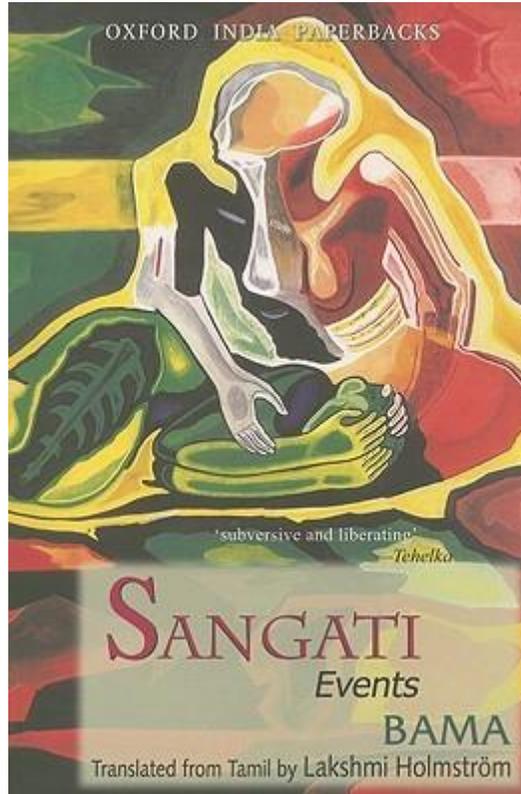


Subjection of Dalit Women in Bama's *Sangati*
K. Angel Vinoliya



Dalit Movement and Dalit Literature

The prime aim of the Dalit Movement is to battle against the caste conflict that lies in the forms of exclusion from common civic responsibilities, discrimination between upper and lower caste people, inequalities based on economic status, oppression of selfhood etc., Dalit through literature especially. In the words of Mishra, women too hold strong position and play active role in the movement through direct participation and as “independent thinkers and writers in the literary world” (23) questioning the existing dogmas and theories on life advocated by the upper caste people.

Subjection always happens for the weaker by the stronger. Dalit literature is a rebel against the higher-class people by the lower caste people. Dalit people are crushed at every part of their life; they were also treated as untouchables. If a woman belongs to Dalit community she faces two types of suppression in her life: first being a woman, second belong to the lower community, they are ‘doubly abused’.

Sangati

Sangati doesn't have a definite plot like other novels, but it is a collection of incidents told to the narrator in different situations. The plot covers the span of three generations starting from Vellaiamma Kizhavi to Bama. The characters are either relatives or people the narrator saw. The collection of such events is appropriately titled as *Sangati* – Events. Bama has brought out many things that happen to Dalit women. Among the often-repeated characters of Bama, Vellaiamma Kizhavi (grandmother) connects the past with the present situation.

From Infancy

The suffering of Dalit women starts from their infancy. They live 'hard lives' as Bama recalls. Even from children's game to the serious issue of marriage, education, labour, the double standard of patriarchal society is visible. In their community boy babies are considered as a gift and girl babies as a burden, boy babies are breastfed for longer hours than the girl babies and they were taken good care when they fell ill. Girls suffering starts even from their birth. 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." (*Sangati* 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..." (7)

Eating the Left Over

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 recalls 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)

Caste Dynamics

Bama records that when she heard that, she had a strange sensation. It was then that she was slowly initiated into the knowledge of caste dynamics. "When I was studying in the third class, I hadn't yet heard people speak openly of untouchability. But I had already seen, felt, experienced and been humiliated by what it is" (11). She then witnessed some upper caste women give water to her grandmother: "The Naicker women would pour out the water from a height of four feet, while paatti and the other received and drank it with cupped hands held to their mouths. I always felt terrible when I watched this" (14).

Velliamma Patti

The women characters who we see through the protagonist, Velliamma Patti, lead an inferior and a horrible family life that could be unimagined by women of upper caste. Already the society has segregated, as low caste people, meek and vulnerable to become easy prey to the insensible wrath and in satiable sexual desire of upper caste men. Mariamma, Velliamma Patti's grand-daughter was about to be raped in pump set shed by upper caste man, Kumarasamy Ayya. Mariamma had a narrow escape from him. The irritated man cruelly narrated a story and the blame fell on her and village court fined her for no fault of her. This injustice evoked a hot discussion among other women. Sexual harassment happens to be a common and inveterate event casually, discussed by women of Dalit community, compelling them to bear the brunt silently:

After this, the crowd broke up and everyone went home. And we were walking home, Arokkyam said, 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 field 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 mudalali's son.... the poor child came and told me and wept. But say we dared to tell anyone else about it. It's my granddaughter who is to be called a whore and punished... (26)

Woman in Dalit Community

A woman in Dalit community, as depicted in Bama's novel is not to be dissuaded by these happenings however cruel they are. She has learnt the art of surviving at any cost, they fight against cruelties to make a living. Though the biased social system demands her to be silent she is not always. She is courageous and hardworking, ceaselessly at home and also outside to take care of the household single-headedly, enduring the enormous violence and physical assaults of her husband and she equips herself with cleverness to tackle the situations using dissenting stratagem.

Most of the Dalit Feminists including Bama talk about Dalit woman facing violent in some form or the other at the workplace, in public arena and at home. Being raped or sexually assaulted by men of superior caste or by the starved fatty men of their clan is a routine one happening in Dalit community. Hence in all Tamil Dalit literature sexuality of a Dalit woman is a common theme coarsely handled by them to accentuate on women's subjugation to sexual assault even at tender age. But the Dalit writing makes one difference from others. Unlike other women writers they never project their characters as women, always whining and wailing with tears filled in eyes. Instead they compile them mouthful; a seaming art though, it is a talent they are gifted with to use as an armour expiating the lost egalitarian privileges in the caste-prone patriarchal society. Talking about women's tactics to confront husband's assault, Aditi Swamy says, sometimes "sharp tongue and obscene words are a woman's only way of shaming men and escaping extreme physical violence" (47). The Dalit woman wags the nerveless bastion to put her husband to shame with added accentuation through vulgar gestures- unimaginable by a timid woman of upper caste. What may seem to be obscenity and ill-mannered are the means to escape from being bashed by or even killed by her husband. Rakkama is not a "quite creature" (Sangati 61) as assumed to be at the beginning of the novel. She uses abusive terms to curse and makes obscene and ill-mannered gesticulations to stoop her husband tormenting her physically.

Representative of the Experience

Bama's depiction need to be understood as representative of the experience. It is indicative of the ill-fated situation bequeathed in a greater degree of self-awareness and quest for achieving high and nobler things in the lives of Dalit women. As Simon de Beauvoir has pointed out in *The Second sex*, "there are women who are mad and there are women of sound method: none has that madness in her method that we call genius" (Beauvoir 717).

Bama defines Dalit women as: Everywhere you look, you see blows and beatings; shame and humiliation. If we had a little schooling at least, we could live with more awareness. When they humiliate us we do get furious and frustrated... because we haven't been to school or learnt anything, we go about like slave all our lives, from the day we are born till the day we die. As if we are blind, even though we have eyes (Sangati 118). After describing all troubles and difficulties she suggests something for the welfare of women. We must bring up our girls alike, showing no difference between them as they grow into adults. We should give our girls the freedom we give our boys. If we rear our children like this from the time they are babies, women will reveal their strength. Then there will come a day when men and women will live one, with no difference between them; with equal rights. Then injustice, violence, and inequalities will come to an end, and the saying will come true that 'women can make and women can break' (123). Bama in her *Sangati* describes autobiographical elements in a very bold and realistic way, which she saw in her life by using colloquial language, abuses used by women in their daily life. She ends her novel with an optimistic point of view. At the end of the novel Bama says that she has a hope; "I am hopeful that such a time will come soon" (123).

Works Cited

- Bama. *Sangati*. Trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom. New Delhi: OUP, 1994.
- Bama. Interview with Manoj Nair. "Recognition For the Language of my people is the Biggest Award I can win". Dalit Forum. 26 Apr 2001. Web. 28 Sep. 2017.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.
- Bernard, Fathima. "Review on Dalit Women Spiritual Journey". *Faith Walkers*. 21st August 2010. Web.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988.
- Swamy, Aditi. "Sangati- A Book Review". *The Viewspaper*. 7th May 2011. Web.

K. Angel Vinoliya
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Sri Ramakrishna College of Arts and Science
Coimbatore
Tamilnadu
India
angelvinoliya91@gmail.com