



Reading Bama's *Sangati* as a Social Document for Dalit-Feminism

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Abstract

The problem of Dalit marginalization in India is a multi-layered, structured phenomenon which continues to pervade the socio-political reality of the nation in more than one way. The systemic social deprivation which begins on the basis of caste, goes on to intersect with other determining factors responsible for a dignified selfhood. It manifested in Dalits being denied the access to land, jobs, economic resources, public space, education, healthcare and other basic services. In this wake, the subjugation of Dalit community to the lower rung of the social order for maintaining the status quo needs deeper, critical attention. The rich corpus of Dalit literature has responded towards such prejudice and social ostracization by producing anecdotes of individual and collective resistance - embracing the fair hope for casteless societies. However, while the corpus itself came to be heavily dominated by the voices of Dalit male writers, the socio-political concerns of Dalit women were given a backseat. The triple marginality of Dalit women, that is, the unequal social, economic, and political opportunities for them made this section the most vulnerable. While many Dalit female voices eventually took these concerns at hand, Bama's Dalit-Social-Feminism was at its earliest to integrate all the three dynamics and articulate them through her staunch literary efforts. This paper seeks to analyse Bama's novella, *Sangati* (1994) for its powerful elements of negotiations and resistance against the dominant, subversive discourses that hinder Dalit women to reach their full potential. It pronounces their immovable conviction in the light of social, political and economic struggles which come to shape their everyday lived experiences and transform their identity.

Keywords: Caste, Women, Feminism, Patriarchy, Discrimination, Resistance, India

Indian Dalit literature emerged as a concerted movement in the late 1960s when the topicality of the field gained momentum in the pan-Indian landscape with the publication of *An*

Anthology of Dalit Literature (1992), edited by Mukl Raj Anand and Eleanor Zelliott, and *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature* (1992) edited by Arjun Dangle, followed by Arun Prabha Mukherjee's translation of Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* into English. Meena Kandasamy, however, problematizes the translation of Dalit literature into English by individuals existing outside of the Dalit experience since important nuances in language are often overlooked (Venkatesan, 2018, p. 150). Nevertheless, Dalit writings initiated an authentic portrayal of the anger, atrocities and indomitable will of Dalit lives which seek to negotiate with the challenges circumventing their Dalit identity and challenge the status quo. In the spirit of collective resistance against caste-based oppression and marginalization, the early Dalit writings however had a less representation of the pluralistic forces of oppression working against Dalit women as the renowned Tamil Dalit writer Bama herself acknowledges:

All women in the world are second class citizens. For Dalit women, the problem is grave. Their Dalit identity gives them a different set of problems. They experience a total lack of social status; they are not even considered dignified human beings... Dalit women have to put up with triple oppression, based on class, caste and gender. (Limbale, 2004, p. 116)

Dalit feminism rose as a feminist perspective in response to the detrimental politics of patriarchal discourse which normalizes a dominant male order. It distinguishes the exploitation of a Dalit male with that of a Dalit female whose identity is affected by intersecting power-structures of caste, class and gender, holding the proposition that the "expressions of marginalization of the Dalits are manifested through their women" (Patil, 2013, p. 142). Their predicament is analogous to the situation of black women in America. This gap was very well recognized by the female Dalit writers, who in turn, gallantly responded to this exclusion with the



creation of a miscellaneous corpus which fleshed out across a range of genres such as autobiography, memoir, poetry, short stories and novel. Baby Kamble, Challapalli Swaroopa Rani, Joopaka Subhadra, Jajula Gowri, Swathy Margaret and Gogu Shyamala, Bama, Urmila Pawar, P. Sivakami, Shantabai Kamble rose as some of the prominent women writers who explored subalternity and gender discrimination in their works. As Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar had propounded that “caste” conflict, and not “class” problems was accountable for the disintegration and exploitation of Dalits in Indian society (Omvedt, 1994, p. 169), eminent feminist scholar such as Sharmila Rege reviews this perspective which defined existing feminist standpoint from a socio-political lens to critique the brahmanical, class-based heteropatriarchies that further shaped the lived experiences of Dalit women. Her Dalit feminist standpoint argued for a “thorough going analysis of the material basis of patriarchy” so that the dynamics of castes, classes and communities can be incorporated to understand the differential access to and control over labour, sexuality, and reproduction (2000, p. 493). Her theorization of feminism can be traced in many writings of Dalit feminism as well.

Bama Faustina Soosairaj, a representative novelist from Tamil Nadu makes a laudable attempt to couple ‘Penniyam’ (feminism) and ‘dalitiam’ (Dalit Studies). Her Paraiyar origin bestows her corpus with a fierce voice of self-assertion and deals with the intersectionality of caste and gender effectively: “even if all women are slaves to men, our women really are the worst sufferers” (Bama, 2005, p.7). Often characterised as a “cultural biography of a community” (Mangalam, 2007, p. 4), *Sangati* was written in 1994 in Tamil, and later translated to English by Laxmi Holmstrom. It is a novella divided into twelve chapters with more than thirty characters. Written without any artifice, its narrative style is like that of Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura*, with a lucid language and unresponsive aesthetical considerations. Since the term “sangati” means action or events, it alludes to the episodic nature of the plot which strings together the individual stories, anecdotes and memoirs of the Dalit women and thus subverts the normative literary narrative of a single plot or story. The plot covers a span of three generations starting from Vellaiyamma Kizhavi to a twelve-year old narrator, Fathima who reflects back on her life later as an adult. The polyphonic narrative of the novella weaves in the question of individual struggle with the larger collective battle involving a community of paraiya women, a neighborhood group of friends and

relations. For this purpose, Laxmi Holmstrom considers *Sangati* rather as “the autobiography of a community” (2005, Introduction xv). This technique of multiple narration makes the narrative a unique site of real and variegated experiences, obtained from the changing conditions of Dalit women’s lives and their collective memory of oppression and dehumanisation as a community.

Bama ingeniously contrived the language of the novel to depict the psychological strain within human relationships. Her language is unconventional and abundant in sexual expletives. Tamil slangs are used liberally and unabashedly to talk about clothes, festivals, and costumes. She uses various Tamil words to name the places, months, festivals, rituals, customs, ghosts, clothes and occupations. Tamil Dalit slogans are used and the village women names such as Vellaiamma, Maarriamma and Pecchiamma are suffixed with ‘Amma’. Bama not only merges the spoken and written styles of Tamil by defying the rules of grammar and spellings, but also uses a language unfamiliar to the mainstream, privileged society. Thus, in the form of symbolic protest, she discards the so-called “chaste” Tamil and constructs her oeuvre in the oral folk language prevalent in her own Dalit community. In *Sangati*, Bama feministically voices out the grievances of Paraiya women who share their everyday experiences sometimes with anger or pain. The outrage against the monopoly of double marginalization which otherizes Dalit women permeates throughout the text not to simply draw sympathy for them, but to evoke an ethics of culpability among the readers who constantly invalidate the selfhood of a woman, particularly a Dalit woman: “Man can humiliate woman many times, he can disrespect a woman, it is very normal. But in this partial double minded society woman has no right to speak out anything. This is acceptable to all” (Bama, 2005, p. 11).

As the novel agonizes over the Dalit women identity, it also celebrates the various modes of resistance put up by them in the multiple sites of survival of everyday struggles - in the streets, at the workplace, in public affairs, in the religious ceremonies and their homes. Recognizing the vulnerability such spaces of hierarchy pose for the rise of voices of Dalit women, Bama celebrates and encourages their outspokenness for further action: “My mind is crowded with many anecdotes: stories not only about the sorrows and tears of dalit women, but also about their lively and rebellious culture, passion about life with vitality, truth, enjoyment and about their hard labour. I wanted to shout out these



stories” (Bama, 2005, p. 9). Tracing the subject of discrimination, Bama suggests how within a patriarchal society gender biases percolate from the experiences of childhood to adulthood in relation to the simplest acts of children’s game to the pertinent factors of marriage, education and labour. The narrator exposes the patriarchal distinction in the treatment of infant boys and girls. In her community, boy babies are considered as a gift, breastfed longer than the girl babies and taken good care of when they fell ill while the girl babies are taken as a liability, given care “half-heartedly” (Bama, 2005, p. 7) and “made to forget the breast” (Bama, 2005, p. 7). The discrimination continues when they grow older; boys were given respect, entitled to more food and could play all the time while girls occupied a secondary societal space and could hardly enjoy a period of their childhood. By commenting on the gendered roles within the household and the burden of unpaid work a Dalit woman has to bear in her daily life-choices, Bama, a visionary feminist, further nuances the role patriarchy plays in subduing women from envisioning a life lived on her own terms.

However, Bama very slyly observes that the childhood innocence was not untouched with this pre-defined gender roles and prejudice. The narrator reflects how girls and boys played separate games and the girls were forbidden to play boys’ games like kabadi or marbles. Moreover, domestic abuse at home was found to be internalized in the games of children: “Even when we played ‘mothers and fathers’, we always had to serve the mud ‘rice’ to the boys first. They used to pull us by the hair and hit us...In those days we used to accept those pretence blows, and think it was all good fun” (Bama, 2005, p. 31). Meditating on the inferiorization of woman, the narrator exposes the interminable tendency of man to subjugate her body, language and identity in order to serve his own phallogocentric purposes: “When we played ‘buses’ there were always boys at the start...And when we played husband and wives they were the ones in authority; they took the role of policeman and ship-owners (Bama, 2005, p. 31). As Prasanna Sree comments “through the centuries, women in Hindu tradition are depicted as silent sufferers; they have been given a secondary status both in the family and society” (2003, p. 20), the novel also corroborate this argument in questioning the mimicking of this normative order by elder Dalit boys who occupy the centre of the private and public spaces while the Dalit girls rests at the periphery: “Why can’t we be the same as boys? We aren’t allowed to talk loudly or laugh noisily; even when we sleep we can’t stretch out on our backs...We are

allowed to eat only after the men in the family have finished and gone. What Patti aren’t we also human beings?” (Bama, 2005, p. 29). The episode of Maikkanni, an eleven-year old Dalit girl further highlights the trepidation of being doubly marginalized. “Maikkanni is one such girl who has started to work from the day she learns to walk” (Bama, 2005, p. 70), deprived as she is of a normal childhood by taking up all the responsibilities of home at a tender age. While she tends her five younger siblings at home substituting her mother’s presence who “delivered them into the world and could do no more” (Bama, 2005, p. 73), she also works in the neighboring match factory to support her family financially. Through Maikkaani’s mother who is pregnant for the seventh time, Bama presents how a Dalit woman’s existence is reduced to an amorphous property, readily mutilated and moulded under the whims of a phallogocentric order. She has no authority over her body and is systemically relegated from the active sources of production in the society. The account of Maikkaani being beaten up by her drunken, adulterous father for spending a rupee on ice-cream from her own wages further complicates the issue of power-relations within a patriarchal discourse which benefits from a woman’s labour to satisfy their selfish interests.

The sense of pent-up resentment within the Dalit women is all pervasive throughout the text. Bama draws a gory picture of the dalit women being lynched, whipped and canded by their fathers, brothers and husbands. Marriage is another frustrating social institution which becomes detrimental to their dignified existence. The instances of domestic and sexual violence, rape, physical and mental torture permeate their lived experiences. Since body becomes a locus of contentions, politics and resistance, Bama reflects that the abjection of a Dalit woman’s body in the patriarchal discourse is itself a tool to exploit and objectify her. Dalit women living under a spectre of constant dread of any assault by the privileged men highlights a body politic which deprives Dalit women of both bodily autonomy and political justice: ““Women should never come on their own to these parts. If upper-caste fellows clap eyes on you, you’re finished. They’ll drag you off and rape you, that’s for sure”” (Bama, 2005, p. 8). The instance of the death of the narrator’s maternal aunt, Periamma, as abused by her husband, Periappan, was recounted by Vellaamma through the metaphor of a parrot (Periamma) who was mauled over by a cat (Periappan). She attributes her death to Periappan’s lust, thereby, signifying the fragile, egotistical masculinity which always tends to subjugate female



bodies to seek momentary validation and pleasure, despite enough signs of internal or external opposition: "Because he wanted her every single day. How could she agree to his frenzy after she worked all hours of the day and night... When she refused, he practically broke her in half" (Bama, 2005, p. 10). It should also be noted how Bama reflects upon the institution of marriage turning claustrophobic for Dalit women, the end goal of which operated to make women only servile and nothing else: "Even they lay down their bodies wracked with pain, they are not allowed to sleep, whether she dies or survived, she had to give pleasure and enjoyment to her husband" (2005, p. 59). At another instance, Bama subverts the popular cultural legend of Thiruvallvar pertaining to women subordination and offers an alternate folk song about Ananatamma, who was beaten up for eating crab curry before serving her husband. By recounting the stories replete with abuse and harassment, Bama in the novella thus reinforces the urgent need for legal provisions and political action which constantly fail to address the life-threatening situations related to Dalit women.

Uma Chakravarti in *Gendering Caste Through a Feminist Lens* delineates how 'Brahmanical patriarchy' deeply links male dominance and upper-caste dominance which impact other forms of patriarchies gravely (2018). In the novella, Bama traces how Paraiyar men, on being humiliated by the privileged men, find in the vulnerable Dalit women an outlet to exert their power, frustration, dominance and masculinity. She recounts the story of Thayyi, "who once had her hair cut off by her husband and hung in front of the house as a way of taming her pride" (2005, p. 43). The marital disharmonies in the lives of Maarriamma and Thayi are however recounted in the light of the assertion of patriarchal politics which delimit, maintain or exclude the relations of Dalit women with the power-structures by tying them to a doubly-bind oppression. Therefore, the social-feminist Bama presses upon the need for education, equal pay and independence as a pathway to realise a dignified selfhood for the dalit women. For the same reason, when the narrator in the novella describes how the coming age ceremony for dalit girls symbolized their doomed future, it highlights the complicity of the whole society behind the Dalit women's degrading position: "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" (Bama, 2005, p. 9). Although religious conversion allowed the Paraiyar community an access to education, it wasn't chosen since they were too poor to abandon working for

home. Despite education being stigmatized in such a community, its emancipatory appeal was not lost upon the Paraiyar women. One of the characters in the story, Subbamma laments, "Everywhere you look, you see blows and beatings, shame and humiliation... Because we haven't been to school or learnt anything, we go about like slaves all our lives, from the day we are born till the day we die. As if we are blind even though we have eyes" (Bama, 2005, p. 118).

The question of economic inequality occupies a core aspect in Dalit-feminism. Invidious patriarchal distinctions for the same kind of labour were followed at the workplace as well as in the distribution of wages. A dalit woman's labour was devalued and her economic precariousness was followed by an intense sexual harassment at the work place along with a repeated casteist politics. One such instance was narrated by Maikkaani when she, along with her friends, refused to work after being called caste slurs by some boys near the factory. Moreover, the dehumanizing treatment of dalit women laborers added to their predicament; Maikkaani being hit by her manager Annaacchi as she took breaks to attend to nature's call points in this direction. The male privilege for doing the bare minimum while the unpaid care work assigned as duties to the dalit women are markedly contrasted in the text. Moreover, as men were entitled to their wages and spent them as they pleased, the women bore the financial burdens of their family single-handedly which deprived them of economic security, and thus, a stable future, at every step:

Although both the husband and wife came after a hard day's work in the field, the husband went straight to the Chavadi to while away their time, coming home only for their meal. But as for the wife they return home wash vessels, clean the house, collect water, gather firewood, go to the shops to buy rice for cooking and other provision, feed the husband and children before they sleep, eat what is left over and go to bed. (Bama, 2005, p. 58)

As the various institutions of society are male-dominated, Bama in *Sangati* presents a thought-provoking picture of the causes of dalit women enmeshed within the multiple folds of patriarchy. Their muted or no presence in the local caste panchayat points towards an internal gender politics at play. Maarriamma's case is an instance as when she faces sexual exploitation in the hands of the upper caste landowner Kumarasami Ayya, the landowner afraid for his privileged reputation himself files a fake complaint against Maarriamma and Manikkam to



the headman of the Paraiya community, Naattaamai. During the enquiry, Mariamma's testimonies were not accepted and she's asked to pay a fine of Rs. 200 while the accused dalit man, Manikkam pays Rs 100. She has to ask for forgiveness and thus, a victim is once again victimized by the law for an "alleged" transgression of her dalit-feminine identity. The inability of Paraiyar men and women to speak up for Maarriamma - "He's upper caste as well. How can even try to stand up to such people? Are people going to believe their words or ours?" (Bama, 2005, p. 20) - also reflect the helplessness of a dalit community in challenging the status quo. At the end, the advice by Naattaamai allows the readers to realize the deeply-rooted, rhizomatic networks of repression that work against the status of dalit women: "It is you female chicks who ought to be humble and modest. A man may do a hundred things and still get away with it. You girls should consider what you are left with, in your bellies" (Bama, 2005, p. 26).

At another political site, women of the Paraiyar community are found calling elections as the "voting business" by the rich landlords who buy their votes. They're despondent in seeking any political change for their situations: "They don't care who comes and who goes. They know they have to look after their stomachs themselves (Bama, 2005, pp. 102-103). This cynical commentary about the social order of the system derives majorly from the persistent disillusionment with the Indian Catholic churches that Bama herself faced. The coerced conversion of Paraiyas into Christianity so as to escape the throes of Brahmanical discrimination led to their ostracization and economic deprivation as they lost their right to reservation and other governmental benefits. Further, the prevalence of Caste-hierarchy within the Roman Catholic Church never allowed them to be accepted fully. Bama thus exposes the hypocrisy of such religious institutions which practised casteism and gender-biases among its pupils, thereby perpetuating patriarchal discrimination. Further, we find an episode of caste panchayat intervening and internalizing caste-hierarchy within a love story between an educated, employed Paraiya girl and a Pallava boy. The girl was harassed and morally policed by her own community for transgression. Despite being met by hostility on all sides, she finally marries the boy but had to quit her job and become an outcast. Even the Church which promises to preach love and equality refuses to come to her rescue. It's interesting to note how Bama highlights that if a boy would've done an inter-caste marriage, there would've been less opposition but the spectacle of an educated dalit woman exercising her

agency for self irked the custodian of patriarchal hegemony. At the end of the novel, the educated, independent narrator vocalizes the same issues faced with her own dalit-feminine identity:

I am a paraichi. And I don't like to hide any identity and pretend I belong to 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? (Bama, 2005, pp. 120-121)

Menaced by the overexploitation, ignorance and prejudice at every end, Bama proposes that it's only cathartic for dalit women to vent their mental agony in their "spirit-possessed state". As *Sangati* examines "the difference between women and their different ways in which they are subject to apportion and their coping strategies" (2005, Introduction x), Bama moves away from the account of self-pity and oppressed position of the dalit women in the first half of the novel to celebrate at the end their fortitude which actualizes their potential even under the double-edged sword of caste and patriarchy. In the quest for a deviant Dalit woman's identity, the stereotyped feminine ideals of fear, shyness, innocence and modesty give way to the experiences of courage, fearlessness, independence and self esteem which inform us of their inner strength and vigor. In doing so, Bama also parallels the life of a dalit woman with a non-dalit woman and believes the former to be better on the grounds of economic freedom and equal participation in running the family. Though the two have a massively different lifestyle, the position of a privileged woman is vulnerable, confined and dependent. Her crushed self esteem is met with a silent response to her body invasion and the widow remarriage, or pre and extra-marital sex translate to the loss of identity. Contrarily, a dalit woman enjoys less alienation from the self. Yet, the agony of double oppression cannot be contained: "It is not the same for women of other castes and communities. Our women cannot bear the torment of upper-caste masters (mudalalis) in the fields, and at home they cannot bear the violence of their husbands" (Bama, 2005, p. 65).

A saga of resilience and resistance, *Sangati* offers a language of protest against the numerous hardships in the lives of dalit women and calls for a radical change towards social emancipation and empowerment, primarily induced through education. As Dalit women resort to variegated tools to survive



within the available means, Bama exhorts boldness, fierceness and pride in asserting one's own identity- a dalit-feminine identity: "We must show by our own resolute lives that we believe ardently in our independence... 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" (2005, p. 59). The richly proverbial, folkloric native language of the dalits enabled women to confront their oppressors. Bama celebrates their crude ways of defense; sometimes making a liberal use of abusive terms, other times by shouting the names of their body parts. This is revealed in an episode of a conjugal fight between Rakkamma and her husband Pakkiaraj wherein instead of accepting the humiliation, Rakkaamma too shouted obscenities at her husband and exposed herself. Such an attitude was inevitable as Bama later reflects "if we are to live at all, we have to shout and shriek to keep ourselves sane... Knowingly or unknowingly, we find ways of coping in the best way we can (Bama, 2005, p. 68). The novella therefore maintains an affective distance with the readers by encouraging a language of anger and resolution that refuses to be appropriated by the mundane sympathy of its readership.

Other vital stories of grit and resistance relate to the narrator's bold grandmother who pawned her 'thali' to feed her children as a single mother, Katturaasa's mother who bore her son by herself while cutting grass and Marriamma who was found back to work even after meeting with an accident. We also see Sammuga Kizhavi challenging the status quo as she threatens to be driven back home after elections. On another occasion, she bathes in a secluded well of a landlord by breaking the fence and upon being asked to come out, shocks him by spitting in its water. Moreover, through Sammuga Kizhavi's description of ragikuzh as "nectar from heaven", Bama exhibits the space of kitchen being appropriated as an exclusive discourse of power for dalit women. The narratives of pain, anger, frustration and courage weave the experiences of dalit women together with a thread of common identity. Thus, we find them enjoying a female camaraderie in their capacity for hard labour and in celebrating their rich cultural roots which disregards dowry, commemorates togetherness through events like marriages, coming age ceremonies, singing of folksongs and also through the simplest acts of cooking, feasting, feeding and sharing food.

Bama's polyphonic novella, *Sangati*, therefore actually reveals itself to be a social document that consciously sketches the lives of

Paraiya women in all their richness of authenticity and crudeness. The attempt is to subvert the devouring stereotypes which reinforce the pain, humiliation and discrimination in their lived realities but fail to acknowledge the persistence in their voices: "In spite of all their suffering and pain one cannot but be delighted by their sparkling words, their firm tread, and their bubbling laughter" (Bama, 2005, p. 80). The author invokes self-respect, confidence and pride in their dalit identity as expressed philosophically through one of the characters, Rendupalli, "even if our children are dark-skinned, their features are good and there's a liveliness about them. Black is strongest and best, like a diamond" (Bama, 2005, p. 114) Thus Bama's feminism derides the subversive discourse which itself caricatures the identity of Dalit women, thereby pressing upon the need to make a paradigm shift in their characterisation so that they are shown not only as subverting the traditional conventions of caste-hierarchy and male hegemony but subsequently, realizing the roots of their unique identity through awareness, education, economic empowerment, and profound resistance.

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