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VOICING THE OPPRESSED: A STUDY ON BAMA'S "SANGATI"

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to study on the marginalization, discrimination, oppression, and humiliation that are faced by Dalit women in Sangati by Bama. Moreover, it concentrates on how they create an identity of their own by overcoming all the hurdles they are facing. As they are the victims of triple oppression, the intensity of torture they are suffering is unimaginable. The whole study is structured on the framework of Dalit Feminism to substantiate the view that Dalit women can stand up their own, shedding all the negative images that a casteist society has imposed upon them and can rise up out of all the oppressions and violence.

Keywords- Dalit women, oppression, caste, identity, patriarchy.

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Voicing the Oppressed: A Study on Bama's *Sangati*

Dalit women are the most deprived class in Indian society and they are the victims of triple oppression of caste, gender and class. Dalit women are rightly seen as thrice subjugated; as women, as Dalit women, and as Dalit women who perform impure tasks. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar saw Hindu caste system as a pyramid of earthen pot which is put over one another. In this structure, the privileged castes of Brahmins and Kshathriyas are at top and Shudras and untouchables at the bottom. Within each earthen pot, men are situated at the top and women of that caste lie on the bottom. At the bottom of this pyramid are Dalits and even below them are the Dalit women. So we can imagine how much pain and suffering they have to go through their entire life and this very suffering starts from their infancy too.

Dalit literature is the literature of oppression which articulates the pain of this oppression and exploitation faced by Dalits in a caste ridden Indian society. Dalit literature as a genre is established in 1960s and 1970s and begins in Marathi literature and later spread to Hindi, Kannada, Telugu, Tamil and Malayalam literature. It is a literature of resistance, pain and agony. Dalit literature is based on the experience rather than speculation. Therefore, the authenticity and liveliness is the essential feature of Dalit literature. Dr. Ambedkar is regarded as the originator of this literature due to his prose writings as well as his status as an icon of Dalit consciousness. Dr. Ambedkar brilliantly analyzed the development of caste system in India in his works such as *Caste in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development* (1916), *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), and *Who Were the Sudras* (1948).

A new stream of Dalit Feminist Literature sprouted when Dalit women are continuously misrepresented in mainstream literature by men. Dalit women have always been wrongly pictured as the victims of rape and lust of the upper caste men by the upper caste male writers. They are wrongly portrayed as

weak who are not strong enough to fight back against the cruelties imposed upon them. Dalit Feminist Literature is enriched by the contribution of Dalit women writers and it represented their own experiences and burning indignation. They have employed autobiographical mode of writing to express their story of anguish and pain.

As we all know, Dalit feminism is an outcome of the marginalization of Dalit women both in the mainstream women's movements and male dominance in Dalit movements. In these movements, there is a lack of representation and recognition for the issues that Dalit women have been going through. They never address the issues of Dalit women and often neglect them. So Dalit women understood the need for a new Dalit women organization through which they can voice, and represent their pain and trials.

Born and brought up in a village called Puthupatti in Tamilnadu, Bama Foustina Mary has always been a leading voice for the Dalits in her community. Through writing, she aims for the upliftment of Dalit people, especially Dalit women. Bama's first novel *Karukku* is autobiographical in nature and her second novel *Sangati* is a collection of incidents and hasn't got a definite plot as such. Her other works include *Vanmam-Vendetta* (2008), and also short story collections – "Kusumbukaran" and "Oru Tattavum Erumaiyum."

The word 'Sangati' means events, and thus the novel through individual stories, anecdotes and memories portrays the events and the account of the life of Dalits in her village, Puthupatti. *Sangati* was originally written in Tamil in 1994 and was later translated into English by Laxmi Holmstrom. The whole narrative is divided into twelve chapters. Bama through *Sangati* portrays the true lives of Dalit people, especially Dalit women of her community. As a dalit woman she knows every inch of the pain, insults and physical tortures that every Dalit women have gone through her life. A Dalit woman's life is a life full of sufferings which starts from her childhood itself. *Sangati* is a realistic portrayal of a series of incidents which emphasis the atrocities of Dalit women in a day to day life. Apart from this, we can hear the voice of Bama questioning the caste system and patriarchy and encouraging the Dalit women to come up in life overcoming every hardships which block them. Bama not only pictures the helpless Dalit women but also the strong, independent Dalit women who have the voice to question everything which trying to control them.

Bama strongly believes that education is a source of liberation for Dalit women and it alone can uplift them. Her journey into her career as a writer was not that easy as she had to face many troubles. Using writing as a weapon, Bama questions every social evil and patriarchal norm which made Dalit women crippled. So through *Sangati*, Bama provides a helping hand to Dalit women who feel lost, depressed and trapped inside the four walls of their houses. We can see those strongest women who walk through the fires of life, shape their identities and come up in life. Rather than celebrating the feminine ideals of fear, shyness, simplicity, innocence, and modesty. Bama portrays women with courage, fearlessness, independence and self-respect.

The young narrator Pathima's questioning voice can be heard throughout the novel and towards the end, the grown up Pathima advices every Dalit women of her community that it's high time to take action against the oppressions and the assaults they have been facing. She tried to make them realize that there is no use being a silent woman suffering everything, but all they need is a voice of their own to call out and challenge men's oppressive measures.

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Sangati is packed with the themes like women facing sexual assaults, inequality of treatment both at work and at home, health issues, injustice, and child marriages. Pathima recalls how boys and girls of her community are being treated differently from childhood. Boys have been given more privileges and

advantages than girls and this is evident even in the games they played. One incident to quote is that “when we played ‘buses,’ there were always boys at the start and finish of the rope as driver and conductor, who allowed the girls to enter in the middle, and shouted at them. And when we played husbands and wives they were the ones in authority; they took the roles of policemen and shop owners” (31). So it is clear that the most powerful and important roles like policemen, husbands, shop owners are being played by boys while girls as mothers and wives, submissive to male.

All these kind of gender games instil a kind of authority in the minds of boys and Bama reveals the crooked nature of these gender biased fun games. Another instance is:

Even when we played ‘mothers and father,’ we always had to serve the mud ‘rice’ to the boys first. They used to pull us by the hair and hit us, saying, ‘What sort of food is this, di, without salt or anything!’ In those days, we used to accept those pretence blows, and think it was all good fun. Nowadays, for many of the girls, those have become real blows, and their entire lives are hell. (31)

This suggests that gender games played a great role in shaping the identities of boys and girls.

The real life situation is even worse than the games they played. Bama remembers how her Patti responded to this indifference:

As Patti said, though it is quite true that the women in our street led hard lives. That is how it is from the time that they are very little. When they are infants in arms, they never let the boy baby cry. If a boy baby cries, he is instantly picked up and given milk. It is not so with the girls. Even with breast feeding, it is the same story: a boy is breast-fed longer. With girls, they wean them quickly, making them forget the breast. If the boys catch an illness or a fever, they will run around and nurse them with the greatest care. If it is a girl, they will do it half-heartedly. (7)

Bama adds that even her Patti has a special care for her grandsons than granddaughters. Boys are given more respect and they will eat as much as they wish and run off to play. But girls are supposed to stay at home and keep on working all the time, cleaning vessels, drawing water, sweeping the house, gathering firewood, washing cloths and what not. When all their work has finished, they will have to carry the babies, minding them even when they go out to play.

Pathima once questioned Muukkamma, for scolding her sis-in-law for having not given attention to her baby boy crying, “So you can’t leave a boy baby to cry, but you can leave a girl to scream on her own, can you?” (31). Bama is being told more attention is given to boys just because they are the ones who supposed to take care of them and on the contrary, girls will be married off to other family and so least importance is given to them.

What is so disgusting and painful is that Dalit women has been tormented and tortured not only from upper caste men but also from their own men. Bama painfully remembers Patti’s description about how her Perimma dies tormented by her husband:

Because the man was crazy with lust. Because he wanted her every single day. How could she agree to his frenzy after she worked all hours of the day and night, inside the house and out? He is an animal, that fellow. When she refused, he practically broke her in half. Once in my very presence he hit her with the rice-pounder. May his hand be bitten by a snake! (10)

These are the words of a heartbroken mother who survived with bruised memories of the past. Bama couldn’t resist questioning her Patti, “And you just stood there watching! Why didn’t you go and shove him off?” (10). Justification given by Perimma’s husband made her more furious, “She is my wife, I can beat her or even kill her if I want” (10-11). This kind of patriarchal attitude exists among men that which make them to act brutally and heartlessly.

There are a number of incidents that Bama describing about how Dalit woman physically and mentally get tortured while they are in the fields from their landlords. One such victim is when Perimma’s daughter, Mariamma is sexually insulted by her landlord while she was working in the field. In order to keep his reputation safe, he lied to the village people saying that he witnessed Mariamma and Manikkam behaving in a

dirty way. Arokkyam's granddaughter's and Thaa'yi's situations are not so different. Arokkyam's granddaughter is tortured by landlord and Thaa'yi by her own husband. Pathima says:

When I thought of Mariamma's life history, I was filled with such pain and anger. Because of some upper-caste man's foolishness, she was made the scapegoat, and her whole life was destroyed. If a woman is slandered, that is always her fate. People won't consider whether the accusation is true or not, nor will they allow the woman to speak out. (42).

Landlords would do anything possible to let her down and insult them. Too often landlords mix the seed gram in the fields with all sorts of chemicals to prevent the workers from not eating it.

In all these incidents, what are so evident is that, no justice has been given to Dalit women but only blame and torture. If it was like this at home and at workplace, the situation is even worse at the church. The girls are never allowed to join in the sacristy. One incident to quote:

If it was like this at home, it was even worse at church. When we were in the seventh and eighth class, me and my friends Jayapillai, Nirumala, Chandura, Seeniamma, and others wanted desperately to peep into the sacristy at least once, someday, somehow, and run away without getting caught. But we never ever made it, even a single time. Even the tiniest boys born just the other day, would manage to get in there, as quick as anything. They would go in one way and come out the other. But they never allowed the girls to join in. (32)

So it doesn't matter wherever they are, even at home, at workplace, or at church, the situation of Dalit women would be the same. They are the victims of oppression, insults, discrimination and what not.

Dalit women rarely get time to take care of their health as they have to manage the work at home and in the field, and so often they have to face many health issues too. Even during their pregnancy, they go work in the field and no special food and care has been given to them. As I have mentioned earlier, the root cause of many evil things prevail in Dalit community is the lack of education. Girls are married off at their young age often before they reach puberty. Bama draws the story of Muttharasi's daughter, Sukkarai of East Street, "It's no more than two or three months since she came of age" (82).

One reason why Dalit women have to suffer more is they, themselves. They internalized the age old concept of femininity that women must be submissive to men and this very concept has been passed and shared from one generation to next and so on. Patti's remark is relevant here, "As soon as she gets her periods, you stop her from studying, hand her over to some fellow or the other, and be at peace" (9). Having a girl child is like a burden and they are denied freedom, education etc.

As Bama suggests, lack of education is yet another reason for their miserable situation. Bama was lucky enough to get education though she had to suffer many troubles. She had to face many hurdles while trying to earn a living even though she is educated. Towards the end of the novel she remarks:

But even though I think and agonize like this, I know that my own situation is not so bad. Somehow, I have a little education; I earn a living, and stand on my own two feet. When I think of the women from my community who can't tell 'a' from 'aa', and bend low to receive endless blows at home and at work, I am filled with frustration. (122).

She has always been anxious about the people of her community especially women who are not educated.

Bama is giving proper answers to many challenging day-to-day situations that every Dalit women have to face. So *Sangati* is an answer to many such questions, trials, situations, which is a kind of boosting and encouragement for them. Her own question voice is employed to make them realise the importance one's own voice. Bama as a young girl in the novel used to question everything she found unacceptable.

It has been a custom that women have to wait until their husbands to come home to have dinner. If something happens on the contrary, it is the end of her life as that of Anantamma of West Street. Even some songs exist in their community to endorse this very rule in the minds of Dalit women for constantly reminding this horror. One such song is:

Crab, O crab, my pretty little crab
Who wandered through all the fields I planted,

I pulled off your claws and put you in the pot
I gave the pot a boil and set it down.
I waited and waited for him to come home
And began to eat as he came through the door.
He came to hit me, the hungry brute
He pounced at me to kill me
He struck me, he struck my child
He almost crushed the baby in my womb
He beat me until my legs buckled
He thrashed me until my bangles smashed. (30)

The young mind of Bama couldn't do anything but question the so-called authoritative nature of Dalit men; "So what would be so wrong if we changed that and the women ate first" (30). The same reaction could be seen in the case of Thaayi from West Street when she questioned the institution of marriage itself, "Well, Amma, just because he's tied a tali round her neck, does it mean he can beat his wife as he likes? It's just pitiful to see Thaayi, Amma" (43). Once Pathima's mother scolded her for reaching home late after church, as she feared that some pey could catch and possess her daughter from the banyan tree on the way back home. Pathima couldn't digest the very idea that "why does the pey possess women, Patti? It never seems to go for the men, even when they are on their own" (50). According to Patti's opinion, women are always fearful cowards, may be that is the reason why the peys are behind the women. Questioning voice of Bama is so evident when she says, "And even among women, I never heard of upper-caste women becoming possessed or dancing in a frenzy. The peys always seem set on women from the pallar, paraiyar, chakkiliyar, and koravar communities" (58). She was moved when her mother said these words:

Once a girl comes of age she has no more freedom. They tell us all these stories, take away our freedom, and control our movements. And we too become frightened, we gaze about us in terror, we're afraid of every little thing, we shiver, and die. It isn't for nothing that they say to one who is terrified, that anything dark is a pey. If there isn't courage in our hearts, we lose our strength and become good for nothing. If we are brave enough, we can dare to accomplish anything we want. (58)

All she wanted to say is that those who don't have the mental strength are totally oppressed and they can easily subject to mental illness and act as if they are possessed with pey. It is a piece of advice to all Dalit women that must have to be stay strong and not get fooled by the pey stories and all other cooked up stories. Bama says, "I told myself that we must never allow our minds to be worn out, damaged, and broken in the belief that this is our fate. Just as we work hard so long as there is strength in our bodies, so too must we strengthen our hearts and minds in order to survive" (59). Her intension here is to share a kind of strength and enlightenment to her fellow members of her community.

It is so true that the institution of marriage has crippled women everywhere and Pathima even questions the very nature of it. She says, "I am sure that god doesn't want us to be living like slaves to the day we die, without any rights or status, just because of a cord around the neck. Don't you agree?" (95). She has always been against the Christian concept, "What God has put together, let no man put asunder" (94). She was sure about the fact that men have been playing games with women in the name of party, god, and caste and women are like grinning puppets in their hands. Her words are so powerful when she says:

It is by repeating that to us that they have made us as useless as rotten eggs. Nowadays women can take up all sorts of responsibilities. But just as they fooled us and took away our rights within our homes, they have also marginalized us in the world outside. But now, generation by generation we must start thinking for ourselves, taking decision, 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. (104)

Bama through these words, made Dalit women realize the strength that lays deep inside them. She call upon for a new change which is beneficial for women and that is possible only if they are willing to come forward and shackle the walls of triple oppression of class, caste, and gender.

While describing the hardship of Dalit women, Bama never forgets about the positive aspects of her community, some advantages they have when comparing other Dalit community and upper caste women. She says that in their streets, both men and women got to work and earn. So there is no need for them to depend on their men for each and everything which is really a good thing to be appreciated. Another thing is their ability to survive every hardship without going crazy. Bama says:

Somehow or other, by shouting and fighting first thing at dawn and last thing at night, if need be, our women survive without going crazy. If we are to live at all, we have to shout and shriek to keep ourselves sane...If you look at it like that, our women have an abundant will to survive however hard they might have to struggle for their last breath. Knowingly or unknowingly, we find ways of coping in the best way we can. (86)

Bama always appreciated the privilege of taking divorce in their community even though Christian women didn't have their chance. Just because one is into marriage doesn't mean that they have to spend their entire life burning and dying inside with a man she dislikes. Many upper caste women couldn't even think of a divorce and if she leaves her husband, people will keep on tormenting her. In Dalit communities, they don't abuse when women who live apart from their husbands and even they are allowed second marriages too.

We have been hearing women suffering in our country in the name of dowry. Bama says that in their streets, there is no snatching and grabbing in the name of dowry. Instead of women bringing dowry at the time of marriage, in their case, man gives a *parisam*, a bride-price. Unlike other communities, during the funeral ceremonies in Dalit community, it is the women who will go and sit by the corpse and sing dirges, while the men remain outside. There aren't rules saying this must only be done by women and this by men. Everyone does everything. In a situation like when a man dies, there is no such rule that his wife must immediately go into white saris nor that she must behave in such and such manners.

Bama has given a number of solutions towards the end of the novel for most of the problems that she had described throughout the novel. She put the example of her own life as a model to the entire Dalit women. She says that:

Besides all this, to live a life as an unmarried woman raises another huge problem. Because I have remained unmarried all his time, people assume that I have known many men as a prostitute: they gossip about me. They seem to think that once a woman is married and has a tali round her neck, she is also signed, sealed, and delivered over to one man. They assume that otherwise she is the common property of many fellows, and they will leer at her suggestively. Why shouldn't a woman belong to no one at all but herself? (121)

Bama has lived against the society's idea of a 'normal' woman. She is an unmarried, working, independent woman who attained her own freedom and identity through struggle. People have a general thought that marriage is the ultimate destiny for women and end of her life and every other life against this is abnormal. People usually see these women as prostitutes. That is where the problem lies. Bama has been constantly fighting against to change this attitude of men.

Bama struggled real hard to live a life of a Dalit, to find a job and a house. She knew the power of her own courage and has never got baffled by the endless pestering of the society. She says that "But I go with enough courage. It's only when your purse is heavy that you fear the journey, as they say. You have to tell yourself the dog is barking at the sun that's all" (121). Though Bama lived a life of an independent, unmarried, strong woman, the thought of the plight of her fellow Dalit women from her community has always been a pain for her. She speaks her minds out that women have their own desires, wishes, and minds of their own too. Women are told never to reveal these things. They have internalized this very concept and believe that they must repress and destroy their own needs and feelings and run about looking after the men and the rest of the family.

Bama says that it has been accepted as normal when man humiliates woman a thousand times, speak about them with disrespect, but it is totally a different story if the same was done by a woman. He will never stand for it and will physically torture her until he gained control over her. As an advice, Bama says that

“Knowing all these, as we do, we must not live like people who choose to be blind though they can see. If we ourselves do not change our condition, then who will come and change it for us?” (122). The concluding paragraph of the novel is a positive, concise, and precise advise to all silent Dalit women sufferers who has been living without questioning anything and anyone at all. The novel ends like this:

We must give up the belief that a married life of complete service to a man is our only fate. We must change this attitude that if married life turns out to be a perpetual hell, we must still grit our teeth and endure it for a lifetime. We must bring up our girls to think in these new ways from an early age. We should educate boys and girls alike, showing no difference between them as they grow into adults. We should give our girls the freedom we give our boys. If we rear our children like this from the time they are babies, women will reveal their strength. Then there will come a day when men and women will live as one, with no difference between them: with equal rights. Then justices, violence, and inequalities will come to an end, and the saying will come true that ‘Women can make and women can break.’ I am hopeful that such a time will come soon. (122-123)

Bama tried to make them realize the importance of giving education and freedom to girl children in order to reveal their hidden inner strength and potential. She pessimistically envisages a time when men and women will be treated equally and all inequalities will come to an end. These words reminded me of the words of Soni Sori, a Koya tribal from Chhattisgarh who is a victim of sexual assault from five police men. She says that “I’ve felt my fear melt like hot metal and shape itself into a sword of strength. (<https://sonisori.wordpress.com/>)”

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