

SANGATI: MEDIATING DALIT WOMEN'S RESISTANCE TOWARDS CASTE AND GENDER BASED DISCRIMINATION

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Abstract: The novel *Sangati* brings out the collective voice of the Dalit women; who resist the domain of the patriarchal society. The double oppression faced by the Dalit women based on the caste and gender is the primary issue taken into consideration for this paper. Dalit women who are not only face subjugation by the men of the other caste but also from their own caste. The writer of the novel Bama makes an attempt to depict the differences that exists among women belong to different caste. She puts forth the struggle of dalit women who are made to narrate their stories using various autobiographical elements such as gossips, abuses, victimization and so on. These elements not only compel the writer to adopt certain form of narration but also underestimate the whole dalit experiences to those narrative elements. In both the cases the dalit women indeed document their voice in history. Considering the title of the novel *Sangati* that is loosely translated as events/ happenings; Bama consciously built a collective narrative of dalit experience that cut across the existing notion on Dalit Literature. For an instance the power dynamics between dalit men and women in *Sangati* exhibits the movement of women within the academic/ creative space that was deprived earlier. Such narration adds a new dimension to the mediation of dalit women resistance towards caste and gender discrimination.

Keywords: Everyday life, Collective Memory, Identity, Difference, Autobiography.

Introduction: Dalit women writings establish a wave of protest against the social system that discriminates them based on their caste and gender. There are myriads of problem such as equality, justice, identity attached to the caste system in India; along with which comes the sexual violence/ abuse that are often faced by the women. It is only in the last few decades the women issue have become a part of global agenda. Dalit women in India, Black women in USA and other part of the world, Muslim women and other women belongs to minority community have acquired visibility globally through their writings and the activism that they are involved. Bama is one such writer who claimed global recognition through her writing. Irrespective of the impact created by women like Bama within the intellectual space; they still undergo the societal discrimination and lack of recognition. In fact her first novel *Karukku* made her to exile from her own birth place for seven months. Such discriminatory measures taken against dalit women portray the society's lack of interest in sharing the intellectual space as well as the closed mind set of inviting perspectives. As Gayathi Spivak noted in her article *Can Sub-altern Speak?*

“It is not so much that subaltern women did not speak, but rather that others did not know how to listen, how to enter into a transaction between speaker and listener. The subaltern cannot because their words cannot be properly interpreted. Hence, the silence of the female as subaltern is the result of failure of interpretation and not a failure of articulation.” (195)

Bama's *Sangati* serves as a voice that is collective in nature. She includes the everyday event that includes women engaging in dialogue in both public and private space. Further, *Sangati* as a reference to event can also be seen as metaphor to change or destruction in creating history. That is when the silenced gender begins to speak they try to reconstruct the history with voice that contains plurality. These voices are carefully adopted by the writers in order to stand out from their contemporary. Social scientists observe such adaptation of voice as a need in addition to the position from where they deliver their standpoint. Gopal Guru, states that,

“Dalit women's claim to 'talk differently' assumes certain positions. It assumes that the social location of the speaker will be more or less stable; therefore, 'talking differently' can be treated as genuinely representative. This makes the claim of dalit woman to speak on behalf of dalit women automatically valid. In doing so, the phenomenon of 'talking differently' foregrounds the identity of dalit women.” (2549)

In comparison to dalit women, the dalit men make a considerable impact in history documenting the discrimination imposed on people of dalit community. While they almost always ignore the fact that they themselves become an oppressor towards the women belonging to dalit community. Bama mentions that “women cannot bear the torment of upper-caste masters in the fields and at home they cannot bear the violence of their husbands” (65). By bringing out such events the writer constructs a parallel narrative to the narratives written by men.

Fragmented Memory: Bama in the preface of the book *Sangati* informs the reader the purpose of bringing out multiple voices in the narrative. She says, “My mind is crowded with many anecdotes: stories not only about the sorrows and tears of dalit women, but also about their lively and rebellious culture, passion about life with vitality, truth, enjoyment and about their hard labour. I wanted to shout out these stories” (9). The novel further talks about the gender role that is imposed on them from their childhood days. The anecdotes that she presents and the childhood days of different women characters lay down the life events in fragments. It suggests that the multitude of dalit women experience, in addition to this such writings gives the reader a space to engage in the narrative. The fragmented memories in narrative can be seen as a sentient move to encourage the readers to complete or stretch the story by filling in their experience. Wolfgang Iser articulates the subtleties of the reader's imaginative engagement with the text in terms of textual elements:

If the reader were given the whole story, and there were nothing left for him to do, then his imagination would never enter the field, the result would be boredom which inevitably arises when everything is laid out and dried before us. A literary text must therefore be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader's imagination... the text may either not go far enough, or may go too far, so we say that boredom and over strain form the boundaries beyond which the reader will leave the field of play. (275)

Dalit women writing document an individual's attempt to recollect the displaced or fragmented memory. Based on its relevance to the present, it uncovers more potential facts about the lived experience of the subject. The conundrum of documenting fragmented consists in its relevance to the momentary purpose. To function at all, we must forget most of the scenes and sensations that constitute the vast array of "experience" or overlay them with what Sigmund Freud called "screen memories," memories that protect us from fear, anxiety, and pain. According to Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, turning memories into stories -- whether humble life stories or pretentious master narratives -- is also a potent form of forgetting (440). One has to narrativize the past. One cannot wish it away. The unnarrativized past returns to haunt the present. Dalit historians present women as dehumanized victims of caste system, torn from their history and culture, it becomes imperative for the women narrators to reconfigure their memory, and to redefine their identities. Such identities in texts have to be read and related as Walter Ong note “Written texts all have to be related somehow, directly or indirectly, to the world of sound, the natural habitat of language, to yield their meanings” (8). Documentation preserves the potential facts about the event -- who, what, where, when, and how. This makes it an appropriate method to construct history.

Bama recollects childhood events such as the games played by the men and women in her novel. She retrospect the reason for her being not encouraged to play games like kabaddi and marbles since it is believed that these games are meant for boys; while girls are encouraged only to play games that involves cooking getting married and so on. The gender roles are clearly defined since their childhood starting from the games they engage. But the memory that a reader should look for is beyond the gender roles, i.e the cultivation of caste conscious in their childhood days. The children belong to upper caste were not allowed to play, eat or sit/ roam with each other. To Bama, the urge to live happily with dignity is the message that she wanted to communicate to the reader. For which, she encourages the girls to get

education; she strongly believes that through education one can break the chains of discrimination. It is for this reason she explores the domain of writing sharing her stories and the stories of other women. Further, education for Bama is not exclusively textual, the characters of *Sangati* demonstrate the knowledge of illiterate women in so many ways. For example, she writes “in my village it was my grandmother who attended every child birth. Only the upper caste never sent for her because she was a paraichi” (1). The fragmented memory in *Sangati* brings out the knowledge the women possess outside the domain of education, and the possibilities of excellence if and when they explore in getting education.

Visual Transformation of Language: “Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.” - Chinua Achebe

Bama’s voice of struggle and pain is transformed into visual, that is, the text. For women even when they are sexually harassed, the society victimizes them further by shaming them. Bama gives an example of Mariamma whom an upper caste man tries to molest. When Mariamma escaped from the molester and tries to inform the others about his heinous action, she was asked to remain quiet. After the incident Mariamma’s friend suggests that “it is best if you shut up about this. If you who will get the blame; it is you who will be called a whore” (24). Similarly, Paralokam, another woman in the novel reports how her master’s son found a way to “squeeze her breast” when she asked him for help to lift the grass bundle on her head; “The poor child came and told me and wept. But say we dared to tell anyone else about it” (26). At home these women were demanded more work physically as well as sexually. Bama writes “night after night they must give in to their husbands’ pleasure. Even if a woman’s body wracked with pain, the husband is bothered only with his own satisfaction” (59). The sexual abuses are never brought into their preview of the public so far, since it is believed that one should not bring the private issues to the public. Bama by documenting all these events in her novel *Sangati*, technically presents all the private issues into visual. Abuse as an event in dalit women’s day to day life transformed visually into words. The reversal of power dynamics and the mediation of the dalit women voice take place at this juncture through such narrative of the private life. The longing of Bama to become “the same as boys” does not imply the inferiority of her gender, rather it depicts the privileges that a boy gets in the society irrespective of them turning into abusers. The extreme inequality among the gender echoes when she put forth inquiries to her grandmother. For an instance Bama asks her grandmother that “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).

Traditionally when women gather and involve in public discussion is considered as unproductive. One may find that *Sangati* as an event where group of women sit together sharing their experience of discrimination based on caste and gender as empowering. Such is the brilliance of the writer who consistently attempt to re-visit / reverse the social norms. The characters in the novel grow gradually from ignorant to victim to a strong woman. Rakkamma, one of the characters who constantly face abuse from her husband Paakiaraj, never missed a chance to give “it back to him word for word.”

For Rakkamma

Even before his [husband] hand could fall on her, she screamed and shrieked, Ayyayyo, he is killing me. Vile man you’ll die, you’ll be carried out as a corpse, you low-life, you bastard, you this you that...She cries with pain but she replies him; She shouted obscenities, she scooped out the earth and flung it about. How dare you kick me, you low life? Your hand will get leprosy! How dare you pull my hair? Disgusting man, only fit to drink a woman’s farts! Instead of drinking today every day, why don’t you drink your son’s urine? Why don’t you drink my monthly blood? And she lifted up her sari in front of the entire crowd gathered there. (61)

The abuse that is transformed into text mediates the women power, breaks the gender role, and cultivates the idea of resistance in the younger generation. Bama defines 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” (118). Her novel ends with the hope to educate the girls and to treat them equally with boys as they grow. Also with the emphasis on never to be silenced by the patriarchy or the system of caste.

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