

Tracing Dalit Issues in Bama's *Sangati: Events*

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Abstract:

Bama Faustina, one of the first Dalit women writers to be widely recognised and translated, was born in Puthupatti, Tamilnadu. She has committed herself to impart the values of self respect and social consciousness among this (Dalit) section of society. Her works include Karukku (1992), a well known autobiography, Sangati and Vanman. Sangati which means news or events or happenings, is originally written in Tamil and translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom in 1994. It is one of the greatest contributions to the galaxy of Dalit Literature so this paper is a sober attempt to bring into limelight the issues of Dalit marginalization and exploitation and multiple oppressions of Dalit women whether it is outside their community or within itself.

Key words: caste, gender discrimination, exploitation, Dalit awareness and Dalit feminism

In India, caste is what race is in Black America, that is, caste plays the same role in India as race in the life of Afro-Americans. The owners of Racism are the white masters of America who shackled the Africans and used them as object and right from the day of slavery, the blacks have realized the cruel reality of this mode of oppression. So to speak, the division of societies is a well known phenomenon to all

civilizations across the world which is the outcome of class struggle and class exploitation. Even today, in the era of globalization and liberalism, caste-ism is prevalent with full force. But what is caste actually? - A question needs to be tackled on the canvass of this study. Uma Chakravarti in his *Gendering Caste Through Female Lens* defines caste division in this way:

Broadly there are three major divisions: the upper caste which may comprise of the brahmanas, rajputs, banias and other castes such as the kayasthas in northern and eastern India; the middle class such as the jats, yadavs, kurmis and other castes which could be dominant...and the low castes who are at the bottom of the hierarchy and whose touch was often regarded as polluting. (9)

And this polluted community has always been degraded with different base and mean names such as 'achhoot', 'harijan', 'outcaste', Schedule Caste or depressed class and later as 'Dalit'. As the present paper is concerned with the Dalit issues so it is pre-requisite to it to throw light on the term 'Dalit'. The word has its origination in the Sanskrit word, 'dal' which means disintegrated, split, broken, downtrodden and crushed. Generally, this word is assigned to the lower caste or poor people but actually refers to the state to which a section of people have been condensed and marginalized socially, economically and politically and now they are living in that predicament. They have always battled against the Brahmanic and other upper class hegemony and subjected to do the menial task of scavenging and other manual works of inferior grade- this task makes them 'untouchable'. It exhibits that caste is the most powerful and decisive factor in establishing one's dignity and identity. Since birth to death, the indelible imprint of caste move further than person itself which becomes excruciating if one belongs to lower strata of society. The intensity of pain is evident in these lines of Kumud Pawade, quoted by Chakravarty:

“The result is that although I try to forget my caste, it is impossible to forget. And then I remember an expression that I heard somewhere: “what comes by birth and can't be cast off by dying- that is caste.” (6)

Down the ages, the Dalits have always been put at the bottom of social pyramid and considered as a commodity to be used and not as human being. Even the most indispensable and fundamental rights like drinking water from lakes and wells and hygienic food were beyond their access; they could not walk freely on the road just because of the fear of touching upper caste people. To their plight, Manu, the law-giver, whose proclamations in Manusmriti are supposed to be the edifice of Hindu society, have added fuel to the fire. He declares that “the name of brahmanas should have a word for auspicious, of a kshatriya for strength, the name of a vaishya for wealth and the name of shudra should breed disgust” (11). He ostracizes them from social order, consequently, till date; they are the victim of economic and political disparity having no social dignity amongst the masses.

Various attempts have been made in this direction to annihilate caste discrimination by Gandhiji, B.R.Ambedkar, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, and some other socio-political thinkers. Gandhiji ushered a new era in the history of the eradication of untouchability and brought Harijan Act and he founded Harijan Sevak Sangh, Dr. Ambedkar began a movement in favour of giving them equal rights and in gush of anger he “burnt *Manusmriti* in a bonfire, because its author, Manu, is the ancient sage credited with codifying the brahminic laws of untouchability and pollution” (xix), writes Arun Prabha Mukerjee in the Introduction to Valmiki's *Joothan*. Mahatma Phule who genuinely believed in social equality, also sacrificed his life for the upliftment of untouchables and women.

Though, caste system in India, was officially eradicated over fifty years ago but the bigotry and discrimination are still prevalent not only in rural areas but in big towns too. Dalits

are often forbidden from using religious places, living in areas of upper class habitats or marrying into their families. Even today, they do cleaning and sweeping in order to fulfill the requirements of upper strata and in turn, exploited and tortured by them. But with the passage of time, by the attempts of various thinkers and writers, a consciousness raised in the minds of Dalits and they have started raising their voice against this social structure, oppression and marginalisation to unfold the problems to the society, and established a new genre, Dalit literature, though first used in 1958 but got prominence after the advent of Dalit Panther movement in 1972: this name, writes Mukherjee, “expressed their feelings of solidarity and kinship with Black Panthers who were engaged in a militant struggle for Afro-Americans’ rights in the United States of America.” (xii)

Dalit literature articulates the firsthand, raw experience of the writers, subjected to the scorn and anger of people who were good for nothing but just belong to upper caste families. For them, to write autobiography is the best medium to send their message to everyone -Dalits or non-dalits. A significant fact about Dalit writing is that though anybody can write about Dalits but cannot be put into the category of Dalit writers; only one, who is born as Dalit, has the right to bear this title. Some writers deserve to be named here for their significant contribution to this genre- Daya Pawar, Om Prakash Valmiki, Mahasweta Devi, Arjun Dangle, Sharankumar Limbale, Bama Faustina and so on. All Dalit writers share one thing on common grounds, that is, they depict the assertion of human rights, self pride, and revolt against social injustice, hopes and aspirations for society sans discrimination. It also aims at ennobling non-Dalits to come out of the traditional mindset which makes them think of Dalits as lower than themselves.

After generalizing the term Dalit and its issues, the present paper shifts its focus on Bama Faustina’s *Sangati* which analyses Dalit marginalisation, discrimination, isolation and humiliation from common tradition of life. Bama, one of the

first Dalit women writers to be widely recognized and translated, was born in 1958 in Puthupatti, Tamilnadu. She has committed herself to impart the values of self respect and social consciousness among this section of society. Her works include *Karukku* in 1992, a well known autobiography, *Sangati*, an autobiography of her community and *Vanman*.

Sangati is originally written in Tamil and translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom in 1994. The word 'sangati' denotes news or events or happenings, so accordingly, it makes us delve deep into the life of Dalit men and women through the occurrences and confrontations to which they come across. This novel is unconventional, in the sense that it has neither a plot nor protagonist rather day-to-day cases and events of Dalit community are incorporated in the framework which the novelist has herself witnessed in her real life. Lakshmi Holmstrom, in the Introduction of this book, makes its theme clear: "*Sangati* moves from the story of the individual struggle to the perception of community of paraiya women, a neighbourhood group of friends and relations and their joint struggle. In this sense *Sangati* is perhaps the autobiography of a community." (xv)

Sangati explores the changing perspectives from generation to generation as it is the story of three generation of women- the narrator's grandmother, the narrator herself and the generation coming after her. The canvass is larger in the context of casteism and church. Her counterparts are subjected to humiliation, caste and gender discrimination and remain marginalized in the new social spiritual space.

The first and foremost issue which Bama brings into limelight is that Dalit women have never ever been the concern of mainstream society which speaks of the 'position of woman'. Undoubtedly, it is true because a number of awareness programs, seminars and conferences are being held but Dalits and their women find no place anywhere. That's why Dalit writers adopt the medium of autobiography which straight away provides them the podium "to expose the malicious impact

of oppressive socio-cultural and political factors in the personal lives of the writers and to share with the outside world, their endeavors to achieve freedom by carving an identity for themselves" (98), remarks P. Rathna in Anita Balakrishnan's *Transforming Spirit of Indian Women Writers*.

Bama also has this idea in mind, while writing *Sangati*, to carve out the stories and incidents in the lives of these people whose voice remains unheard, whose glimpse remain unseen by the layman as she states in the Acknowledgement that,

We have all come across news, broadcast widely and everywhere telling us of the position of women in our patriarchal society, and of the rights that have been plucked away from them. But the news of women who have been trapped not only by patriarchy but also caste hatred is often sidelined, hidden, forgotten" (ix). Thus, she is intended to inculcate the values of self-respect and confidence in the women of her community which would accelerate and assist them in their struggle against caste system.

The novelist has traced the role of caste, class and patriarchy in the lives of Dalits. Dalit men, though they are the patriarch of their women, have no identity of their own outside their caste region. They have to keep their mouth shut in front of the upper class people whether they are true to their words or not. Bama incorporates one such incident in the texture of this novel; when a girl named Mariamma goes to collect firewood in the scorching heat; bare feet, exhausted and thirsty, while returning from the field, she drinks water from a pump set. Eventually an upper caste fellow, Kumarasami Ayya, "an evil man, fat with money" (20), finding her in his field, molests her. Anyhow, she escapes and rescues herself. But this is not the end of the story. To save himself, this man Kumarasami Ayya alleges Mariamma to be with a village boy, Manikkam in very awkward position. Finally, the menfolk gathers to punish the culprit but no one asks for any clarification from Manikkam and Mariamma rather her father Samudrakani has to pay fine for Rs. 200 on her behalf. Her father knows that nothing such

his daughter has done but being a Dalit, he keeps his mouth shut and shouts at Mariamma,

“Well girl, you heard what he said, didn't you? Why are you standing there like a stone then? Beg forgiveness, you bitch, I have suffered enough shame because of you.” (23)

This sexual harassment with Mariamma by upper caste man also brings forth the fact that caste role becomes more intense when it comes to Dalit women. Mariamma is accused, abused and made a scapegoat because of some upper caste man's wilful maliciousness. Even in such cases, a woman can't speak rather she hides the incident to save her from a blot. But Bama has made an attempt to make them aware about their rights, to face the challenges so far their life in their particular Dalit world is concerned.

Dalit women are the victim of oppression and subjugation in multiple ways- firstly, upper caste men keep an evil-eye on them as Patti tells:

“If upper caste fellows clap eye on you, you are finished. They'll drag you off and rape you, that's for sure. If you go on a little further, there will be escaped criminals lurking in the plantation.”(8)

Secondly, their husbands' treatment towards them is worse than anything; various incidents of wife-beating and domestic violence can be found in the novel. It is not uncommon to see the husbands, beating and tormenting their wives with no reason. The ideology behind is that the male sex has taken for granted to use their wife as an object, as rubber doll who has to follow the orders of her husband, give him pleasure over the night whether her body aches or reproduction has sucked the blood. Thirdly, their Dalit status showers all kinds of remaining exploitation over them. Examples of Rakkamma and Thaayi are worth noticing in this regard. They are badly beaten with chappals and belts by their husbands. If any passerby strives to save them, at once the anger and frustration of husbands get double and they beat them up more furiously. Thaayi's

husband, while interrupted by Karuthamuthu, retorts in this way:

“Who are you to speak for this munde? She is my wife, I can beat her or kill her if I wish. You go and mind your own business” and then turns to his wife to abuse and beat her saying, “You common whore, you, any passing loafer will come in support of you, you mother fucker’s daughter. You will go with ten men.” (43)

Though wife- beating and hitting are tagged as the activity of low caste household but such incidents also take place in upper-caste families too. The difference between the two, lies in the fact that the former does not care about the reputation and status, because for them to serve the belly is prior to anything; they have to do the physical toil to run the entire household without the support from their husbands and as a result their frustration dispenses in the form of quarrels and abuses in the streets. Bama makes it evident that only few women fight with their men like this. “Most of them put up with all that violence and suffer a life of hellish torment” (67). In contrast to it, upper-caste men and women are conscious about their dignity in society. Their women “submit to their men all the time and are shut in and controlled, like snakes locked up in boxes” (111). Here lies Bama’s greatness that she does not let down the people of her caste rather rationalize the cause of their predicament.

Bama has raised the issue of economic inequality. Dalits have always been deprived of basic constitutional rights. Since the ages, they are assigned to do the manual work and artistic and intellectual tasks were never for them; various Brahmanical textbooks held their chief duty to stand and wait for the three castes- Brahman, Kshatriya and Vaishya. So, till date, though a bit conscious about their rights, they are still serving and are always at the disposal of upper castes. But there is economic disparity in the Dalit-economic framework too so far their women are concerned. Their condition is utterly

pitiable. Meena Anand in *Dalit Women: Fear and Discrimination* writes in this connection:

Dalit women have the most horrible position in Indian society even today, though the rigidity of untouchability has been relaxed to many extent... Women are compelled to go for hard labour with discrimination of wages, sexually abused frequently and have to go for dirty and odd jobs. (23)

In the novel, Bama's conversation with her Patti sheds light on the issue of economic exploitation by the superior people on the part of Dalit men and by both on the part of Dalit women. Their women are real wage earners but they do not get their due; do the hard work inside or outside the house but "whatever work they did, were paid less than the man. Even when they did the very same work, they were paid less" (18). Their plight is evident as Patti explains that, "We have to labour in the fields as hard as men do and then on the top of that, struggle to bear and raise our children. As for the men, their work ends when they've finished in the fields... We only toil in the fields and in the home until our vaginas shrivel." (6)

It is worth noticing here that Bama has slotted in all those issues which are complimentary to each other, that is, one problem overlaps another, for instance, above discussed economic exploitation is the result of caste, class and patriarchy. Patriarchy (a society, system or country that is ruled or controlled by men) is the patron of gender discrimination or better to say, gender discrimination is the central feature of patriarchy. In *Sangati*, from beginning to the end, Bama has dealt with gender issues at large so the term 'gender' needs to be conferred.

Since 1970, a line of demarcation has been drawn between sex and gender. Sex is biological difference between males and females whereas gender is socially constructed. Marta Lamas defines gender in this way by recording Hawkesworth in her *Feminism: Transmissions and Retransmissions*:

Gender was used to analyze the social organization of relationships between women and men; to refer to human differences; to conceptualize the semiotics of the body, sex and sexuality; to explain the differential distribution of responsibilities and benefits between women and men;... Thus, in the final analysis, *gender* was seen as an individual attribute, an interpersonal relationship, and a means of social organization. (98)

Thus, it is used to denote the roles, responsibilities and status, which as a result of social conditioning have come to be associated with a given sex and gender relations are constructed by an interplay of several factors like religion, media, mythologies, law, economy, education, etc. These institutions, time and again, put the female sex down in the hierarchy, snatch all the rights which can help them to upgrade and uplift themselves. Bama's cry on the grounds of gender discrimination is audible in *Sangati*:

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 nor lie faces down on our bellies. We always have to walk with our heads bowed down, gazing at our toes. You tell us all this rubbish and keep us under control. 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, Patti aren't we also human beings? (29)

It very clear exhibits that 'home' or 'family' is the first unit where the socialization of gender takes place because, since the time of child birth, his or her nurturing begins not as a child but as a boy or a girl. When the child gets the senses, the elders indoctrinate them to behave accordingly. They inculcate the feelings of being active, aggressive, tough, daring and dominant in boy while they condense the girl to be feminine in attitude having sweetness, softness and submissiveness. Apart from this, it can be seen in the form of caste, class, race and ethnicity

too and Bama has foregrounded this stark reality through her narrative with multiple strands.

The writer strongly holds the view that outside their community, the life is tougher either for a Dalit man or a Dalit woman. Undoubtedly, it is factual as she shares in the novel: "Being a Dalit creates a problem. On top of that, being a Dalit woman makes it more difficult. The biggest problem of all, I realised, is trying to live alone as an unmarried Dalit woman."(119-20). Thus she has explored the psychological stresses and strains faced by all Dalits in one way or other and that they are constantly vulnerable to the harassment and abuse in the work place. She thinks of herself a bit in better position than other of her community since she is educated and capable enough to stand on her own feet. By the end of the novel, we can find that she has become successful in raising her voice against caste, class, patriarchy in general and 'male' sex in particular; focuses on the importance of education, strong self-will, unbiased attitude of female to female and to show the courage against inequality and injustice. The very last line of the novel reveals her believe for a better future of her community: I am hopeful that such a time will come soon" (123) To conclude, it can be said that Bama has made us aware about the life of Dalits very closely which compels us to change our attitude towards the downtrodden, the marginalized and suppressed class of society. Being human suggests us to behave like human and not like beasts because God is all powerful and not are we. He has created everyone to support and not to demoralize and down one another. She has succeeded in bringing out the truth that all sense of dignity of the Dalits vanished in the vicinity of so called upper castes due to the humiliations hurled on them. So Bama makes a call to the people of her community as well as to every human being through her work to come out of the old and narrow mindset of which they are victim since the ages.

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