

TRADITION AND MODERNITY: A FEMINIST STUDY OF BAMA'S SANGATI

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ABSTRACT

The invisible suffering and distress are the basis of most of the writings available about Dalits. The Dalit Literature that voices against all the injustices and contests for equality, justice and freedom of these people has emerged as a response to this oppression, exploitation, and humiliation done to this particular class of society namely Dalits. The paper thus aims to throw light on the ills that the Dalit community has faced down the ages particularly women portrayed in the researched novel Sangati, and is based on the real-life incidences that serve as a documentation of the female suffering. On the one hand they are the victims, on the other hand, they have contended while in a conversation they conclude that they are far better than the upper-class women who are completely muted, submissive, and docile in the hands of the strict patriarchal order. Bama's Sangati, however, can best be described as a result of a personal observation of the author who has highlighted the struggles of Paraiya women in the marginalized Dalit community.

KEYWORDS: *Patriarchy, Feminism, Domestic Violence, Dalit Literature, Gender Discrimination, Unheard and Paraiya, Etc*

INTRODUCTION

The humanist wing of Feminism argues that women are misinterpreted under patriarchy and that the images of women which appear in literature, the media and elsewhere are often false and misogynistic. Women find it difficult to give expression to their true selves and can feel invisible or marginal in the male-dominated culture. Part of the struggle of Feminism has been to support women in creating new, valid images of themselves, a sense of wholeness and a more authentic representation in their writings, and of what it means to be a woman. In this endeavor, emphasis is given to the centrality of personal experience, the need to find one's own voice and to give an account of one's inner self. The construction of the woman as the victim has grown deep roots in feminist discourses as well as in social science analyses over the years. As Tahira.S. Khan, teaching gender studies courses at a university in the United States, in her book *Beyond Honour: A Historical Materialist Explanation of Honour-Related Violence*, points out:

In patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal societies, women have always been attached to the male members of the family. Women could never have class, caste, creed, or language of their own other than that of the men of their family. Women's socio-economic status in such society has always been determined by the socio-economic status of the men they are affiliated with. (Khan 137-138)

While some critics have drawn attention to problems involved with viewing women as patients rather than as active agents within the family and society, others wrote that treating women as victims of oppression places them in a male-defined conceptual framework. The matter of fact is that the women are central yet subordinate; active yet victimized. They have for centuries been excluded from positions of power, both political and economic, yet as members of families, as daughters and wives, they are often closer to actual power than many men. Usually, when we see we find that femininity and masculinity have no fixed or knowable meanings, and they argue for the need to deconstruct the process whereby certain qualities came to be defined as feminine or masculine. The feminist ideology thus wanted to extend values, rights, and opportunities that men had established as good and secured long before in history. This ideology had a woman-equal-to-man orientation since patriarchy has always annihilated the identity of women. The paper thus aims to elaborate on the social construction of men and women in which the former is always dominant and the later held a submissive status and serve rather like slaves. This patriarchal dominance has been the major cause of domestic violence not only in India but all over the world. The main victim of this aggression is women, especially those who belong to the marginal communities like 'Dalits' or 'Tribals'. Hence the traditional approach of male towards considering female as meek and powerless has helped to take an insight in the struggles and revolts by the Dalit women in their response to this misogynistic approach of the so-called hegemonistic attitude of the predators of patriarchy. The paper is a study of Bama's *Sangati* which is based on the repression of women in one of the outcaste communities of Tamilnadu, known as Paraiya. The novel is about women's suppression in terms of male as rulers, particularly women. Bama has ended the novel with a positive hope reflected in the modernist ideology in describing women revolting against the age-old male dominance and abuse.

Sangati reveals different aspects of domestic violence and how do these Dalit women resist and revolt against it. It therefore, becomes essential to know the meaning of 'Domestic violence' which has been generally a matter of political concern. "Domestic violence also is known as domestic abuse, spousal abuse, battering, family violence, and intimate partner violence (IPV), defined as a pattern of abusive behaviors by one partner against another in an intimate relationship such as marriage, dating, family, or cohabitation" (71 Chhikara). While, according to the Oxford Dictionary, "Violent or aggressive behavior within the home, typically involving the violent abuse of a spouse or partner: police, social services, and voluntary agencies are working together to tackle domestic". The suppression has been a central fact of history all over the world. Women are subjugated in several ways namely: religion, patriarchy, tradition, male hypocrisy and so on. In 'Feminist Writing', in other words, writings that are gynocentric, women analyzed various factors in reference to the hierarchy of men and focused towards causes of the suppression of women in their literature. As M.S. Nagarajan has said regarding issues concerning the female cause in his book *English Literary Criticism and Theory: An Introductory History*:

In the past, we have had some landmark studies on this subject. Shelley's mother-in-law Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Right of Women* (1792), and John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1879), deserve special mention. At a time when male supremacy was taken for granted, and it was an unwritten convention that woman should obey man. . . . (208)

Feminism concerns with both, first it deals with the representation of women in literature, second it traces the changing position of women in society. The main purpose of this documentation is to draw a journey of women from suppression

to freedom, from erasure to assertion, and so on, which helps to free them from oppressive restraints. Feminism as a movement became popular in the 1960s. Feminism was also a reaction against the subordination, deprivation, marginalization, oppression, exploitation, and sexual colonization. All these features are part of a single institution i.e. patriarchy, which in traditional life means that women in literature depend on women in life. So, traditional society also is supposed to be governed by patriarchy. Patriarchy was responsible for the condition of women. They were meant for the earth. Patriarchy was sanctioned by religion also. Every religion in general is responsible for indirectly providing a basis for the subordination of women which has become a central fact of history whether east or west. Women were always trapped in a conspiracy of silence. They become victims and are more generally considered as 'Unheard'. Hence women frequently complain that they feel gagged in certain situations or that what they do say is unheard or misheard or undervalued. One element in Mineke Schipper's collection of writing for women in Africa, Asia, the Carribean and Latin America entitled *Unheard Words*, are lists of traditional proverbs, many of which make clear that women should, indeed be unheard. Some of them refer that in times when a woman tells something one should never trust her even if she in drought says she has found a well, one should not pay attention. Further, a virtuous woman is the one who suffers and dies in silence etc.

These suggest that indeed the virtuous woman is silent. The first idea therefore, that is likely to occur in the course of Feminism is that it emerges as a social force. The emergence of a feminist idea and feminist politics depends on the understanding, that in all societies which divide the sexes into different cultural, economic or political spheres, women are less valued than men. Feminism also depends on the premise that women can consciously and collectively change their social place. While many languages do not have the word 'Feminism', and 'Feminism' as a term for the politics of equal rights for women did not come into English use until the 1890's, the word Feminism can stand for a belief in sexual equality combinable with a commitment to eradicate sexist domination and to transform society, so while most writers agree that in Britain, Feminism as a group of political and social movements, probably dates from the seventeenth century. Feminism as a body of answers to the 'question of woman' has a more diffuse and considerably more longstanding existence. It aimed to provide liberty to women from various demonstrations of gender-based discrimination and exploitation. Mary Wollstonecraft is known as a pioneer of this feminist movement, she wrote *A Vindication of the Right of Women* in 1792, whereas, John Stuart Mill is the first male who supports the female cause through his work *Subjection of Women* published in 1869. Besides, these two prominent authors of Feminist movement, there are few others important writers and texts that stand as foundational with regards to Feminism such as Oliver Scheiner's *Women in Labour* (1911), Virginia Woolf's *Room of One's Own* (1929) and Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), etc. Beauvoir is the first woman who challenged the unjust and exploitative gender-based social constructions and radically changed the general perception of women's place in society. Feminism is one of the latest trends of contemporary literature and the liberation of women is the main motivating force behind this movement. A large number of women write against the hypocrisy, hegemony, and hierarchy:

The modern Feminist movement gets a sharp focus in the writing of women whose works..... Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970) makes a distinction between 'sex' and 'gender'; 'sex' is determined biologically whereas 'gender' is culturally constructed. . . she analyses therepressive role of the male and submissive role of the female. Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1972), Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Polics* (1985). Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of their Own: British*

Women Novelists from Dronte to Lessing(1979), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination*, (1979) and many others. . . (76 Swami)

Other than these there are now writings originating from every nook and corner of the marginalized societies where it is not simply marginalization in general but the subordination of women in particular, is a major central concern. One such discourse is writings concerning 'Dalits'. Broken people which is a meaning associated to 'Dalits', a term first used by Jyotiraj Phule Maharashtra (1827-1890), a social reformer who has described these people as broken and suppressed victims of the High-class Hindu society. Women in such community who belong to an outcaste are generally subjected to ritualistic prostitution by the powerful dominating class. Bama is a Dalit writer and an activist who concerns about the Dalit community. *Sangati* is her second novel, which is based on the first-hand investigation. It is the narration of a painful and pathetic life of her people. The novel is in an episodic form that begins with the introduction of people and culture in her community. Her previous works are- an autobiographical novel entitled as *Karukku* (1992) and her latest novel stands in the third place in chronology named *Vanmam* (2002). In the two decades of Tamil Dalit literature, *Sangati* occupies a unique place. The novel does not only deals with the issue of caste, but also the atrocities against Dalit. The significance of *Sangati* represents Dalit victimhood and focuses on the caste system in Tamil society. This novel contributes new approaches such as the theoretical development takes place within Dalit Studies, demands a reading of Dalit literature not simply as 'literature on Dalits', but as a critique of the Hindu social order. In an interview, Bama says that "When I started writing *Sangati*, I just thought how my 'Paatti' would have narrated this story. I never thought about literary style as such. That doesn't seem so important to me" (Bama 131).

Bama's *Sangati* deals with the struggle of Dalit women. The novel is originally written in Tamil language and translated into English by Laxmi Holmstrom. *Sangati* is not only the story of an individual, but it is a story about the whole community of Paraiya women, a neighborhood group of friends and relatives and their joint struggle. Hence, *Sangati* has no plot in the normal sense, only the powerful stories of a series of memorable protagonists. The meaning of 'Sangati' is news, events, and happenings. In this novel, Bama illustrates the sufferings of Dalit women and their effort for survival. Bama writes in the acknowledgements of *Sangati*:

My mind is crowded with many anecdotes: stories not only about the sorrows and tears of Dalit women. But also their lively and rebellious culture; their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter them, but rather to swim vigorously against the tide; about the self confidence and self-respect that enables them to leap over their adversities by laughing at and ridiculing them; about their passion to live life with vitality, truth and enjoyment; about their hard labor. (IX)

Sangati focuses on the complexities involved in various forms of domestic abuse as physical, sexual, emotional, verbal, economical violence and so on. The only purpose is to maintain control over the victim which is the central theme of the novel. These individual stories are a form of memories which is based on personal experiences. The entire novel is in the first person narration that is counter-pointed by the generalizing comments of the grandmother and mother figure. As the narrator of the earlier chapters is a young woman. Whereas, the later part of the novel reflects an adult voice that is looking back and meditating her experiences. Therefore, the structure of the novel explores the Dalit feminist perspective.

There are several characters that portray exploitation in many ways as, they are abused by the upper-caste male-like 'Kumarasami Ayya', who tries to rape 'Mariamma' though she escapes, but catches in 'Panchayat' and blames of indulging in evil activities and traps upper-caste men. Therefore, she is punished by the heavy fine of two hundred rupees. After this incident 'Naattaamai' an elder of 'Paraiya' community says that "It is you female chicks who ought to be humble and modest. A man may of a hundred things and still get away with it" (10 Bama). Bama narrates another story in which a man hits female like an animal. As 'Thaayi' a Dalit woman is brutally beaten by her husband when his neighbor 'Karuthamathu' tries to protect her. Her husband becomes more violent and says, "Who are you to speak for this munde? She's my wife I can beat her if I wish, you go and mind your own business" (43).

Moreover, the novel Sangati shows gender discrimination in society as there is a story of 'Eskkai' who is murdered very cruelly by her brothers. Though she was full-term pregnant, the only fault was married to another cast man. Through the novel, Bama conveys the suppression of women with the help of sensible story of village women. She elaborates their hard work in the fields with men the work of men is limited to the field, while women's work is more than that, as they say:

We have to labor in the field as hard as men do and then on top of that, struggle to bear and raise our children. As for the men, their work ends when they have finished in the fields. If you are born into this world, it is best you were born a man. Born as a woman what good do we get? Only toil in the fields and in the home until our very vaginas shrive. (6-7)

Though there are several stories of suppression and violence still there is a sense of modernity which is reflected at the end of the novel. Bama discusses several other things like revolt that expresses through the character like 'Raakkamma'. She protests against domestic violence when her husband is beating her, she protests and revolts by abusing. Moreover, Bama gives the contrast between high and low caste and discusses the Dalit women's enjoyment when they all gather in the river. It is not only bath, but they enjoy and share their daily stories; sometimes they make fun of upper-caste women. As an old woman 'Sammuga Kizhavi' who ridicules the upper-caste landlords and their effortless obedient wives. They are unable to enjoy simple events of life and how do their male befool them.

Besides, these things Sangati presents a glimpse of the positive cultural identity of women. As, it deals with the everyday life of these Dalit women who are working together, eating food, bathing, singing, and celebrating things together without any interruption. There is no dowry system in their community; widows are not discriminated from celebration and rituals. Moreover, they have the freedom to remarry there is no restriction. Bama ends the novel with a positive hope that reflects modern aspects of society. She admires females of her community and quotes a little girl 'Maikkanni' who supports her mother and family by working with them. There is no doubt the novel is enlightening the downtrodden class of females who are more Dalit among Dalits. Still, there is a hope in which they enjoy their freedom more than upper cast females.

CONCLUSIONS

To put it somewhat differently, the traumas associated with ill treatments done to the subalterns and violence which are brutally performed to them indicating the depiction of pitfalls encountered when one set of oppressive rulers exercises its control on another set of repressed marginals became an easily identifiable theme of the Dalit literature of the region. Another cluster of themes has to do with endemic poverty and the persistence of religious, class, and caste prejudice as well as patriarchal injustice. Still, another has to deal with the plight of underprivileged, marginalized, or steadily disappearing

communities. The alienated consciousness of the writer writing on such themes and sometimes their cut off from mainstream life in the region that exists in an ironic embrace of it also became more and more visible in this body of writing.

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