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BAMA'S SANGATI: A CELEBRATION OF WOMANHOOD

R. SUMATHI

Assistant Professor of English

Thiruvalluvar University College of Arts and Science
Thennangur



R. SUMATHI

ABSTRACT

As a literary movement on its own, dalit literature lashes at the marginalization and ostracization of the dalit community in the name of caste. In defiance of the oppressing society, the dalits reclaim self-respect, wielding their pen; they assert their right to dignity and humane treatment. Dalit feminism celebrates dalit women's vibrancy and self-preservation despite the dual oppression of patriarchy and caste. Bama's *Sangati* rejoices in the resistance and rebellious nature that sustains dalit women in the face of hardships. This paper analyses in detail the lifestyles and everyday affairs of dalit women who reclaim their uniqueness laughing at and ridiculing society's cruelties. Though anger, shame, sorrow and helplessness have become inseparable from their lives, their spirit is indomitable. The events narrated in *Sangati* stand witness to the fact that centuries of suffering have only made the dalit women strong. Bama's characters do not want sympathy. They want recognition. Their joy in living, defying the cruelties of the caste Hindus, itself is a form of assertion. Pained that discrimination is justified, sanctioned and perpetrated by the government, they want to make their presence felt: they want to shout out their pains, their sorrows, their humiliations. Just because they had to do menial jobs, they need not be denied humane treatment. They too are entitled to education, employment, enjoyment. Uncouth, uncivilized, uncultured, uneducated, superstitious, violent ... dalits are all this, but these are not all that they are. And, the characters in *Sangati* are determined to prove this.

Keywords: celebration; marginalization; self-dignity; womanhood

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Generation by generation we must start thinking for ourselves, taking decisions, and daring to act. Don't we sharpen and renew a rusted sickle? Just like that, we must sharpen our minds and learn to live with self-respect.—Bama

For ages, dalits have suffered in silence in India. Social exclusion was "sanctified" by *Manusmriti*, the ancient Hindu law text, and the so-called Untouchables endured untold humiliation at the hands of the caste Hindus. Constant effort from social activists and writers set in motion the process of re-scripting dalit literature. Dalit

feminist literature is a relatively recent phenomenon. It lashes at the marginalization and ostracization of the dalit community because of caste and gender. In defiance of the oppressing society, dalit feminism reclaims self-respect; it asserts women's right to self-dignity and self-sustenance.

Bama's *Sangati* upholds that dalit women have exceptional capacity to withstand the oppression of patriarchy. Their energy, buoyancy, and indomitable spirit despite the adversities of everyday life are remarkable: Mariamma, narrator Vellaiyamma Kizhavi's granddaughter, puts up with the humiliations heaped on her in front of the panchayat for no fault of hers; Maikkanni sustains her family, in spite of her age, whenever her mother gives birth; Sammuga Kizhavi is daring enough to bathe in the upper caste men's well, piss into their drinking water and, to top it, "carry the tale" to the whole village.

The novel is structured as a series of anecdotes; we find that there are so many stories waiting to be told: happy as well as sad ones; memorable as well as trivial ones; interesting as well as weird ones; we see women working together, recounting past events to not feel the burden of work; swimming and bathing together; singing lullabies and threnodies, enjoying their present moment in spite of the crushing reality. The various experiences narrated in the novel exhibit the various ways in which women are subject to oppression and their coping strategies. *Sangati* is the autobiography of a community—the joint struggle of generations of *paraiya* women to set free the shackles that have heaped dignities on the womenfolk for centuries.

The daily ordinances for *paraiya* women are endless: physical abuse at the hands of their husbands, sexual harassment at workplace, necessity to fulfil husbands' sexual needs, constant fear of assault from upper caste men. Yet, the resilience displayed by them is beyond admiration. They have the stamina to laugh at life's adversities, the pluck to counteract the atrocities the upper caste men inflict on the "dalits of dalits" (Agarwal 167). Their vehemence is the result of self-discovery, their pride in being a *paraichi*. Being a *paraichi* gives them certain freedom: for example, to remarry; to bathe in wells; to wear kumkum and flowers even after becoming a widow. *Sangati* celebrates these freedoms that are forbidden to upper caste women.

The quarrels in the novel are instances of resistance. They are an effort to assert the self and dignity. The virulent tongue of women is the counterpart to the violence of men. Paakkiraj and Raakkamma's fight and Chinnappan and Kaaliamma's quarrels stand proof to this. On the use of colloquial language as well as expletives in the fights, Bama writes, "sharp tongues and obscene words are a woman's only way of shaming men and escaping extreme physical violence" (xx). For his "strength of muscle," the woman shows the "sharpness of her tongue" (67).

In the beginning, the novel narrates the oppressive incidents: women slogging in the fields and at home and managing the economic sustenance of the family singly; however, as it progresses, we notice the positive thread that links these various episodes. We are made to realize that the art of storytelling itself is a means to give vent to their pent up emotions, shouting to the world the multipronged humiliations generations of women have suffered because they are subaltern and twice ostracized and yet are not going to be crushed. Interspersed between the narrations are the author-narrator's questions regarding their deplorable condition. The very questioning attitude is an indication of the changing perspective: the subaltern has started questioning the hegemony; the process of the decentrifcation of the centre has started. It might take time for the reversal of this centre-margin relationship, but at least the first step has been taken. To quote Abidi, Ekalavya has not only got his thumb back, but he has "also managed to hold the tongue of fire in his mouth and a fiery pen in his hand" (6). This "counter discourse" will revolt, rewrite and reassert the story of Shambhuka (to borrow Harbir Singh Randhawa's concept), and this is celebratory. From being sorry and ashamed, from being a victim, Bama's women have progressed to say, "I'm lucky to be a *paraiya*" (104). As Bama herself mentions in the Preface, "the glowing message of self-confidence in place of self-pity was its [*Sangati*'s] strength as well as its voice" (vii). The theme of *Sangati* is "subjugation to celebration" (Singh).

The episodes related to Maikkanni are full of pleasantries in spite of the hardships she endures at such a young age. Mirth, cheeriness and gurgles accompany all her narrations. There is charm and delight in every story she tells. The "shit-room" in their factory, the new songs from Superstar Rajnikanth's movie *Vira* she listened to in the factory, the ice cream she had for the first time, the "new" frock she has made her sister

Amalorpavam wear which makes her look like Kushboo, the way she has combed her hair back which makes her look like actress Jayalalitha . . . the innocence she displays, the amusement she shares, the glee she portends are catchy. The light-hearted and chirpy attitude of dalit women is displayed in many an episode in the novel. Though women have to do back-breaking work throughout the day, they get to laugh and amuse themselves a lot. They sing and work; they talk and work; they share their memories/experiences and work; they sing roraattu as well as oppaari. Interludes they have many to lighten life's burdens. The tales shared during voting, marriage ceremonies, *parisam* functions and the Esakki and Ayyankaachi troupe anecdotes are a few examples.

It is their innate strength, in addition to their determination to stay strong in order to survive, that sees dalit women through the ordeals of life. It is their resignation to life's practicalities that helps them handle their miseries. "They retain," says BeenaAgarwal, "the glory of womanhood and preserve the sublimity of the spirit to redefine their inner reservoir of spirit to assert their identity beyond the 'discontent of civilization'. Besides the attributes of femininity, they are endowed with the power to assert their right to self-preservation, self-development, self-dignity and self-survival" (168).

As translator Lakshmi Holmström mentions in the Introduction to the novel, "The ideals Bama admires and applauds in Dalit women are not the traditional Tamil feminine ideals of *accham* (fear), *madam* (innocence), *naanam* (shyness), *payirppu* (modesty), but rather courage, fearlessness, independence and self-esteem" (xix, italics in original) (xix).

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