructs these entrenched power structures using theoretical frameworks from Michel Foucault, Sharmila Rege, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, among others. It focuses on how power manifests in three interconnected realms; the body and domestic labour, economic and spatial segregation, and the politics of language and narration. Ultimately, *Sangati* becomes a revolutionary text, giving voice to those on the margins and laying bare the mechanisms that silence them.

Keywords: Power structure, Dalit feminism; caste patriarchy; intersectionality; resistance narratives; Tamil literature; Bama

Introduction

Bama, a pioneering voice in Dalit literature, brings a unique lens as a Dalit Christian woman writing in Tamil. Her second work, *Sangati*, stands apart from mainstream Indian literature by presenting the lived realities of Dalit women not as mere social commentary, but as a radical counter-narrative. While Karukku was largely autobiographical, *Sangati* adopts a communal voice, chronicling events in a collective rather than individual form. The focus of this article is to examine how Bama deconstructs various interlocking power structures that shape – and often subdue – the lives of women in Dalit communities. Through a multi-disciplinary theoretical approach, the article probes the narrative strategies and thematic motifs that turn *Sangati* into a critical site of resistance.

Theoretical Framework

This analysis is grounded in three critical perspectives:

1. Foucauldian Notion of Power: Power is understood not as a top-down structure but as diffused across various institutions – family, religion, labour, and language. Bama's narrative shows how such micro-mechanisms of power permeate daily life.
2. Dalit Feminist Theory: Sharmila Rege's work stresses the need to centre Dalit women's voices in both feminist and Dalit discourses. Rege calls for a "Dalit standpoint epistemology" that *Sangati* embodies.
3. Intersectionality: Crenshaw's framework helps us understand how the convergence of caste, gender, class, and religion creates unique forms of subjugation for Dalit women, a recurring theme in *Sangati*.

This triangulated approach allows for a nuanced analysis of how oppression is represented and resisted in the text.

Caste and Gender: Intersecting Axes

In *Sangati*, caste and gender are not isolated categories of discrimination. Rather, they are interwoven to create a specific mode of "caste patriarchy." The women in the text are doubly oppressed: by upper-caste men who sexually exploit them and by their own community's men who replicate patriarchal norms.

Sexual Violence: Characters like Mariamma are falsely accused and brutalised, highlighting how Dalit women's bodies are subject to casteist and misogynistic violence.

Internalised Patriarchy: Dalit men often reinforce the same structures that oppress them, directing their frustrations toward women through verbal abuse and physical violence. The text exposes these dual hierarchies while also documenting women's attempts to subvert them, such as public confrontations with abusive husbands or vocal expressions of dissent.

Labour, Economy, and Spatial Politics

Labour in *Sangati* is not just about economic activity; it is a marker of systemic exploitation. Bama carefully outlines how Dalit women perform unpaid domestic work and are simultaneously exploited in fields and factories.

Invisible Labour: Tasks like collecting firewood, fetching water, and preparing food are rendered invisible and unacknowledged, though they are essential for the survival of families.

Wage Discrimination: Women are paid less than men for equal work. Moreover, they often have to give their earnings to male relatives, reinforcing economic dependence.

Spatial Marginalization: Physical spaces like mills, wells, and churches are sites of exclusion. For instance, Dalit women cannot use certain wells or must sit at the back of churches – an extension of their social inferiority.

Through detailed observation, Bama brings these inequities to the fore, making economic and spatial marginalisation visible.

Language, Orality, and Narrative Form as Resistance

The narrative style of *Sangati* is an act of resistance in itself. Unlike mainstream literature, which follows linear plot structures and formal language, *Sangati* uses:

Colloquial Tamil: The use of Dalit dialect challenges Brahminical norms and reclaims linguistic agency.

Oral Traditions: Gossip, storytelling, and songs form a significant part of the narrative, which gives voice to women who are usually silenced in literary and social spaces.

Polyphonic Narration: The first-person narrator does not dominate the text. Instead, multiple voices emerge – each contributing to a collective Dalit-feminist consciousness. In doing so, Bama not only tells stories of resistance but embeds resistance within the structure of the narrative itself.

Collective Agency and Micro-Resistances

While the text reveals harsh realities, it is far from a narrative of despair. It is full of small acts of defiance:

- **Sangams and Solidarity:** Women form collectives to share resources, confront injustices, and even laugh at their suffering, showcasing a remarkable spirit of resilience.
- **Public Shaming:** The women use public spaces to confront domestic abusers, undermining male authority in subtle but powerful ways.
- **Educational Aspiration:** The narrator's advocacy for education among young girls is a direct challenge to the status quo and a path toward long-term liberation.

These micro-resistances accumulate into a sustained and communal assertion of agency, dignity, and survival

Conclusion

Sangati is a literary document of defiance. By chronicling the everyday lives of Dalit Christian women, Bama does not merely expose injustice – she reclaims narrative space. Through her treatment of language, labour, space, and gender, Bama dismantles hegemonic power structures and foregrounds alternative ways of being and resisting. The novel should be read not only as ethnographic testimony but also as a theoretical intervention that critiques dominant paradigms.

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