

AN EXPLORATION OF DALIT FEMINISM IN BAMA'S SANGATI

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Abstract :

One of the main opponents of women writers is thought to be patriarchy. Thus, it is not unusual for stronger people to oppress or exploit weaker people. The feminist movement or feminist aspect addresses women specifically as well as society at large, "The Woman" and "The Dalit" experience marginalization, hegemony and devaluation. This paper explores the various hidden forms of pain that the Dalit community endures with a focus on women's experiences as shown in Bama's Sangati. It also covers the experiences of the two main characters in the book, Mariamma and Maikkanni and how Dalit women are routinely taken advantage of by the dominant caste of Hindus. The paper outlines how Bama examined and described numerous individual stories from Dalit life in the context of this background.

Keywords: Hegemony, Patriarchy, Feminism, Marginalization, Subjugation

Feminism, as one of the most transformative social movements of the past two centuries, has played a pivotal role in reshaping human society on a global scale. At its core, feminism advocates for the political, economic and social equality of the sexes. This movement has evolved over time, taking on different meanings and interpretations, but its foundation remains rooted in the fight for women's emancipation. Originating in the late 18th century, feminism has sparked enduring changes in societal norms and has challenged patriarchal structures that have historically marginalized women. One of the earliest and most influential works in feminist literature is Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Written during the height of the French Revolution, Wollstonecraft's treatise called for the recognition of women's rights and their equal status in society. Her work was groundbreaking in its argument that women should have access to the same educational and intellectual opportunities as men, challenging the prevailing belief that women were naturally inferior to men. Wollstonecraft's ideas laid the groundwork for future feminist thought and set the stage for subsequent generation of women to fight for their rights.

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, feminist thought continued to evolve, with contributions from a wide array of writers and thinkers. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) is a seminal text that delves into the social construction of gender and the ways in which women have been historically oppressed. De Beauvoir's analysis of women's roles in society and her call for women's liberation resonated with the burgeoning feminist movements of the mid-20th century and helped to shape modern feminist theory. Other prominent feminist writers such as Emily Dickinson, George Eliot, Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath have also made significant contributions to feminist literature. Through their works, these writers

explored the complexities of women's lives, their struggles for autonomy and their resistance to societal expectations. Virginia Woolf in her essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929), argued for the necessity of financial independence and personal space for women to create and express themselves freely.

The notion that feminism in India is a purely Western import overlooks the deep and complex history of feminist thought and activism rooted in Indian culture. While it is true that contemporary feminist movements in India have been influenced by global trends, Indian feminism traces its origins back to the 19th century, particularly in Maharashtra where early reformers began challenging patriarchal norms. Furthermore, India's tradition of female intellectualism stretches even further back, to the early Vedic period where women like Lopamudra, Maitreyi and Gargi were celebrated as scholars and philosophers. This suggests that the struggle for gender equality in India is not merely a modern phenomenon but one that is deeply embedded in the fabric of Indian history. However, modern Indian feminism has evolved uniquely, in ways that diverge from its Western counterparts. This is evident in its intersectional approach, addressing not just gender but also caste, class, religion and regional disparities. The works of feminist writers like Kamala Das, Ismat Chughtai, Kamini Roy, Krishna Sobti and Gaura Pant reflect a broad spectrum of experiences and challenges faced by women in India, often engaging with issues that are specific to the Indian context. These writers and activists have contributed to a distinctly Indian feminist discourse, on that is as much about reclaiming cultural heritage as it is about advocating for contemporary rights.

Dalit literature is diverse in its forms, encompassing autobiographies, novels, poetry and essays, each contributing to a broader understanding of the Dalit experience. In South India, Dalit feminist writers like Bama, Sivakami and Poomani have been instrumental in exploring the intersection of caste and gender, highlighting the double marginalization faced by Dalit women. Their works delve into the complexities of subalternity, offering a nuanced critique of both caste oppression and patriarchy. Through their writings, these authors not only assert their identity and resistance but also enrich the broader discourse on social justice in India.

Bama Faustina Soosairaj, widely known as Bama, is an important figure in Dalit feminism and a representative novelist whose works vividly depict the intersectional struggles of Dalit women. Caste and gender serve as dual identity markers in her writings which create a distinct Dalit feminist perspective that highlights the "double oppression" faced by Dalit women. As members of both a marginalized caste and gender, Dalit women suffer layered forms of discrimination, making their experiences unique and particularly harsh. Bama was born in 1958 in Tamil Nadu, belongs to Paraiyar community, a Dalit group historically subjected to social exclusion and economic exploitation. Bama's literary influences are rooted in both her Tamil heritage and broader literary traditions. Early Tamil writers like Jayakantam, Akhilam, Mani and Parthasarathy shape her narrative style while her college readings introduced her to the philosophical musing of Khalil Gibran and lyrical prose of Rabindranath Tagore. This blend of regional and global influences has helped Bama craft a unique voice in Indian literature. Bama's works are not just a testament to the struggles of Dalit women but also a celebration of their strength and resilience. By using her pen as a tool for social change, Bama has played a crucial role in the issues of caste and gender discrimination to the forefront of Indian literature and continue to inspire new generations of writers and activities.

Bama's *Sangati* is indeed a unique and powerful narrative within Dalit feminist literature. Written originally in Tamil in 1994 and later translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom. The book stands out for its unconventional structure and its commitment to portraying the lived experiences of Dalit women. The title *Sangati*, meaning "events", aptly reflects the novel's format which eschews a traditional plot in favor of a series of interconnected stories, anecdotes and memories. This narrative choice allows Bama to vividly depict the realities of Dalit women's lives in all their complexity, offering a multifaceted view of their struggles, joys and resilience.

The absence of a conventional plot in *Sangati* is deliberate, as Bama seeks to present a collective voice of Dalit women rather than focus on a singular storyline. The novel's structure mirrors the fragmented yet interconnected experiences of these women whose lives are shaped by both individual and communal challenges. Through this series of anecdotes, Bama captures not only the hardships and sorrows faced by Dalit women such as caste and gender based violence, exploitation and discrimination but also their strength, vitality and capacity for rebellion. In her acknowledgement, Bama explicitly states her intent behind writing *Sangati* to give voice to the myriad stories of Dalit women that are often overlooked or suppressed. She emphasizes that the book is not just about documenting suffering but also about celebrating the "lively and rebellious culture" of Dalit women, their passion for life and their unwavering spirit in the face of adversity. By focusing on both the pain and the resilience of these women, Bama challenges the reader to recognize the full humanity of Dalit women who are not merely victims but active agents in their own lives. Its narrative style which blends the personal with the communal allows for a rich exploitation of the complexities of Dalit women's lives, making it a powerful and enduring work in Indian literature.

Bama's *Sangati* evolves from the perspective of a young girl to that of an adult woman, allowing for layered and reflective examination of the experiences of Dalit women. In the initial chapters, the story is told from the first-person perspective of a girl, approximately twelve years old. This choice of narrative voice brings an immediacy and intimacy to the reader's understanding of the daily struggles faced by the Paraiyar community. The narrator's observations are raw and unfiltered, providing a direct window into the harsh realities of caste and gender discrimination. The use of a child's perception primarily shows the innocence and confusion in confronting the deeply entrenched social injustices around her.

As *Sangati* progresses, the standpoint broadens through the generalizing comments of elder women in the community, particularly grandmothers and mother figures. These voices offer wisdom and collective experience, providing a broader context to the individual anecdotes. The elder's reflections reveal the long history of oppression and the strategies of resilience developed by the community over generations. This communal viewpoint adds depth to the narrative, showing how systemic issues affect all members of the community, while also emphasizing the role of oral tradition in preserving and transmitting the collective of resistance. In the later chapters, the narrator, now a young woman reflects on her past experiences with a deeper understanding. This shift in voice from the immediate observations of a child to the mature reflections of an adult, allows the narrative to transition from merely recounting experiences to critically analyze them.

One of the critical aspects Bama addresses in *Sangati* is the superstitions and cultural

beliefs that surround the birth of Dalit girls. The belief that it is fortunate for odd numbered children to be girls and even numbered ones to be boys reflects that community's fixed gender biases. These superstitions are not merely harmless cultural practices; they contribute to the broader framework of gender discrimination that dictates the lives of Dalit women from the moment they are born.

Bama also emphasizes the severe lack of healthcare facilities available to the Dalit community which further compounds the difficulties faced by Dalit women. This lack of access to healthcare is particularly devastating for women who are often expected to bear the brunt of physical labor, even during pregnancy without adequate medical support. The narrative underscores how Dalit women despite being daily wage earners, are abandoned by their husband, exploited and sexually harassed at their workplaces. The grim reality of their lives is depicted with stark realism, showing how they must continue to work hard under extreme condition even while pregnant, with no reprieve or consideration for their well-being.

The character of the narrator's grandmother, Vellaiyamma, exemplifies the resilience of Dalit women. Single-handedly raising her children, Vellaiyamma embodies the strength and determination required to survive in a society that offers little support. The absence of family planning within the Dalit community further shows the lack of control Dalit women have over their bodies and lives, often leading to large families and the perpetuation of poverty and hardship. The novel also does not shy away from depicting the terrible truths of sexual assault and physical violence that Dalit women persist. The physical violence portrayed in *Sangati* including lynching, whipping and canning by male family members reflects the brutal enforcement of patriarchal norms within the community. Bama poignantly expresses that while all women are treated as second-class citizens, the situation is far graver for Dalit women due to their caste identity which strips them of social status and often denies them even basic human dignity.

The language used in *Sangati* is particularly noteworthy for its directness and rawness especially in its frequent sexual references and colloquial expressions. Bama consciously bridges the gap between the spoken and written forms of Tamil by deliberately breaking conventional grammatical and spelling rules. This approach not only challenges the literary norms of the dominant culture but also gives voice to the marginalized speech patterns and expressions of Dalit women, making their stories more vivid and relatable. By doing so, Bama amplifies the grievances of Dalit women, ensuring that their pain, anger and toughness are communicated with the necessity and authenticity they deserve.

A significant aspect of *Sangati* is how it exposes the vicious cycle of oppression that Dalit women endure. The men in the community, themselves victims of dehumanizing treatment by upper caste landlords, redirect their frustration and suppressed towards their wives. These men were unable to assert their dignity in the face of caste based oppression, exert their male pride and authority at home, inflicting physical and emotional violence on their wives. Bama portrays this dynamic, showing how Dalit women are doubly oppressed: by the caste hierarchy that devalues their existence and by the patriarchy that subjects them to domestic violence. The novel makes it clear that while all women are subjected to patriarchal control, Dalit women face an even graver situation due to their caste identity. Through *Sangati*, Bama asserts the importance of listening to and amplifying the voices of those who are most

marginalized, ensuring that their stories are not just told but are also understood in their full complexity and significance.

Bama draws a nuanced comparison between Dalit and non-Dalit women, expressing the complex and often paradoxical nature of their experiences. While acknowledging the severe challenges that Dalit women face, Bama also identifies certain aspects of Dalit culture that afford women a degree of freedom and an agency that is often denied to their upper caste counterparts. Bama contrasts the economic independence of Dalit women with the restricted lives of upper caste women. Dalit women, despite their hardships, possess a form of economic freedom as they work in the fields, contribute to the household income and take active roles in raising their children. This economic participation gives them a sense of autonomy and responsibility that is largely absent in the lives of upper caste women who are typically confined to domestic spaces and dependent on their male relatives for financial support.

In Dalit communities, certain progressive practices such as the allowance of widow remarriage, offer women a chance to rebuild their lives after the loss of a spouse. This stands in stark contrast to many upper caste communities where widows are subjected to severe social restrictions and stigmatization. Bama suggests that in some ways Dalit culture is less rigid and more inclusive, allowing women a more active role in the community and in their own lives. However, Bama does not idealize the situation of Dalit women. She is actually aware of the oppression they face; caste oppression during the day and gender oppression at night. While they may have more freedom to work and participate in public life, they are still subjected to the dehumanizing effects of caste discrimination and the violence of patriarchy.

In contrast, upper caste women though not subjected to the same caste based discrimination, live in conditions of extreme vulnerability within the confines of their homes. Their emotions and desires are suppressed and they are forced to conform to rigid social norms that deny them autonomy and self-expression. Bama points out that the very structures that privilege upper caste women in some respects also serve to imprison them, leaving them with little opportunity to assert their individuality or pursue their aspiration.

As a child, the narrator's melancholic and rebellious disposition is shaped by the cruel realities she witnesses in her community. Bama describes the immense capacity for hard labour, the spirit of protest and the rich cultural heritage of Dalit women, drawing attention to the qualities that make them powerful despite the oppressive circumstances they face. Through anecdotes about the characters of narrator's courageous grandmother, Katturaasa's mother and Mariamma, Bama illustrates the strength and perseverance of Dalit women. These women are depicted as warriors in their own right, fighting against the odds to provide for their families and survive in a society that seeks to silence them. The grandmother who pawns her "thali" to feed her children, the mother who gives birth while working and the woman who returns to work after an accident all exemplify the extraordinary toughness of Dalit women.

The critical exchange between the narrator and her grandmother encapsulates the tension between tradition and the desire for change. When the protagonist admonishes her grandmother for not protesting against the oppression they face, the grandmother's response reflects a deeply ingrained resignation to the current situation. Bama asked her grandmother that from your ancestors' times it has been agreed that what men say is right. Don't you go dreaming that everything is going to change just because you have learned a few letters of the

alphabet? It reveals the generational divide in perspectives on resistance and change. The grandmother's resignation is a result of generations of internalized oppression where resistance seems futile and survival depends on acceptance and conformity. However, Bama's narrative also suggests that education and awareness can be catalysts for change. The protagonist's determination to challenge the situation despite her grandmother's caution represents a new generation of Dalit women who are unwilling to accept the limitations imposed on them. Bama's portrayal of this generational conflict emphasizes the importance of breaking free from the shackles of tradition and advocating for social empowerment.

The character of Pechiamma who is described as having studied up to the fifth grade, symbolizes the limited access to education that Dalit girls often face. Bama uses Pechiamma's educational journey to underscore broader issues within the education system that impact the Dalit community. Bama places a strong focus on education for two reasons. On the one hand, it celebrates the success and bravery of individuals who succeed in moving forward in spite of the obstacles they face. However, it also shows the societal barriers that deny Dalit children especially girls, access to and opportunities in school.

In the seventh chapter of *Sangati*, Bama presents a harrowing portrayal of the suffering faced by an eleven-year-old girl named Maikkani. The risk of the family is increased by her mother's multiple pregnancies and her incapacity to work as a result of her illness. Even though Maikkani is only a little child, she is forced to take care of the household and looks after his younger siblings while his mother leaves to work in the fields. She even goes so far as to work in a nearby match factory in the event that her mother becomes unable of working after giving birth. The harsh cycle of labor and extreme exploitation that Dalit families are forced to endure where even the youngest members are exploited for financial survival.

Bama explores how patriarchal norms and caste oppression confine Dalit women to roles of subjugation and powerlessness. The story of Mariamma is particularly tragic as she continues relentless victimization including molestation by a powerful upper caste individual, Kummarasami Ayya. Her story demonstrates the absence of freedom and support that Dalit women in their communities face. When faced with Mariamma's suffering, the paralysis of the Paraiyar men and their silence mirrors the widespread fear and helplessness that many Dalits experience when going up against upper caste authority. Their lack of response is evidence of larger structural problems that support oppression and hinder effective opposition.

Bama believes in being strong. Serving as a rallying cry and manifesto for Dalit women that we must show our own resolute lives that we believe ardently in our independence. It is an appeal for resilience and self-assertion, recognizing the value of independence and self-determination in the face of structural oppression. Bama's support of strength and perseverance is consisted with her large feminist goals which include enabling Dalit women to stand up and dominate social forces that aim at reducing their individuality and sense of dignity.

Thus, in *Sangati*, Bama's depiction of Dalit women holds up a mirror to their lives and hardships, revealing both their strength and their pain. Bama advocates for real change and advancement in the lives of Dalit women through her moving stories and uncompromising honesty. Her appeal extends to many facets of life such as gender equality, sexual liberty and access to jobs and education. Bama promotes a more equal and just society where Dalit women can flourish and reach their full potential.

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