

Portrayal of Dalit Women in Bama's Sangati

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Abstract

This paper examines the varied underlined, invisible ways of sufferings embedded in the lives of the Dalit community, particularly women and their lived experiences portrayed in Bama's Sangati. It also discusses how Dalit women are constantly exploited by the powerful Caste-Hindus and experiences faced by the two protagonists: Maamma and Maikkanni in the novel. In the light of this background, the paper delineates how Bama analysed and characterized many individual stories in Dalit life. Sangati is an autobiography of Bama, which highlights the struggles of Paraiya women and it unlocks the physical and mental sufferings experienced by the suppressed, discriminated and marginalized Dalit women.

Dalit literature was disregarded for a long time and not taken seriously in the literary circles. The publication of translations from modern Marathi literature entitled 'Poisoned Bread' edited by Arjun Dangle ignited debates in the literary circles. Then, Arun Prabha Mukherjee who translated Omprakesh Valmiki's 'Joothan' into English that gave a wider acceptance and circulation of Dalit literature in and outside of India. There is an anthology entitled 'No Alphabet in Sight' edited by Suche Tharu and K. Sathyanarayana opens up new debates on the long history of Dalit literature and its current prominence in the contemporary scene of literature and politics. It also shows how Dalit literature moves beyond the other forms of literature.

Sangati

The novel Sangati (Events) deals with several generations of women. The older women belong to narrators narrating the grandmothers' generation, VelliammaKizhavi's generation and downward generation. If a woman belongs to Dalit community, she has to suffer in two ways. The first being a woman and second is belonging to the lowest community. Bama's Sangati is a unique Dalit feminist narrative carrying autobiographical elements of the whole community. It focuses the double oppression of females. The novel has several individual stories, anecdotes and memories that portray the events taking place in the life of women in Paraiyar community in Tamilnadu. Women are presented in Sangati as daily wage earners. They earn less than men do. However, the money earned by men, can spend as they please whereas women have to bear the financial burden of running the family. Women are also regular victim to sexual harassment and abused in the place of work. In this novel Maamma tells a lot about the sexual assault faced by her and her community women and their inability to stand up

against it. The physical violence is realistically portrayed in this novel like lynching, whipping and canning by fathers, husbands and brothers.

The key characters in Sangati

Sangati was written in Tamil then translated into English by Laxmi Halmstrom. The whole narrative is divided into twelve chapters having more than thirty-five characters. The word Sangati means events. It carries an autobiographical element in its narrative, but it is the story of a whole community and not an individual. The condition of Dalits was very vulnerable as they were not allowed to enter into temple and schools for education. In Indian social hierarchy, Dalits get the lowest status. Observing all, Bama expresses caste and gender problems both outside and inside the community. According to Bama “All women in the world are second class citizens. For Dalit women the problem is grave. Their Dalit identity given them a different set of problems. The Experience a total leak of social status. Even they are not considered dignified human beings. My stories are based on these aspects of Dalit culture....” (Ranjana 2-3)

Mind Stress related to psychology

Bama expresses the psychological stress in this novel. “The subject matter of the novel is ‘human relationships...’ in which are shown the directions of men’s soul,” As Dorothy van Ghent (1953) says in the book *The English Navels: Form and Function*. Her language is different from other Indian writers. She uses more Tamil Dalit slogans and addresses the village women as Amma such as Vellaiamma, Maarriamma and Pecchiamma. She uses various Tamil words to name the places, months, festivals, rituals, customs, clothes and occupations. In this novel, women address one another and share their everyday experiences sometimes with anger or pain. The language of this novel is full of sexual references. She bridges the spoken and written styles of Tamil by breaking the rules of grammar and spellings. She also 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 spoken out anything. This is acceptable to all”. She feministically voices out the grievances of Paraiya women. Characters like VellaiammaPaati and a small girl and the narrator herself, who learn the story from her grandmother.

Women’s Encounter in society

Sangati examines “the difference between women and their different ways in which they are subject to apportion and their coping strategies”. Bama focuses the protests against all forms of oppression and sufferings faced by Dalit women in the first half of Sangati. But later part of Sangati moves away from the state of depression and frustration. Instead, it presents a positive identity to Dalit women focusing their inner strength and vigor. The writer attracts our mind towards the education system about Dalit community. She gives the example of Pecchiamma belonging to Chakkili community studied up to fifth class. The girls of that community don’t go to school that much.

Giving Birth to Child

This novel is introduced with the capability of Patti in attending every childbirth in the village. She can even handle the most difficult cases “It didn’t matter if the umbilical cord was twisted round the baby, if the baby lay in a breech position, if it was a premature birth, or a case of twins. She delivered the baby safely, separating mother and child, without harming either”. (1-2). Most people know Patti very well and like Patti very much because of this. People themselves feel in and around of villages that she had a lucky hand. However, the upper caste people don’t approach Patti in attending the childbirth even the situation is worst because “she was a Paraichi”. (1)

Exploitation on Physique

Maarriamma faces sexual exploitation in the hands of the upper caste land owner

KumarasamiAyya. One day, Maarriamma gathered firewood as usual and returned home in the burning heat carrying her bundle. Seeing water in the nearby irrigation pump-set, she goes to drink water. When she goes to drink water, KumarasamiAyya seizes her hand and pulls her inside the pump set. However, she escapes and says it to her friends; they said “That landowner is an evil man, fat with money. He’s upper caste as well. How can even try to stand up to such people? Are people going to believe their words or ours?” (20) However, KumarasamiAyya gets afraid of his reputation and so he hurries to the village and complains to the headman of the Paraiya community named the Naattaamai by saying “Just today that girl Maariamamma, daughter of Samudrakani, and that Mnukkayi’s grandson Manikkam were behaving in a very dirty way”. (20).

During the inquiry in the village, Maariamamma and Manikkam come to the centre of the circle and then greet the elders by falling down and prostrate themselves at full length. Hence then, they are asked to stand each to one side with folded arms. At last, Maariamamma falls down and asks for forgiveness and so the Naattaamai asks her to pay Rs 200 as fine and Manikkam Rs100. The Naattaamai ends the proceedings by saying “It is you female chicks who ought to be humble and modest. A man may do a hundred things and still get away with it. You girls should consider what you are left with, in your bellies”. (26)

The Pathetic Suffering of a Young Girl

The seventh chapter portrays the inconsolable sufferings faced by eleven years old little girl Maikkanni. Perhaps she was born unlucky because soon after her birth, her father becomes friendly with another woman and so the family responsibilities fall on her shoulder. Her mother is pregnant for the seventh time therefore she finds very difficult to go for a job. However, if she is laid up at home, the children will starve to death. She says that when “Maikkanni has grown up a bit and can go out to work”. (69) The day Maikkanni learns to walk, she starts to work as well. When her mother goes out to work in the fields, it is Maikkaani who looks after all the tasks at home. “From the time she

woke up, Scrubbed the cooking pots, collected water, washed clothes, gathered firewood, went to the shops, cooked the kanji. She did it all, one after the other”. (70) Whenever her mother has a baby, Maikkaani goes off to work in the neighbouring match factory in the town because her mother cannot go for a job. The family is managed on what she earns. After her mother delivered a baby, she goes to work and Maikkaani takes care of the children. “It was Maikkanni who brought up all the five children who were born after her; her mother delivered them into the world and could do no more. Just as soon as one child began to walk, she was ready to deliver the next” (73).

Feminism in Bama

As a feminist writer Bama’s feminism is focused in the Dalit community. As women are powerless, they accept the patriarchal role of men in their life. All her women characters are never empowered with education. Therefore, they are treated as social victims and easy to attack by whoever wishes. As Prasanna Sree says “through the centuries, women in Hindu tradition are depicted as silent sufferers; they have been given a secondary status both in the family and society”. Maariamamma and Thaayi have faced inexplicable shame in their family life. Their husbands regularly beat them up and also feel that it is their birthright to humiliate and kill their life partners. Maarriamma is unlucky in her whole life. When she was with her parents, she didn’t get the love and affection that she expected for. She began to cry when her marriage was arranged with Maanikkam who is a drunkard and does not go for a job and often goes to jail.

When Maariamamma knew his character, she refused a lot to marry him. Finally, she was compelled to accept him. Since she got married with Maanikkam, she suffered with beatings every day. She was completely made as a scapegoat that people watched helplessly. The Paraya men were speechless when she was victimized for molestation by KumarasamiAyya. They get afraid of losing their favours especially jobs and don’t have the power to question the upper class person. So, Bama Says in her book Sangati “we must be strong. We must show by our own resolute lives that we believe ardently in our independence. I told myself 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, we must strengthen our hearts and minds in order to survive” (59).

Summing Up

This paper presented the sufferings faced by Dalit women from their childhood. Women are considered inferior to men and given less care. Their consciousness of ignorance burns in the heart of Bama. Samundrakani and Pechiamma are the prime victims of marginalization. From the readings of Sangati, the similar issues have been identified in the form of sufferings in many chapters. Through Sangati, Bama holds the mirror up to the heart of Dalit women and makes an appeal for a change and betterment of the life of Dalit women in different fields including sex, gender discrimination, equal opportunity in work force, education rights, etc.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:3 March 2018