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Ostracized Beings Dalit Women as Portrayed in Bama Faustina's *Sangati – Events*

Dhanalakshmi A., M.A., M.Phil.



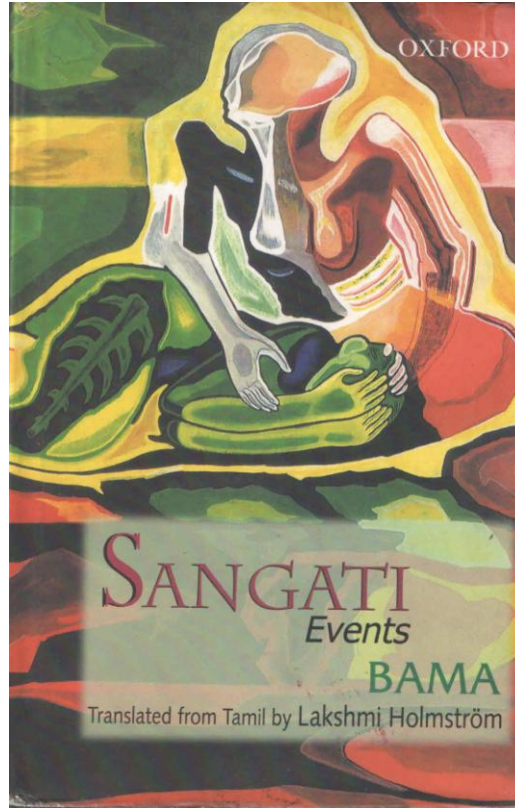
Bama

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Bama's Faith in Education as Source of Liberation

Like the great Dalit leader Dr. Ambedkar, Bama believes that education alone can uplift her people. Her father, who served in the army, made sure that all his children were all educated. The support from the family helped Bama to blossom into a full time writer. Her journey into the writing world wasn't that easy.

Fight Against Injustice

When Faustina published her first novel, *Karruku*, she wasn't allowed to enter her village. People realized their folly and it was after seven months they allowed her to enter the village. Her narrative style and her language earned her many enemies. It is after many years people accepted her as a writer. She is bent on fighting against the injustice meted out to her people.

In the interview to the daily *The Hindu*, she also says, "Because Dalits have been told again and again of their degradation, they have come to believe they are degraded... they have reached a stage where they themselves, voluntarily, hold themselves apart... The consequence of all this is that there is no way for Dalits to find freedom or redemption."

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Dalit women are seen as “thrice-subjugated as Dalit, women, and as Dalit women who perform stigmatized labour.” says Karan Singh Yadav.

The Place of Women in General

Woman along with man in the society completes the human civilization. But she is given second place everywhere. As Neena Arora points out,

... 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 (Arora, 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, 14)

Indian Scenario

If women can be treated as lesser beings everywhere, one cannot expect the scenario to be different in India. Here too women were treated as subordinates to men. One can argue saying that in our society everything auspicious are named after woman. But in reality she is subjugated and ill-treated in many ways. Arora argues that, “There is a great discrepancy between the idealized concept of woman in Indian myths and scriptures and her actual situation in life. On the surface she enjoys a very high status and is known as Devi (Godess), Lakshmi...or Shakthi..., but, in real life, she is harassed, oppressed and tortured in various ways.” (Arora, 16)

***Sangati* Structure**

Sangati is not like other novels with a definite plot, but it is a collection of incidents told to the narrator in different situations. The characters are either relatives or neighbors to the narrator. The collection of such incidents is aptly titled as *Sangati* – Events. Bama has brought out many things that happen to Dalit women. Among the often repeated characters of Bama, it is her grandmother who connects the past with the present situation. The novel, thus, well structured and carefully planned to maximize its effects on the readers.

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A Comparison with the Suffering of African American Women

Dalit women's suffering is not less than the suffering of the African-American women. We can compare the life of Dalit women to that of Celie in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. There too she is married off at young age to a man at his behest. There is a reflection of Celie in Bama's aunt, Periamma, mother's older sister. (Note that Periamma is not a personal noun, it is a kinship term used to address and refer to mother's older sister, and such other persons of that status in age and wisdom.) Her "Perimma" too is married off at the behest of a man and the grandmother narrates it as, "I caught hold of her and gave her away immediately (after puberty). Poor girl, she didn't want it. That fellow from Mossulupatti kept insisting and wouldn't take no for an answer. I couldn't take his pestering anymore, and finished it all... what sort of life she has, married to him?" (Bama, 10)

A Life Full of Suffering

The suffering of Dalit women starts from their infancy. They live "hard lives" as Bama recalls. Their suffering starts even when they are babies. The case is different for boys, "if a boy baby cries, he is instantly picked up and given milk. It is not so with the girls." (Bama, 7) She continues saying that the case doesn't change even after they have grown old, "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..."

Bama recalls how she ate the "leftover skin" of the mangoes her grandmother brought. If she brought anything home when she returned from work, it was always the grandsons she called first. If she brought cucumbers, she scooped out all the seeds with her fingernails, since she had no teeth, and gave them the remaining fruit. If she brought mangoes, we only got the skin, the stones and such; she gave the best pieces of fruit to the boys. Because we had no other way out, we picked up and ate the leftover skins. (8)

The young Dalit girls hardly enjoy their childhood. She recounts how a young Dalit girl's life starts.

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. (75)

In yet another instance, Bama accuses the women as those who put down the other women. She tells them that, "It's you folk who are always putting us down... From the time we are babies you treat boys in one way and girls in quite another. It's you folk who put butter in one eye and quicklime in the other." (29) Bama sums up saying that "the position of the women is both pitiful and humiliating".

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Lack of Education

Lack of education breaks the spirits of Dalits. Bama understands it clearly and says, “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.” (118)

Bama proclaims how her father was particular to educate his children. Even when the society expected her to stay at home he took the courageous step to send her to the school. “Her father won’t allow her to stop off now. He wants her to study at least to the tenth. He says, we didn’t learn anything, and so we go to ruin. He says, let them at least get on in the world.” (Bama, 9)

Get Her Married Soon

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.” (122)

Girls without healthy food suffer from malnutrition and the ignorant family accuses the girl instead, and relies on “pujaaris”. Mariamma is one such motherless child and she suffers in the hands of ignorant women, “... it seems that in this town called Maduragiri, there’s a pujaari. If he says a mantram over a lucky charm, and then ties it round their wrist, it seems barren women conceive, and girls who haven’t come of age get their periods. Why don’t you take your grandchild to him?” (Bama, 14)

Victims of Molestation

The mistakes and 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*. (Bama, 20) Without proper trial or enquiry, the words of the upper caste man were taken blindly. “... did the mudalaali lie to us in everything he said?” The girl’s cry is heard by none and they called her “whore” and “was asked to pay a fine of Rs.200 ...” (Bama, 26) The mistakes of men fall on women and, even though the women knew it, their words fell on deaf ears.

Bama through Arokkyam portrays the reality.

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Look how unfair these fines are. Even last week, when my granddaughter Paralokam went to pull up grass for the cow the owner of the fields said he would help her lift the bundle on to her head. That was his excuse for squeezing her breasts, the barbarian. He's supposed to be the mudallali's son. He's supposed to be an educated fellow. The poor child came and told me and wept. But say we dared to tell anyone else about it. It's my granddaughter who'll be called a whore and punished. Whatever a man does, in the end, the blame falls on the woman'."

(Bama, 26)

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." (66) Again from Bama's view, spirit possession or pey happens only to Dalit women. She is bewildered to know that even evil spirits "peys" possess only women and not men. "I began to wonder how a man could even strike at a pey bravely, while a woman is easily caught and becomes its prey. And even among women, I never heard of upper-caste women becoming possessed or dancing in a frenzy. The peys always seem set on women from the pallar, paraiyar, chakkiliyar and koravar communities." (58) She doesn't stop with questioning alone but comes out with the answer too.

... I thought about the fact that only women – and Dalit women in particular – become possessed. And when I examined the lives of our women, I understood the reason. From the moment they 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 have collected water and firewood, cooked a kanji and fed 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 wracked with 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 one who don't have the mental strength are totally oppressed; they succumb to mental ill-health and act as if they are possessed by peys.(59)

The sufferings of the Dalit women cannot be expressed better than this, even though one should also note that similar experience is not uncommon, in fact it is similarly widespread, among the poorer and socially supposedly lower castes among the non-Brahmin communities in Tamilnadu. Since Bama's focus is on Dalit women in *Sangati*, it is natural for her to focus such suffering as part and parcel of Dalit women's lot.

Making Dalit Women Strong

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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.”(59) Pressure from all the quarters is tackled by the women wisely.

Bama surveys dalit women and tells that in order to “survive without going crazy” they shout and fight in the streets. She compares the upper caste women with hers and proclaims that,

“If we are to live at all, we have to shout and shriek to keep ourselves sane. Upper-caste women, though, keep it all suppressed; they can become unstable and mentally ill. If you look at it like that, our women have an abundant will to survive however hard they might have to struggle for their least breath. Knowingly or unknowingly, we find ways of coping in the best way we can.” (68)

Things that One can be Proud of

There are a few practices among the Dalits about which Bama is very proud of. She is proud to proclaim that all the Dalit women, unlike the upper caste women, work right from the beginning and as Bama says, “... our women work hard and earn their own money” (66). They are the ones who feed the family and “don’t hold out their palms to their husbands for every little expense” (66). They are the ones who run the family, for, “Most of the men, never give their wages to their women. It is the woman who looks after everything in the house.” (67)

The social evil of the dowry system doesn’t exist among the Dalits. It is the groom’s family who gives money as “*parisam*” for the betrothal. The bride’s family used to, “buy ... out of that money.” Ill-treatment meted out to widows is also not known among Dalits and the “widows are not treated differently.” (90) Remarriage is not a sin for them and it is there in their custom and “...a woman can marry again after her first husband dies.” (91)

Even female infanticide or foeticide isn’t heard in their society. Bama recalls, “...we don’t have such customs, ... Whether it’s a boy or a girl, parents in our community accept the child and bring it up as best they can.” (115) It is not simply on one occasion that states that the social evil is not present in their caste. She again and again emphasizes this point throughout the novel.

Bama Stands Tall

Bama doesn’t bend herself before the society at large which tends to ostracize the Dalits. Instead she stands tall, to proudly proclaim that she is a “*paraiya*”. The undying spirit of Bama comes out through many characters. She is proud to be born as a *Paraiya*. She often states, “...I often think to myself that I’m actually lucky to be born into the *paraiya* community.” (112) She says, “...I don’t like to hide my identity and pretend I belong to a different caste.” (121)

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Bama adores her women and heralds them as multifaceted. Besides being the earning member of the family, the women know to sing for special occasions like lullaby and dirge songs. "...from birth to death, there are special songs and dances. And it's the women who perform them. Rorattu to oppaari, it is the women who sing them."(78)

Crusade against Many Odds

Dalit women's fight is a long crusade against their men, upper class and patriarchal society. It is after much struggle that Dalit women slowly emerge from the cocoon by braving the situation, to face the society and, as Bama pictures them, "Oppressed, ruled, and still being ruled by patriarchy, government, caste, and religion, Dalit women are forced to break all the strictures of society to live." (Bama, vii) Dalit women don't bow now as they did earlier but, "...dared to make fun of the class in power that oppressed them."

Bama on *Sangati's* Theme

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." (66) She 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." (66)

Bama adores her women and places them in the highest pedestal proclaiming that they are skilled and are able to multitask, "... how many jobs they are able to do simultaneously spinning about like tops! Even machines can't do as much." (78)

How to End the Suffering of Dalit Women

Bama asks her community to follow a few things to put an end to the suffering 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'. (123) will come true and "such a day will dawn soon."

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