

OPPRESSION AND SUPPRESSION OF WOMEN IN BAMA'S SANGATI

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Abstract

The present scenario speaks a lot about the position of women in society. The feminist study tries to project the woman equalent to man and it moves ahead to portray the superiority of women. In Indian setting, Feminist writers like Kamala Das, Anitha nair and Anita Desi, other attempts pictureized the position of women in patriarchal society. Bama, as a feminist writer and a dalit, to focuses the double oppression faced by the dalit women in the society. In her novel, Sangati she demonstrate the panic life of a dalit women with caste and gender discrimination. The project sets to focus on the oppression and suppression faced by a dalit women. The first part discusses on the origin of dalit writing in Tamil Nadu, it characteristics and about the authors and her translator. Next, the discrimination faced by dalit young girl and adult dalit women in the family and social setting is discussed in detail. The solution for improving the status of women to move away from the gender and caste discrimination is clearly noted and discussed in detail.

Keywords: Gender and caste discrimination, Cultural identity, Double Oppression

Oppression and Suppression of Women in Bama's Sangati

Writing from the margin, Bama's literary writing is being a care provided to improve a situation in Tamil Dalit fiction. Bama, a Dalit woman, a former Kanyastree (Christian nun) and a school teacher writes about her experiences locating them within the contexts that circumscribe her personal and professional life. Her identity as a Dalit, her marginalised position in the society is further shown to be stressed by her gender, class and religious location. From such a position, she explores the multiple structures of oppression that operate in the lives of Dalits, and more specifically in the lives of paraiyar women of Tamil Nadu. As a marginalised writer, Bama seeks to explore modes of empowerment for her people. Her novel Sangati (1994) is an autobiographical literary narrative which imaginatively combines her lived experience with that of the experiences of the larger groups refers to her caste and gender.

Sangati is a stimulating to action insight into the lives of Dalit women who face the double disadvantage of caste and gender discrimination. Written in a colloquial style, the original Tamil version overturns propriety in manner and conduct and aesthetics of upper-caste, upper-class Tamil literature and culture, in turn, projects a characterized by cultural identity for Dalits in general and for Dalit women in particular. Sangati treat with contemptuous disregard received notions about what a novel should be and has no plot in the normal sense. It relates to the mindscape of a Dalit women who steps out her small town community, only to enter a caste-ridden and lower society, which constantly questions her caste status. Realizing that leaving her community is no escape, she has economically independent woman who chooses to live alone. In relating this tale, turns Sangati into the story not just of one individual but of a pariah community.

In Sangati Bama is focuses on the double oppression of females. While going through all this caste system some important questions arise in the mind. Who are Dalits? What is the women identity in Dalit? What does Bama's Sangati focus on? What are the solutions suggested in Bama's Sangati? These are some important questions which pressurize the readers to go through the text.

Sangati exposes that how a man spend his earning as they please but on the other hand a woman has to fulfill their family responsibilities with her minimal wage. The theme of Sangati is "Oppression to Celebration." Bama's Sangati is a unique Dalit feminist narrative. It is mainly concern with women's movement in India. Indian Literature also contributes in the Dalit movement and to the women's movement in India. In Tamil Nadu, 1960s may be noted as the starting point of feminism. Before that various struggle against male oppression, the privilege

systems in patriarchal society and inequality was occurred. As an advocate of Dalit feminism, Bama's Karukku explores the sufferings of Dalit women. Sangati carries an autobiographical element in their narrative, but it is a story of a whole community, not an individual.

A girl child in Dalit community is perceived as a potential source of cheap, unpaid labour. She is a deputy mother to her siblings, thereby coming to the rescue of her mother who can take up her heavy workload at the farm outside and leave the domestic responsibilities to her daughter. A Dalit girl's domestic chores includes collecting firewood, cooking, feeding, washing and taking care of a child thereby coming to the rescue of her mother who can take up her heavy workload at the farm outside. She leaves the domestic responsibilities in home at afternoon by working at the farm in return for a couple of handfuls of gram or peas, running errands, working at factories or at farms. During sowing and harvesting time, she hands the wages to a hounding brother or a drunken father.

The girl child, of course, gets discriminated against right from birth. In Sangati, the narrator observes, My mother was happy enough .but she was a little disappointed that I was so dark and didn't have my sister's or brother colour. My mother told me that in our village make any difference between boys and girls at birth. But as they raised them, they were more concerned about the boys than the girls. She said that's why boys went about bossing over everyone.

She further recalls that it is a norm in her never allowed to even whimper while the female baby is left unattended for long hours. Even in matters of weaning, the male child enjoys breast feeding for a longer period compared to his female counterpart. While staying in home, a girl takes over a hard task like fetching water, firewood, mopping and washing cooking and numerous never ending tasks. Ironically, the boy is allowed only to fill his stomach and play outside.

A girl child can step out of the home only when she picks up her younger sibling and takes him out for play. Thus her stepping out too is work-related. It is a task that is ordained upon her on account of her gender. Similarly, the games that children play are codified on gender lines. As the narrator recalls in Sangati, "Boys do not girls play their games. Girls could only play at cooking a meal, play at being married off even play at getting beaten up by husbands" (6). Sangati, focuses on how the strong minded dalit women had the bond and tie down to the authority of male. The condition of dalits was very bad as they were not allowed to enter into the temple, and schools for education.

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'd go in one way and come out the other. But they never allowed the girls to join in.

This form of discrimination based on identity similar in equality to racism. To the great extents, writers like Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir speak out about the representation of women in literature. In 1980's first feminist criticism became much more providing. It is attacking the male version of the world on the female. In the Indian social ladder Dalit refers to the lowest step.

Dalit feminism points out repeatedly that Dalit struggle has tended to forget a gender perspective. In Dalit society every women live under the double power of caste and patriarchy. They are doubly oppressed. Women's are considered as the symbol of sex and object of pleasure. A study of Dalit feminist writing reveals a tale of endless miseries, inhuman victimization and shocking gender discrimination. Bama, was already, formulating a Dalit feminist. In Sangati events the characters such as, Marriamma, Rakkamma, Kaaliaamma, Marriamma mother, Narrator act as example. The tragic end of Marriamma's mother killed by her own husband clearly depicts the poor status of women.

Marriamma is a sixteen years old girl whose mother died leaving behind the responsibility of tending two sisters and an alcoholic father on her tender shoulders. Marriamma faces constant teasing from the men in her community as she does not get her menstrual cycle even in her sixteenth year. Due to anemia caused by poor nutrition and excessive workload,

Marriamma's father virtually killed her mother through sustained, repeated beating, Wife-bashing is perceived as a birthright by Dalit men. Marriamma's mother has victim to this. Her grandmother prove, she was killed by the ceaseless beatings she received from her husband. He would demand his quota of sex from her every night. She worked day and night, at home and in the fields. How could she put up with his demands night after

night? He was a beast. If she dared to refuse, he would break her bones. Any object would serve him as a weapon, even an iron pestle. When she died, her last-born was barely four months old. (9-10)

The infant was nurtured by Mariamma. Her father won a courtesan for himself. Her, again, the reader perceive, how a dalit women receive no protection from the family. Rather, they need to be protected from the family. The violence from within the family complements the violence at the hands of the community elders at large. While returning from work with a head load of firewood, Mariamma is molested by a higher-caste landlord. When she protests and runs away, leaving her fire wood bundle behind the landlord approaches the Parai panchayat and charge a complaint that Mariamma and her cousin, Manickam were found in a compromising position at his field. The headman promptly calls a meeting of the panchayat of Parai community. The panchayat meeting could be attended only by men.

The men, frequently, abuse them for being too forward using sticks. They shout at the women "Are you out of your mind? What are you moping about here where men have gathered to discuss. Go back home, the lot of you" (23). Even old women are not allowed to speak up. Here, the reader can see a pattern of marginalisation that is imitative in structure. While Dalits are kept out and marginalised by upper caste communities, Dalit men follow suit when they occupy a position of power. They keep their women out of any form of participation concerning decision-making or community oriented activity. The enforced absence of women from Dalit panchayat is a reflection of patriarchal functioning of Dalit men in the context of women-related issues, especially pertaining to their sexuality.

Mariamma is called in but her testimony is hardly esteemed. The men conclude that the Modalali (landlord) must be right and that Mariamma should accept her crime return journey from work (and hence a reliable witness) intervenes that Mariamma had left long before Manicakam joined Kaliaamma and others, a bunch of men pounce upon her and abuse her,

"You slut! Leave this place, hey women! How many times shall we drive you off?" Women are violently silenced in Dalit panchayat. They have given no opportunity to defend themselves or testify facts. One woman's alleged sexual violation is construed as the entire community's shame the headman says "This is a great dishonour to our Jati" (22).

The panchayat dispatch Mariamma's father to procure her apology or face a heavy punishment. The father promptly slaps her hard repeatedly right before the panchayat, ordering her to surrender guilt. When Mariamma relates the facts to panchayat, the men disbelieve her, discredit her integrity and announce their decision to fine Mariamma (Rs.200/-) and Manickam (Rs.100/-). Not only panchayat take a more lenient action concerning Manickam. They not standing with the fact that the act of misconduct was committed allegedly by both of them, the headman gives his authoritative mind thus, "Girls need to be more careful of our honour. A man may commit a thousand lapses. Only women have to remember that they shouldn't end up with a burden in their womb" (28).

All the male panchayat duplicates the discriminatory, unjust, repressive attitude of the upper castes towards Dalits in its treatment of Dalit women. It violates their dignity, erases them spatially, silencing them and excluding them from decision making even on issues directly concerned with their own being. The writer pictures the Paraicheri women marginalized from the centre where the men hold court in the panchayat.

In unusual twist of irony, Mariamma's father decides after a few months to marry her off to Manickam as she is unable to get a groom from the village following her discredit at the panchayat meeting. Manickam, a drunkard, gambler and a jailbird over his involvement in illicit brewing of liquor turns into a regular wife-beater after the marriage. Mariamma suffers violence both at the hands of her father and her husband. Her bruised body bears witness to the oppressively hegemonic control of Dalit women by the men of their community.

Maikanni is a representative Dalit character who is shaped and constricted by her gender. In Karukku, Bama had commented on the loss of childhood pleasures and privileges of Dalit children working at match factories to supplement their parent's erratic income. In Sangati, she presents the case-history of Maikanni who enters the suffering circle of work, violence and injustice that engulf the lives of Dalit women both at home and outside.

Maikanni is eleven years old. who is so undernourished like a seven years old. Her name is Jayarani but she is universally called Maikanni. She has large, attractive, beautiful eyes. Being the eldest of seven siblings, she takes over all the domestic chores, takes care of her mother's continual confinements and nurtures the younger children. Her mother has been deserted by her husband for sake of a concubine soon after Maikanni's birth. He returns home every now and then. Hence the tale of her seven siblings is rooted in her father's callous violence towards his wife and children.

Bama relates Maikanni's daily chores:

Maikanni, it seems, took over her mother's chores, the day she learnt to walk. Her mother worked in the fields, she at home. Her daily routine included, mopping the floor, washing the dishes, fetching potable water, washing clothes, fetching firewood, buying groceries, cooking Kanji she never ceased to work .(81)

When her mother was due for delivery, Maikanni would work in the match factory in the nearby town. As her mother could not work in the fields, Maikanni's earning would be the only source of income for the family. She would work at the factory and at home. But Maikanni would not accept pitying glances from her neighbours "Who would my mother turn to? My father is gone for good. I shall look after my mother, of course (81).

When her mother resumed her work at the fields, Maikanni would stay at home, nurse the baby and manage the home. Although Maikanni retains her spontaneity and innocent charm and does not perceive her condition as unjust work load, the reader can locate the source of her oppression is essentially rooted in her gender.

Her brothers do not lend her a helping hand either at home or at the factory.

Her father's desertion affects Maikanni the most. She is deprived of schooling, games and a care-free childhood. As she has to leave for the match-factory before sunrise, she suffers from constipation and stomach disorders.

On one particular Saturday, she is tempted to buy an ice candy for one rupee and gets severely beaten up by her father. She, thus, has no rights over her earnings. She suffers the cruelty of oppression in the factory. The boys do not allow her to sit near the window at the bus, often beating her up and kicking her about. The supervisor at the factory also beats her for any minor lapse. On one particular occasion, he severely beats her up as she relieves herself in the open instead of using the factory toilet. (85)

When Maikanni goes to fetch firewood, she is harassed and barely escapes the attempts of molestation. This threat is posed by Dalit men, who make a thrusting at her while returning from work. A Dalit girl finds no reassuring safe environment within her Cheri, even within her community, "While young Dalit boys loaf around in the streets, it is the girls who work at the match-factory and at home" (92). Boys graze the cattle, a less taxing and more fun-filled task.

Maikanni is shown to retain her spontaneity, her laughter and innocence. While this could be partly the narrator's exercise in sentimentalisation, Maikanni definitely comes across as a lively girl who is burdened much beyond her age. The violence at the hands of her father, factory supervisor or the bullying boys, the ceaseless chores at home fall to her fate vying to her gender.

Her oppression is caused by men of her own caste.

In Bama's work, Sangati she documents a series of women workers who cannot but work in order to survive and feed their children two helpings of gruel a day. They work not to supplement their husbands or sons income as middle class women are perceived to do. But they rather share the responsibility, in fact, are loaded with alion's share of it. Many women are the only earning members of the family.

Bama sees women around her engaged in work during the entire period of their waking hours. Both her grandmothers worked at the Naicker's fields. In Karukku, as a young girl, the writer noticed and resented how even a small boy from Naicker's family used to boss over the women workers, calling the narrator's grandmothers by their names, showing no deference to their age. The boy was addressed most respectfully as 'Aiya' by the women who ran his errands most swiftly. The women workers were constantly reminded of their caste identity.

They were served water in the most inhumane, demeaning manner. The Naicker women would hold the pitcher a good two feet high and pour while the Dalit women would hold out their hands to receive the water. Similarly, food was literally thrown at them from a height. The Dalit women workers would finish off their daily chores of carting the cow dung, clearing the cow sheds, round off other work related to scavenging and then place their utensils in a corner near an open drain.

The Naicker housewife would throw the leftovers, the stale curry and rice consumed by the family the previous day or before into these utensils. The narrator feels outraged at this spectacle. But the grandmother perceives reasons, this as part of society's tradition "They give us food. Without them, how could we survive? After all they are upper castes. We are low born," (13). Meanwhile the school going granddaughter protests against this inhuman practice. She argues with her grandmother to accept only wages and not leftover, throw away food from her upper caste landlord. The old woman accepts such practice as a matter of fact and as a convention sanctioned by society.

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