



PATHETIC PLIGHT OF THE VOICELESS DALIT WOMEN: A STUDY OF BAMA'S *SANGATI*: EVENTS

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ABSTRACT:

Dalit women face discrimination on the grounds of their caste and gender, their oppression both at home and outside. The dual pressures of caste and gender place Dalit women in a specifically far more exploited matrix than their male counterparts. While sexual harassment, threat or rape by upper castes is a well recognized form of oppression faced by Dalit women, what is less recognized is that the Dalit men subject their women folk to equally violent, sexually demeaning conduct. Dalit women have been the object of violence in greater degree from their own men folk, and also from higher caste men. In our society everything auspicious are named after woman. But in reality she is subjugated and ill-treated in many ways. One gets a picture of Dalit women's predicament from the works of Dalit women writers like Bama and Sivakami. Their writings highlight the role of caste, gender and social class, purity and pollution, gender discrimination, caste discrimination and bias; issues related to survival, double burden on women; their dehumanization and vulnerability to exploitation and violence. The present paper focuses on the pathetic plight of the voiceless Dalit Women in the novel of Bama's *Sangati: Events*.

KEYWORDS: Gender Discrimination, Oppression, Exploitation, Sexploitation, Dehumanization Vulnerability, Violence.

INTRODUCTION:

Sangati: Events was originally written in Tamil in 1994. It was translated by Laxmi Holmstrom into English. The word *Sangati* means events, but it is a collection of incidents told by the narrator in different situations. *Sangati* is an autobiography of her community, which highlights the struggles of Paraiya women. Bama chooses only a woman protagonist for every story in her novel. *Sangati* contributes both to the Dalit movement and to the women's movement in India specially Tamilnadu. "*Sangati* is a look at a part of those Dalit women who dared to make fun of the class in power that oppressed them and through this; they show the courage to revolt." (p.8) Holmstrom points out in her introduction to the book there is also a reflective voice that moves across the narration of events in *Sangati*. The author herself says the purpose of writing the book in her acknowledgement.

"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." (p.9)



INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF INDIA

From the moment the women wake up, they set to work both in their homes and in the fields. At home they are pestered by their husbands and children; in the fields there is back-breaking work besides the harassment of the landlord. When they come home in the evening, there is no time even to draw breath. And once they collect water and firewood, cook a kanji and feed their hungry husband and children, even then they can't go to bed in peace and sleep until dawn. Night after night they must give in to their husbands' pleasure. Even if a woman's body is writhed in pain, the husband is bothered only with his own satisfaction. Women are overwhelmed and crushed by their own disgust, boredom, and exhaustion, because of all this. The stronger ones somehow manage to survive all this. The ones who don't have the mental strength are totally oppressed (p.68)

In *Sangati*, Bama presents the pathetic plight of Maikanni who enters the vicious circle of work, violence and injustice that engulf the lives of Dalit women both at home and outside. Maikanni is an eleven-year-old who is so undernourished that she looks like a seven-year-old. Her name is Jayarani but she is universally called Maikanni for she has large, beautiful eyes that are as attractive as if they were Kohl-lined. Her name translates as "a girl with kohl-lined eyes". Being the eldest of seven siblings, she takes over all the domestic chores, takes care of her mother during her recurring confinements and nurtures the younger children. Her mother has been abandoned by her husband for a concubine soon after Maikanni's birth but he nevertheless 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 his children.

Although Maikanni retains her spontaneity and innocent charm and does not perceive her condition as unjust and exploitative, one can locate the source of her oppression as 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. Her earnings range from Rs 40-50 per week. She also gets manhandled by the bullies at the factory.

On one particular occasion, "he severely beats her up as she relieves herself in the open (as the custom in her *Cheri*) instead of using the factory toilet." (*Sangati* p.85) When Maikanni goes to fetch firewood, she is harassed and barely escapes attempts at molestation. This threat is posed by Dalit men, who leap at her while returning from work. A Dalit girl finds no reassuring safe environment within her *Cheri*, even within her community. The violence at the hands of her father, factory supervisor or the bullying boys, the ceaseless chores at home fall to her fate owing to her gender. Her oppression is caused by men of her own caste.

Mariamamma is a sixteen-year-old girl whose mother died leaving behind the responsibility of tending to two sisters and an alcoholic father on her tender shoulders. Mariamma faces constant teasing from the men in her community as she does not get her menstrual cycle even in her sixteenth year. Hers is a condition of acute anaemia caused by poor nutrition and excessive workload. Mariamma's father virtually killed her mother through sustained, repeated beatings. Wife-bashing is perceived as a birthright by Dalit men. Mariamma's mother falls a victim to this.



INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF INDIA

Her grandmother testifies, "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." (*Sangati* p.9-10) The infant was nurtured by Mariamma. Her father won a concubine for himself.

While returning from work with a head load of firewood, Mariamma is molested by a high-caste landlord. When she protests and runs away, leaving her bundle behind, the landlord approaches the Parai panchayat and lodges a complaint that Mariamma and her cousin, Manickam were found in a compromising position at his field. (p.21) The headman promptly calls a meeting of the panchayat of Parai community. The panchayat meeting could be attended only by men.

Mariamma is called in but her testimony is hardly regarded. The men conclude that the Mudalali (landlord) must be right and that Mariamma should accept her crime or else she would be heavily fined. When Kaliamma, who followed Mariamma on her return journey from work (and hence a reliable witness) intervenes that Mariamma had left long before Manickam joined Kaliamma 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?" (p.25) Women are violently silenced at this Dalit panchayat. They are given no opportunity to defend themselves or testify facts. One woman's alleged sexual misdemeanour is construed as the entire community's shame: "This is a great dishonour to our Jati," says the headman. (p.22)

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. The Dalit women have to bear the dual oppression of caste and gender hegemony in our society.

Sammuga Kizhavi is a sixty five-year-old woman who is perceived by her community as a "crackpot", a "tough nut" and a rude person. She is unpopular among children and women as she teases them, abuses them and prefers to work and stay alone. She is considered eccentric and difficult to get along with. However, Sammuga Kizhavi uses these shrewish and 'difficult' traits to subdue the men and fight back caste discrimination. In her youth, once Sammuga Kizhavi went to have a bath at a well owned by an upper caste man. To prevent "Paraijati women" from polluting the well, the owner, Seenivasan had put up thorny bushes at the steps. Sammuga Kizhavi carefully pushed them aside entered the well and had a joyous bath, alone by herself, enjoying a long, undisturbed swim. This had continued for many months when one day the owner caught her red handed. Unfazed, the woman told the upper caste owner, "Sir, the water in your well is very salty and spat out a mouthful of water into the well. She then leisurely climbed out in her bathing attire and put on dry clothes."



INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF INDIA

Bama recollects how Rakkamma, a helpless woman of her community behaved when she was beaten by her husband she shouted obscenities and shamed him by lifting her sari in front of the crowd and she supported her act by saying, if she had not behaved so, he would surely have split her skull in two. At first Bama disgusted by her behaviour, but Bama is clear that no one is going to help the unfortunate women of her community, certainly not the government. It is up to the women themselves to take their lives into their own hands for a start girl should be given the same treatment as the boys (even the fair-minded grandmother gave food to her grandsons first).

Baby Kamble recollects in her autobiography how Kamble was a victim of her husband's male chauvinistic mentality, "Once we went to Mumbai to attend a meeting, we travelled in a general compartment that was very crowded and some young men happened to stare at me. My husband immediately suspected me and hit me so hard that my nose started bleeding profuselyThe same evening we returned and he was so angry that he kept hitting me in the train." (P.155)

Destiny of an Indian girl is to get her married as soon as she enters her teens in case of Dalit girls the situation is worse than this. They demanded to be like young women and look after household works. As Bama recollects, "in our streets the girls hardly ever enjoy a period of childhood. Before they can sprout three tender leaves, so to speak, they are required to behave like young women, looking after the house work, taking care of babies, going out to work for daily wages. Yet, in spite of all their suffering and pain one cannot but be delighted by their sparkling words, their firm tread, and their bubbling laughter". (P.75)

Bama gets irritated and felt sad about her community women who are not educated and ready to accept the humiliation and torture at home and at working place. She admits that 'People were ignorant of the outer world and all they want in a girl child is to get her married after her puberty and beget children. She emphasizes on education and is furious for not being learnt. "... I have a little education; I earn a living, and stand on my own two feet. But when I think of the women from my community who can't tell...a [the first letter of the Tamil script] from ...aa [the second letter of the Tamil script] and bend low to receive endless blows at home and at work, I am filled with frustration." (P.122)

Neena Arora says that "The place of woman in society has differed from culture to culture and from age to age, yet one fact common to almost all societies is that woman has never been considered the equal of man" (P.8) Arora also emphasizes that women in the patriarchal society are "treated like a beast of burden and an object of pleasure". Males look down upon females and they treat women as "property, servile" to them. It is universal truth and they are ill-treated everywhere. She gives various examples from all over the world for the demeaning status of women.

Men all over the world have been speaking about women in a derogatory manner. An old Italian saying is: "a horse, whether good or bad, requires spurs, so a woman whether good or bad, requires thrashing."The wise men of China also advise husbands in these words: "Listen to the counsel of your wife, but act against it." The old men of Russia say: "There is only one soul among ten women." The Spaniards say: "We shall save ourselves from wicked women and should never be captivated by any that have good looks." (Arora p.14)



INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF INDIA

The novel deals with gender discrimination faced by Dalit women right from the childhood. Dalit girls hardly enjoy their childhood. They have little time to play as they have to take care of their younger siblings. Maikkanni is one such girl who has started to work from the day she learns to walk. (p.70). She has to go to work when her mother delivers a baby. When her mother becomes fit Maikkanni turns to take care of the new born baby. The life of a Dalit girl is tormenting but the life of a grown up Dalit woman is worse. The story of narrator's cousin Marriamma tells a lot about the sexual assault the abuse faced by Dalit women and their inability to stand up against it. Bama shows gender discrimination meted out to them throughout the lives of Dalit women. The suffering of Dalit women starts from their infancy. They live "hard lives" The case is different for boys even when they are grown ups,

"If a boy baby cries, he is instantly picked up and given milk. It is not so with the girls. Boys are given more respect. They'll eat as much as they wish and run off to play. As for the girls, they must stay at home and keep on working all the time..." (*Sangati* p.7)

"*Sangati: Events*", highlights the vulnerability of the lower caste women to sexual crimes such as exploitation, molestation and rape. These women are sexually exploited by the upper caste landlords. Mariamma manages to escape from the clutches of the landlord who tries to pull her inside the shed. Vellaiamma warns her granddaughter to be cautious while crossing the fields or the plantation areas.

"... '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. If you go on a little further, there will be escaped criminals lurking in the plantations. They keep themselves well hidden. You must never let them see you either....'" (p.8)

The evil deeds of the upper caste people are cast upon the Dalit women. They suffer more cruelty at the hands of men, for no fault of them. The men take advantage of their situation and when women protest they are labeled as whores. Kumarasami is an upper caste man who tried to molest a Dalit girl. In order to save his face he accused the innocent girl, Mariamma. "When she went innocently to get some water, he seized her hand and pulled her inside... afraid that his reputation might be in ruins, hurried to the village and went and complained to the headman of the Paraiyar community, the *naattaamai*. (*Sangati* p.20). Without proper trial or enquiry, the words of the upper caste man were taken blindly. From Bama's view only the Dalit women suffer this kind of molestation. Bama wonders why the Dalit women alone suffer in the hands of men and the society. She questions if it is "... because of our caste and because of our poverty, every fellow treats us with contempt. If ever there is a problem or a disturbance, everyone, starting with the police, chooses to blame and humiliate the women of our community." (p.66)

Bama realistically portrays the physical violence, like lynching, whipping and canning the Dalit women by fathers, husbands, and brothers. She feels that they have to endure oppression from all sides on account of their gender. Dalit women's discrimination on account of their caste, class, gender and religion is revealed through the following lines. "...The position of women is both painful and humiliating... In the fields they have to escape from upper-caste men's molestations. At church they



INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF INDIA

must lick the priest's shoes and be his slaves while he threatens them with tales of God, Heaven and Hell. Even when they go to their own homes, before they have had a choice to cook some kanji or lie down and rest a little, they have to submit themselves to their husbands' torment..." (p.35)

Sangati focuses generally on Dalit women on various issues such as gender, sexual discrimination. According to Bama "All women in the world are second class citizens. For Dalit women, the problem is grave. Their Dalit identity has given them a different set of problems. This experience is only because of lacking the social status. Even they are not considered dignified human beings. My stories are based on these aspects of Dalit culture". In order to overcome the situation, Bama asks Dalit women to "be strong". She also tells them 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."(p.59) Pressure from all the quarters is tackled by the women wisely.

Bama says that 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 states the theme of *Events* in her Preface as, "... the growth, decline, culture, and liveliness of Dalit women." She is concerned more about the Dalit women. She repeatedly reminds Dalit women to stand up and brave the situation. "If we continue to be frightened, everyone will take advantage of us. If we stand up for ourselves without caring whether we die or survive, they'll creep away with their tails between their legs." (p.66)

Bama wants her women to arise and proclaim, for they too are hard working and are capable of rising up. They should do it on their own and she asks them to realize that there is no need for others to voice their grievance for them and it is enough if they realize their plight. She instigates them by asking, "Why should we hide our own skills and capabilities? We work just as hard as they do. Why, you could even say we actually work harder. Ask them to do all that we do in a day – care for the children, look after the house, and do all the chores... It is we who must uphold our rights. We must stand up for ourselves and declare that we too are human beings like everyone else. If we believe that someone else is going to come and uplift us, then we are doomed to remain where we are, forever." (p.66)

Bama asks her community to follow a few things to put an end to the suffering of women. She asks them to treat both "boys and girls alike, showing no difference between them as they grow into adults." Girls too must be given freedom and make them realize their strength. Then she is sure that, "there will come a day when men and women will live as one, with no difference between them; with equal rights. Then injustices, violence and inequalities will come to an end, and she is sure that the saying "Women can make and women can break" (p.123) will come true and "such a day will dawn soon."



INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF INDIA

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