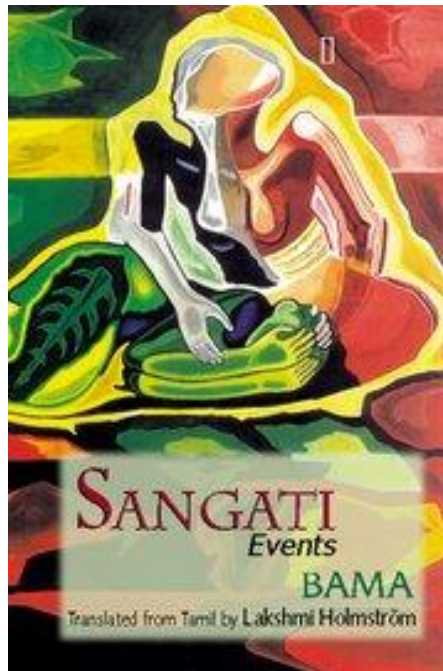


Violence and Gender Discrimination in Bama's *Sangati*

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Courtesy: <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/sangati-9780195698435?cc=us&lang=en&>

Abstract

Dalit literature is a literature of protest, pain, and agony. The primary motive of Dalit literature is the liberation of Dalits. It has become an effective tool in expressing their protest against the domination of the caste Hindus. Its beginning can be traced to the undocumented oral folklore and tales of the past decades. Dalit literature as a genre was established in the 1960's and 1970's when a spurt of Dalit writings was published in Marathi and Gujarati. Dalit literature is also gives importance to the upliftment and liberation of Dalit women from patriarchal and caste ridden society. Dalit women face more atrocities due to caste and gender discrimination. They are subjected to systematic oppression and structural violence both from the general community and from within their own community and their families. Violence is used to curb the assertion of the rights of Dalit women in particular and of the community in general. Their socio-economic status combined with being a woman and Dalit also increase the incidence of violence against them.

In Bama's *Sangati*, Dalit patriarchy is an important subject of concern. Bama criticizes the domestic violence and abuse of Dalit women at home by Dalit men and sexual and occupational harassment faced by them outside their homes at the hands of the upper caste men and the police.

The present paper focuses on how Bama's *Sangati* explores the violence and gender discrimination of Dalit women experienced by the hands of upper caste men and women and their own community male. It is also portrayed, how they are facing these kinds of inhuman treatment to assert their rights and challenge caste and gender norms.

Key Words: Bama, *Sangati*, Dalit literature, gender discrimination. caste, violence, suffering



Bama

Courtesy: <http://www.keralaliteraturefestival.com/speaker/bama-soosairaj/>

Introduction

Dalit literature not only portrays the hostile circumstances in which Dalits live, but also articulate their struggle for emancipation from caste oppression. This provides a hope of breathing away from their inferior status, but true liberation for Dalits is possible not just by demanding for equality and justice but only by bringing transformation in the society where others also acknowledge their human identity with respect and dignity. Dalit Literature is influenced by African American literature for liberation and equality in the White-dominated America.

Dalits in India first united themselves to fight against the tyranny of caste in Maharashtra. They formed the Dalit Panthers Party (inspired by the Black Panthers Party) in 1972, and decided to spread awareness among the Dalits of their dehumanized existence and the need to be liberated from the shackles of untouchability. Dalit writings were meant not only to reveal their pathetic and debased existence but also to effectively sow the seeds of protest and revolt in the minds of the fellow Dalits.

The term *Dalit*

The term *Dalit* literally signifies the depressed and suppressed groups of various social formations. But it is used in ways which vary with the specificity of contexts, the speakers' ideological positions, and the political strategies of those who address audiences with it. As a matter of fact, the term is essentially a political idiom and often puts one in a temper. The word "Dalit" actually tends to be appropriated for the castes traditionally discriminated as untouchables and refers to their specific conditions of cultural identity and social subalternity.

According to the decennial Census of India 2011 data, the total population of India is 1.2 billion people. Of this total, 16.2% belongs to the category of Scheduled Castes (technical/legal term given in the Constitution of India for the castes formerly treated as untouchables)(http://censusindia.gov.in/Tables_Published/A-Series/A_Series_links/t_00_005.aspx).

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In India, sex ratio is for every 1000 males there are 943 females. Thus, the Dalit women form a substantial number not only among the Dalits but also among the entire women's population in India.

Social Status of Dalit Women

Dalit women in India constitute the lower segment of Indian society and suffer from dual disadvantage of being Dalit, due to socio-economic and cultural marginalization of being women; i.e., suffering from gender-based inequalities and subordination. Early social reformers were concerned with two major problems - - the emancipation of women and the amelioration of the condition of depressed classes. Their first efforts were directed towards demolishing certain customs like *Sati*, prohibition against widow marriage, female infanticide, etc. Issues related to the lower caste women who were marginalized by the new land legislation and exposed to the threat of sexual violence under the Zamindari system and the distressing sale of women following the new land settlement were absent in these debates. Caste bondage had gender specifications, and specific caste biased atrocities against Dalit women were not discussed overtly.

Dalit Feminism

Koteswar Rao's "Dalit Feminism: A Reading of Bama's *Sangati*" identifies the novel as an account of the experiences of Bama's maternal grandmother and her contemporaries. Yet, the novel symbolizes, indeed, every Dalit women's history. It is a powerful Dalit feminist narrative of the dual oppression of Dalit women on the grounds gender and caste. This kind of self-reflectivity of Dalit feminist discourses on the issues of gender and caste is the predominant theme of Tamil Dalit feminist literature. Vincent B. Netto's "The Subaltern Can Speak?: Bama's *Sangati* as a Chronicle of a Caste" reveals that the writing of Bama, a Paraiyar woman who has suffered all the iniquities possible in a caste repressed society and who fought through many seemingly impossible odds, have settled the issue. The voices of many women speaking to and addressing one another as they share the episodes of their daily lives, sometimes raised in anger or in pain as they lash out at each other, or against their oppressors, are reported exactly.

Discrimination and Violence of Women

A life of Dalit woman is full of suffering, which starts from her infancy. Bama recalls in *Sangati* about women's living as "hard life". Because their grief-filled life starts as gender bias baby. The situation is different for baby boys -- "if a boy baby cries, he is instantly picked up and given milk. It is not so with the girls" (*Sangati* 7). Bama continues that this 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..." (*Sangati* 8). The hapless victims of women in cultural practices start from their beginning life of journey in which the young Dalit girls hardly enjoy their childhood. Bama 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. (*Sangati* 75)

Gender Discrimination Right from the Beginning of Life

Thus, the gender discrimination has been imposed even in childhood games. Bama as a young girl of twelve learns that boys have different roles as they wish to play than girls who continue to play only gender-oriented games as children. *Kabadi* and *Marbles* are meant for boys to play. But girls even when small had to play only cooking or getting married, home keeping, minding babies as in real life.

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This incident causes distress to the author and she raises questions with her *Paatti* (grandmother): Why is it that whatever men say is assumed to be correct while whatever women say is supposed to be always incorrect:

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 or lie face down on our bellies. We always have to walk with our heads bowed down, gazing at our toes . . . even when our stomachs are screaming with hunger, we mustn't eat first. We are allowed to eat only after the men in the family have finished and gone. What, Paatti, aren't we also human beings? (S 29)

Bama is angry against the real social condition of Dalit women in the Male chauvinistic world which imposes inhuman treatment on women. Bama's documentation displays how patriarchal society insisted and trained up women with cultural practices guiding the development of gender discrimination. Young Dalit girls hardly enjoy their childhood just as the Black girls suffer from the very beginning of their life. The restrictions are thrust upon them in the name of tradition, custom, and culture. According to the patriarchal society, the boys are always free to do as they wish. But the girls' desires only are guided by the parents even if the girls want to sleep within the home.

Dalit Girls under the Family System

In the family system under the influence of savagely patriarchal tradition, women have always been brutally treated by men, because a wife is dependent upon the husband. Dalit women have been much subjected to mental torture and violence at home apart from the oppression imposed on them by Upper castes. They are manhandled by their husbands without any specific reasons. Bama depicts the sad tales of Dalit women. On her way back home from school, she used to find a Dalit woman called *Thaayi* weeping. Bama writes, "*Thaayi's* husband beats her up again and again with the belt from his waist. She didn't even have a *chattai* on. Everywhere the strap fell on her light skin, there were red weals" (*Sangati* 42). When the neighbours move to save *Thaayi*, her husband said that he could beat and kill her because "she is my wife". After hearing such words, no one is ready to confront him. So, *Thaayi* existed in the hapless victimization of brutal cultural practices.

Women Quarrelling with Their Husbands

Bama justifies the quarrel by a Dalit woman with her husband and she feels it to be natural when she says, "Why must she submit to being beaten and stamped upon for no rhyme or reason? That's why she quarrels with him" (*Sangati* 67). She justifies even the sexually connoted words that the women pour at each other and others by saying that "because they have neither pleasure nor fulfillment in their own sexual lives, they derive a sort of bitter comfort by saying these terms of abuse which are actually names of body parts" (*Sangati* 68). Shouting, fighting and cursing, the women manage to keep afloat in the dire torrent of their lives.

Importance of Dalit Women within Their Community

Bama also reveals the importance of Dalit women within their community. Women can sit near the dead bodies. They sing dirges and are even allowed to go to the burial site. She posits this in sharp contrast to the denial of the presence of an upper caste woman in the death ceremonies. There is also a celebration of the freedom enjoyed by the Dalit woman who enjoys the privilege of taking bath in the ponds, swimming, and enjoying with the other women of the community. Bama is surprised at their claustrophobic existence within their house and at the commands of their husband. Her Paatti's narration of the grit of a Paraiya woman who delivered her child amidst the grasses safely and single-handedly is a pointer to the triteness of such substantial events like a delivery in the life of a Dalit

woman unlike the present elite women to whom the ritual is associated with immense importance and pampering.

The men in the poor Dalit families are rather illiterate, irresponsible, and drunkards. After a day's work, their responsibility is over and are free to move around freely taking to drink and all. They are least bothered about their children, whereas women after a day's hard work have to cook for the entire family, take care of the children and at night they give themselves to the pleasure of their husbands willy-nilly. Bama very realistically brings forth sufferings and agonies of Dalit women through her novel *Sangati*. Bama points out that although all women are slaves to men, Dalit women are the worst sufferers. They have to bear the torment of upper caste masters in the fields and at home the violence of their husbands.

Woes Begin at Home

A Dalit woman's woes begin at home with her husband. She is a victim of caste oppression outside and a patriarchy outside and inside her home. Bama's grandmother projects her radical views and resentment when she narrates the life story of her daughter who was beaten to death by her lustful husband. At the same time, it's a pointer to the fact that a Dalit woman has begun to react and articulate her protest against the internal domination and attempts to come out of this marginalized existence.

Bama points out and protests against the gender biases that her community shows right from the childhood. She talks about the plight of the young girls who have to take care of all the work at home, "cleaning vessels, drawing water, sweeping the house, gathering firewood, washing clothes and so on" (*Sangati* 7). And at the same time nurture the smaller babies, being not in a position to even attend school unlike the boys of her community. Gender roles are inscribed in the children right from their childhood. Baby boys are preferred to girls and are breast fed longer than girls and also at the time of illness it is the boy who receives all the care and love. Even the games are gender stereotyped. Bama questions this tradition, "What Paatti, aren't we human beings?" (*Sangati* 29)" When Sappaani says, "In these days, neither the girls nor the boys are going to look after you. If we work hard, we earn or own kanji (food)" (*Sangati* 30). It is an indication of the change in the attitude of the community towards longstanding notions and practices.

Discrimination All Around

Bama probes the very position of a Dalit woman who is forced to live life according to the terms and conditions laid down by the domineering patriarchy. Even the wages of men and women differ and men are paid more. She challenges this tendency of the patriarchal set up to dominate women in all phases of their lives. She says, "Whatever happens must be according to their pleasure and their convenience. If anything is ever arranged for a woman's convenience, they will never stand for it. They will leap between heaven and earth to prevent it. They will insist you must not cross the line they have drawn. And what have we ever gained by never crossing that line all this time" (*Sangati* 110).

Women's Revolt

Bama narrates the story of one Rakkamma who is habitually beaten up by her husband. She defies her husband's abuses, raises her sari and exposes herself in public. She is actually defending her "self," her womanhood from the impending torture and subverting the notion of an all-enduring Dalit woman. It is nothing but purely a self-defence, but with that act her husband walks out leaving her alone. Bama portrays a "new" Dalit woman ready to react to an injustice and shows Rakkamma as an example of one who has learned to cope up.

The story of *Maikkanni* is a revelation of the hidden strength and resilience of a Dalit girl who has to face the most awful circumstances in life right from the childhood. Bama portrays Maikkanni as possessing a sense of maturity and poise far above her tender age. With a defiant father and a mother who put the burden of a new baby each year on her tender shoulders, she is robbed of her childhood. She takes care of all the affairs at home and works in a match factory. Even though her poverty demands her to lead an adult life, her innocence exudes in her description of the “super” bus journey to the town and the “cone ice-cream” and the special “shit-room.” She is also a victim of the bullying and exploitation of the men from within and outside her community, at home and in the work place. Yet the streaks of rebellion and protest are innate in a Dalit.

Inner Strength to Overcome Hurdles

Bama and the girls of her community are fed on the stories of possessed women. The women are prey to the “push” since they went out to work in the fields. The belief was that the men escaped all this since they were brave at heart. Bama questions the very existence of these “peys” (evil ghosts) and regards them as strategies by the community to wield power over women, to scare them and manipulate their movements. Bama calls for the inner strength in a woman's heart to overcome all the hurdles. Here, we see a woman negotiating her marginalized status by looking up to the inner vigour and vitality within a woman, thereby drawing sustenance from it.

Again, the incident of the Sannuga Kizhavi who insists that she be taken back home in the same car as she was brought for voting, by the party-men themselves throws light on the changing attitude of the Dalit community towards politics and politicians. However, it is also an indication of the changing attitudes of a community so long taken for granted to be naive and incapable of reacting and earlier deemed “apolitical.” Bama also lauds the ability of Valliamma Kizhavi to ridicule the upper caste landlord. Here, she admires the ability of her to undermine the authority of the lord by playing tricks on him.

Bama also focuses on the male supremacy and violence by the men against the women of her community. She wonders if it is a strategy of self-gratification that the men achieve by way of wielding power and authority over their women because it was absent otherwise in their lives. In the fields they have to be the slaves of their masters and once at home, they let lose their frustrations by abusing their wives. Once at home after work, he uses the opportunity to give a free rein to his fastened masculinity by way of beating and torturing his wife and imposing strict rules on his girls.

Again, Bama wonders why the community makes leniencies for inter-caste marriages when boys are involved, but strictly prohibits girls from entering into it. Even the church and the priests are gender-biased when it comes to inter-caste marriages. Even educated girls who raise their voice in public places are often snubbed. Bama questions these tendencies within her community.

Women must be extremely cautious during their periods and never venture out alone in the dark. We also get an insight into the nature of marital discord and domestic violence through the lives of certain characters. The men were always in the position of authority and the women always had to succumb to their domination. The women were also subject to physical and sexual violence by their husbands.

Deaths of Passive Victims

In *Sangati*, readers get an insight into the lives of some other women, who passively succumbed to their husbands' beatings and violent treatment. Bama's maternal aunt was married off to a drunkard, Samudrakani, who tortured her with his excessive sexual demands. For him, she was merely an object

to satiate his lust and vent his frustration. He always rained blows on her, sometimes with a rice pounding rod. When she got married, she got so scared during her first night that she refused to sleep with him. Although he waited patiently for four days, on the fifth day he dragged her into his room and forcibly slept with her. Her 'Periamma' (aunt) was treated more like a child bearing machine. She had to work the entire day in the fields and at home and at night had to surrender her body to placate her husband. One day she was so tired that she refused to succumb to his sexual demands. Samudrakani got so angry that he killed her. Vellaiyamma who was a witness to her daughter's torture was unable to do anything except mourn her death. She inwardly believed that a husband had full right to do anything with his wife. Samudrakani, on the other hand, had no regret about his wife's death and found solace in a concubine.

Thaayi was a light skinned woman, who was extremely good looking. She was married off to a man whom she disliked. He was extremely suspicious of her and beat her all the time. Since the lower caste women did not wear blouses, one could see red weals on her back. When one of the men rebuked him for treating his wife brutally, his suspicion got strengthened and he beat Thaayi and referred to her as a whore and a prostitute. He even humiliated her by cutting a thick tuft of hair from her neck, which he hung from his door-post. He believed that by acting thus, he reduced his wife's pride.

There was another woman, Rose, who in her full term of pregnancy was beaten by her husband. He had no qualms in dragging out his pregnant wife onto the streets. When the people approached her parents for help, they washed their hands of her saying that since she married him on her own accord, defying their wishes, she must bear the consequences on her own.

Women Who Asserted Their Rights

Apart from the Dalit women who passively succumbed to such violent beatings, Bama also delineates certain women who actively and courageously retaliate against their husband's violence. Kaaliamma actively fought with her husband, Chinnappan, for not bearing equal responsibilities. She asserted for equality by questioning him as to why she should be taking the responsibility for housework, when she too goes out to work in the fields. She criticized her husband for having a bath after having returned from work, while she has to stoke the fire and cook food. She also grumbled about standing in a long queue to buy kerosene. When Chinnappan found her struggling with fire and smoke and asked her to pour a little kerosene to stoke the fire, she put him to shame saying that he had not stocked adequate kerosene for her in order that she be spared of such domestic troubles. She demanded him to return the hundred rupees that he had taken away from her and threatened Chinnappan with dire consequences on his failure to do so. Chinnappan rebuked her saying that she should be ashamed to call herself a woman since she didn't even know how to light a stove. He then moved out of the house. Their relationship was a war of words.

Another woman is Raakkamma, who resorted to using abusive language in order to escape from her husband, Pakkiraj's blows. She called his action unmanly and said that he was fit enough to drink a woman's fart. She asked him to fight with a man, rather than show his strength over a woman. She also put him to shame by asking him to drink his son's urine and her monthly blood. Thereafter, she lifted her sari before everyone. A little later when she heard the other women abusing her, she clarified that if she hadn't put him to shame, he would have broken her skull.

Conclusion

Dalit women are oppressed in two ways. Firstly, being a woman, one is oppressed by the men belonging to one's own community in the patriarchal society. Secondly, being a Dalit a woman, she is

oppressed by the upper caste men and women in the society. The Dalit writers, especially women, express subjugation of Dalit women asserting the self. The self-respect and identity are the manifest forms of the identity of the Dalit women.

Bama's *Sangati*, an autobiographical novel, represents the dual oppression of women. The novel is an important Dalit autobiography, and is a landmark work of Bama. It depicts Dalit woman's agony and anger at the dual oppression. The Dalit women who are the downtrodden sections of the society have been exploited and oppressed not only by their men but also by the upper caste men and women. As a result, they have become one of the most exploited and marginalized groups in the society.

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