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RACIAL INJUSTICE: A STUDY OF WOMEN IN BAMA'S *SANGATI*

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ABSTRACT

Caste system is created by the humans for the development of mankind and is considered as one of the methods of division of labour. Eventually this has begun to segregate them in accordance to their rank. Later, the caste system itself has become a custom that is to be followed, making men to forget about their humanity and brotherhood.

Each and every caste has its own unique features: both advantages and disadvantages. The narrator through her novels shares the culture and customs of *paraya* community. In the novel *Sangati*, she not only depicts the suffering of Dalits, but also portrays them as protesters against the injustice which has laid its cruel hand on them by the name of caste and gender. Through this novel, narrator exposes the world of Dalits to the outer world and also to the other Dalit people, instructing them to fight for their rights.

Key words: Dalits, Bama, injustice, caste discrimination, women exploitation, child labour.

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Dalit movement began in Maharashtra during the seventies of the twentieth century, witnessed the emergence of Dalit literature. The translation of such literature proclaims the problems of Dalits, the voiceless to the world. The first wave Dalit writers have shown Dalit women characters as victims not as fighters, whereas the second wave, attempted to portray women as real: heroic, audacious and self-respecting, began placing them in the battle field for fighting against atrocities. One such Dalit writer is Bama, well-known for her novels *Karruku* (1992), *Sangati* (1994) and *Vanmam* (2002), belongs to *paraya* community. Holmstrom commends in the introduction of *Sangati* that, "Bama was already formulating a 'Dalit feminism' which redefined 'woman' from the socio-political perspective of a Dalit, and examining caste and gender oppressions together" (xvii) and "*Sangati* is uniquely placed in contributing both to the Dalit movement and to the women's movement" (xvi). In one of her interviews Bama discloses that, "The main purpose of my writing is to bring out the revolutionary nature of Dalit culture. How the Dalit voice, while experiencing violence, protest against the established systems, how they attempt to sustain their culture, revolting against oppressive

society" (LITTCRIT 111). In *Karruku*, she speaks about the various kinds of oppression on the Dalit by the state, upper caste people and also in the church. In *Sangati*, she narrates the events of Dalit women who managed to overcome their wretched situation through their determination and self-respect. In *Sangati*, she "had written about the life of three generational women (grandma, mother and daughter). The main purpose of writing *Sangati* "is to bring out the stamina of Dalit women with which they try to live their life to the full amidst their daily misery and agony" (LITTCRIT 115).

The word 'human being' is supposed to symbolize humanness, but now it bears the quality in the name and not in the spirit. Though globalised and at the pinnacle of technological success, the world fails to respect the fellow human as a living creature. People have started respecting others for money, power and caste. Humanity and brotherhood are at the verge of extinction. Loss of humanity is going to be the identity of mankind, who lost their conscience in the darkness of discriminations like caste, religion, language and race. The issue is discussed elaborately by Bama in *Sangati*, who in the preface of her novel declares, "*Sangati*, which has as its theme the growth, decline, culture, and liveliness of Dalit women, changed me as well. Even in times of trouble, boredom, and depression, the urge grew to demolish the troubles and to live happily. To bounce like a ball that has been hit became my deepest desire, and not to curl up and collapse because of the blow" (vii).

In the novel, she speaks about the brutality of caste system which has made the human beings forget their humanity. In spite of hard labour and education, equality and access to legal rights are not given to Dalit people. Untouchability has spread its wings all over them and has marked them as outcast. Even in religious domain such as church, the arrangement is in such a way that they are not allowed to sit along with other people. Doctors and nurses avoid entering into their residential areas. People hesitate to sit near them in buses while travelling. Many of the Dalit houses do not have proper fundamental facilities. Children are not equally treated in schools and colleges. The children of the upper caste hardly respects the elders who work in their houses, fields, etc.,.

Dalit women are humiliated and molested by men at work places. They are neither allowed to enact nor allowed go to theatres. They are ill-treated both by upper caste and by the Dalit men. Rakkamma, a Dalit woman in the text, shouts in a revolting way and shames her husband by lifting her sari in front of the crowd, when her husband drags her to the street by the hair and stamps her belly. It is clearly a means of survival and escape. Thaaayi, one of the most beautiful women, is beaten up wickedly by her husband and he goes to the extent of cutting off her hair in order to diminish her beauty. Bama does not forget to mark the oppression imposed on Dalit women by the upper caste men, who take privilege over their caste for protection. One such instance is Kumarasami, who attempts to molest Mariamma, turns the story upside down and as a result of which Mariamma undergoes disgrace among her community people and destines to marry an unmatched person against her wish. Mariamma who gets sick of life says, "For no fault of mine, I get abused wherever I go. Did I ever look that fellow in the face even? Yet the people of this village call me every kind of name" (40).

Child labour is most common among Dalit people. Female children are not encouraged to get even a basic education, without which they are indirectly forced to lead life of ignorance and poverty. Even the healths of female children are not given priority when compared to the opposite sex. Society and parents consider educating a female child as pointless. Female children, from their young age, are trained to take care of the household chores and their siblings. They are also expected to work in the fields and factories for less wages for their survival. One of such cases is Maikkanni in the text, who is compelled to work in fields, factories and do household chores at home. Narrator mentions her pathetic situation as:

From the time she woke up, she sprinkled the front yard with water and swept it, and then carried on with all the housework: swept the rest of the house, scrubbed the cooking pots, collected water, washed clothes, gathered firewood, went to the shops, cooked the kanji. She did it all one after the other. (70)

Bama, through her novel depicts the sufferings of Dalit women who are considered triply marginalized by caste, society and gender. She laments: "It's one justice for men and quite another for women" (24). Netto

shares the view on the need for protest says, "Bama, like Periyar contests this construction of the male as the superior and advises women to break the rules of patriarchy as a framework to oppress women and maintain their hegemony" (70). The narrator shows that the women not as victimized creatures but as protesters. Abedi, in his book *Contemporary Dalit Literature*, says "Bama through her writing hopes to influence Dalit women readers to shape their lives positively. Her works lay a lot of emphasis on empowerment of dalits through education" (109). Dalit Christians have difficulty in breaking their marriage bonds. Divorce which is possible for any other Dalit woman becomes difficult for them by their conversion into Christianity. Bama pities Dalit Christians and upper caste women thus:

A woman is told she must stay with her husband until she dies and put up with every kind of torture. She can't go back to her parent's house. But she is not able to keep on suffering abuse in the house she has entered, either. Do you know how many women have committed suicide because they have no other go? And do you know how many women who go on living like corpses, have actually been killed and their deaths passed off as suicide (93).

Namara claims on Bama's focus on reinterpreting Christian scripture to point to the "oppression of the church, and to think through social transformation" (31). Bama expresses her feeling of depression through Sothipillai who condemns saying, "Just look at what goes on in our church as well. It is our women who sweep the church and keep it clean. Women from other castes stand to one side until we've finished and then march in grandly and sit down before anyone else" (119). Namara throws a view over this point as, "Considered outcastes within the orthodox Hindu social hierarchy, many Dalits converted to Christianity to escape caste-based oppression. However, caste as a tool of social control continues to work within Christianity where upper-caste converts to Christianity dominate the church and exploit Dalit Christians" (31). Bama does not want her people to live as scapegoats to false practices of church and she could not resist her protest against the practices which humiliates her community people in the name of God. She declares the rights of women and the authentic sanctity of church as, "Its by calling on all this stuff about God, the promises made to him, our sins and our good deeds, and Heavens and everlasting Hell, that the priests and nuns frighten the life out of us. But God created us so that we can be happy and free" (95). Women are not allowed to marry out of their caste which is not the same for men of Dalit, about which Bama condemns "when it comes to inter-caste marriages, our people are not bothered if boys make a marriage outside their caste. But if a girl marries out of caste no one will accept it" (106). Bama pities the condition of Dalit women, though educated, suffer by the physical harassments thus, "That girl was beaten up in her house every day by her father and her brother. And they weren't light slaps that she was given, either. For all this, mind you, she was an educated girl who worked for her living" (106).

An inhuman activity towards of a Dalit child by the land owner is cited by Bama to bring to light the atrocities committed by the upper caste. Her mother says, "That *ayya* had brought a small pot of drinking water for himself. One of the children from our streets went and touched it by mistake, so the *ayya* picked up some young groundnut stalks and beat up the child cruelly" (118). Throughout this novel, she narrates innumerable events where the Dalit people are exploited and handled in undignified manner. Upper caste people struggle to suppress dalits in a lower state of life. They are not ready to provide space for Dalits to develop economically. Hard labour and low wages become the destiny of dalits. She questions society thus, "Why do we alone have to struggle so much for a mouthful of kanji? Just think about that. Why is it that people who don't do a stroke of work can fill their bellies so easily, while for us life is always a "lottery"?" (104).

Ghanshyam asserts, "Life is a continuous struggle and the subjugated, the Dalits have undertaken one fight more; a fight to affirm and assert their identity" (88). One of the problems which a Dalit undergoes is the identity crisis. Bama asserts that she encounters difficulty for two reasons: one as a Dalit and the other as a woman. She finds it difficult to lead a normal, simple and a dignified life on her own and is not able to satisfy the basic needs as a human being. All Indians are asked to feel proud of being Indians but fail in making people feel proud of their community. The suppression and oppression of Dalits by the society made them feel

inferior and only few are ready to overcome that, who bravely calls themselves as Dalits. One such person is Bama who shares her determination as:

I often get angry enough to shout it out aloud: I am a *paraichi*; yes I am a *paraichi*. And I don't like to hide my identity and pretend I belong to a different caste. The question beats away in my mind: why should I tell a lie and live a false life? Women of other castes don't face this problem. They can move where they choose, take a house, set up a livelihood. But we are denied the basic right to pay our money and rent a house. Are we so despicable to these others? (120)

Rao and Jayaprakash reveals their view on *Sangati* as, "As for the Dalit woman, the book *Sangati* definitely calls for a revolution and the need for an empowerment through education and introspection. Thus the book is essentially subversive in nature and it brings a world from a Dalit woman's perspective" (154). She firmly believes that path towards equality is education. Bama's women realize the importance of education and expresses their determination to educate the younger generation to escape the exploitation. Bama concludes *Sangati* saying, "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). Bama aches for a society where there is equality, humanity and love, sadly it remains a dream.

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