

4. Caste, Gender and Resistance: A Critical Study of Bama's Sangathi

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ABSTRACT: Dalit literature articulates the oppressions and exploitations faced by Dalits in a caste ridden society. Dalit writing as a political form of writing records the cultural and social lives of Dalits and ideologically the writing offers a call for resistance. Bama is a Tamil Christian Dalit writer who writes about the lives of Dalit Women in Tamil Nadu. This paper attempts a look at Bama's novel *Sangathi* as a site representing Dalit women and analyses how caste and gender act as tools of double oppression in their life. This critical feminist reading of the novel from a Dalit Feminist perspective focuses on how women are discriminated in the Paraiya community in their relations with different social institutions like education, marriages, electoral politics etc. Simultaneously, we see how this text through its form and theme builds up a resistance against the oppressions the women face in their everyday lives.

Keywords: Literature on Dalit, Bama's novel *Sangathi*, Dalit women, Paraiya community, resistance, caste ridden society

FULL TEXT

Dalit Literature can be considered as a sociological document that records the cultural lives of Dalit people in a particular society. In a Hindu society that is structured around Varna based caste hierarchy, Dalits who are placed at the bottom of the caste ladder is pushed to the periphery of the social, cultural, political and economic life of the Indian society. Dalit Literature has developed an aesthetics of its own that could powerfully depict the issues of marginalisation and exploitations against Dalits in the society. Unlike other literary expressions, this genre of literature draws its materials from the social realities of the communities in which the writer is embedded and hence these writings are autobiographical to certain extent. Dalit writings derive its political energy from the political philosophies of Dr. B.R.Ambedkar and Mahatma Phule. Ideologically Dalit literature can be called as a literature of resistance as these writings challenges the existing structures of oppression and raise a call for political action.

Bama is one of the prominent Tamil Dalit Christian writers whose works portray the plight of Dalit people in her community. *Sangathi* (1994) is the second work of Bama that is translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom nearly after a decade of its publication in Tamil. The title *Sangathi* means incidents or events of daily life and the episodic plot covers a set of interconnected incidents that happen in the lives of the characters in the novel. As a self-conscious Dalit writer, Bama experiments with the form and theme of this novel and brings out a political edge to the experiences recorded in the novel. Her writing style is a mixture of photographic realism and creative interpretation and the combination of these two elements is organically united to evolve a call for practical action against all sorts of discriminations that are prevalent in the society. The very form of the novel flouts the traditional notions of writing a novel and the language of the novel is very close to that of the spoken language of that community of people in the novel.

The novel presents a set of interconnected events from the lives of ordinary Paraiya women from a remote village of Tamil Nadu. The novel can be rightly described as the autobiography of the community that records the struggles encountered by women from the community. As a Feminist writer, she adopts appropriate style to depict the exploitations and marginalisation of women in the patriarchal society. The plot covers a span of three generations starting from Vellaiamma Kizhavi to that of the narrator. The ideological evolution in the changing conditions of women's life and thinking are depicted through the novel. The technique of multiple narration is employed by Bama to make the narrative a site of real and diverse experience from the lives of women belonging to

different age groups. Fathima is a main narrator and voices of many women including that of her grandmother Vellaiamma Kizhavi are built into the narrative.

In the fictional scape of this Dalit novel, it is important to take into account the differences of Dalit women from women as a general category. In *Sangathi*, the marginalizations are on different grounds of gender, caste, class and religion. This study will adopt a Dalit Feminist perspective to analyse the depiction of gender issues in this novel in the backdrop of caste articulations in the community. The caste -gender dichotomy in this novel is represented from a socio-political perspective of the writer and the analysis will focus on how this double tools oppression is discriminating and marginalising women from the social institutions of education, marriage and labour and how the women in the novel raise resistance to the structures of domination through their lives.

Dalit feminist approach to this text includes caste as an important category that determines relations of productivity and sexuality in the community. In the Indian social scenario, caste mediates control over resources and determines labour divisions in the society. Further, labour division in the society is based on sexual division. In the case of Dalit women, caste and patriarchy acts together to gain control over their identity and sexuality. Sharmila Rege (2000) ,in her review of the existing standpoint of Feminism emphasis on the necessity of accommodating differences among women groups in theorising the issues faced by women in a patriarchal society. She argues that it is necessary to redefine woman from a socio-political perspective in order to understand the power imbalances between different groups of women. Sharmila Rege writes : " DSF is about historically locating how all our identities are not equally powerful, and about reviewing how in different historical practices similarities between women have been ignored in an effort to underline caste- class identities or at other times differences ignored for the 'feminist cause'." (p 493).

The patriarchal social set up of the society, Paraiya community in this novel, conceptualises and internalises different gender roles for men and women. In this act of gender stereotyping, men are assigned superior roles and decision making power whereas women are considered as second citizens and are discriminated in different spheres of social, cultural and private life. Bama suggests that this discrimination starts from the very beginning of women's life and continues through their childhood and adulthood. Even from the simplest acts of children's game to the serious issues of marriage, education, labour, the double standards of the patriarchal society is visible. In the community, boy babies are

considered as a gift and girl babies as a liability, boy babies are breastfed longer than the girl babies and taken good care of when they fell ill.

Children's play is a seemingly simple everyday site where the existing social and gender relations are imitated by children. Girls and boys play separate games and the narrator Fathima says that girls are not allowed to play boys's game like Kabadi. Moreover, the nature of gender performance in the play throw lights upon the nature of gender inequality persists in the community. Children internalise their future gender roles by observing everyday acts of men and women who live around them in the society. It is visible that the kids are not allowed to cross the territories of gender roles even at the children's play.

“Even when we played 'mothers and fathers', we always had to serve the mud 'rice' to the boys first. They used to pull us by the hair and hit us, saying, 'what sort of food is this di, without salt or anything'. In those days, we used to accept those pretence blows, and think it was all good fun. Nowadays, for many of the girls, those have become real blows, and their entire lives are hell."(p 31)

Education is a process that can empower the downtrodden people. In a traditional caste society, Dalits are not allowed to pursue education but conversion to Christianity has offered an opportunity to access the institutions of education. Paraiya community have converted to Christianity hoping that conversion will solve the problem of untouchability and will empower them through education. Religious conversion offered education but as the children refused to go to schools, they couldn't get the benefit of education and conversion also adversely affected them as it disabled them from receiving the benefits from governments. In the case of girls, education is seen as not necessary for girl children and they are not sent to school. They are supposed to do all the house works and as seen in the case of character Maikkanni, an eleven year old girl who was made to go out and work in factory as well as to take care of daily works at home.

Dalit women go out and work in the fields along with men, but their labour is devalued and they are paid less than men for the same job. The wage inequality is a visible sign of discrimination against women in the public life.

The women, in any case, whatever work they did, were paid less than men. Even when they did the very same work, they were paid less. Even in the matter of tying up firewood bundles, the boys always got five or six rupees more. And if the girls tied up the bundles, but the boys actually sold them, they got the better price. (p 18).

Even when women work outside and earn for the family as men do, they have to carry the burden of the house works in their shoulder all alone. After doing the work, women have to come back to home and do all the works at home including cooking, cleaning, washing etc. This work done at home is not at all seen as labour and is seen as a duty that is assigned to women by the virtue of their gender. Thus women bear the double burden of the work outside and inside home. In some instances when men spent their wages for drinking and other activities, women alone have to manage the expenses of the house.

Marriage is another institution that follows the patriarchal rule of gender roles. Women are not given any freedom of choice on whom can they marry and marriages are arranged by respective families. In the life of most of the women characters, apart from doing full day's labour inside and outside home, their nights are to be spent for the pleasure of their husbands and their willingness or pleasure is not a matter of concern in the marriage life. They have to bear as many children as their husbands want to and it is the women who have to do the birth control as men will never do such an act which is conceived as an act of losing their masculinity. Even the full pregnant women has to work in the field owing to their social conditions and poverty and for delivery women are not given proper medical care and some of them die for this reason. There are many instances of domestic violence that are represented in this novel where women are abused, physically and emotionally tortured by their husbands and in most of the cases, the beatings and abuse of men are seen as 'natural'.

Inter-caste marriages are in the news for all the wrong reasons like honour killing and caste panchayath interventions and incidents in the novel shows how the persons involved in such an act meet with a gender biased justice from the community. When a boy goes and marry girl from another caste it's not met with much hostility but when a girl goes and choose to marry a boy outside her caste, she is suppressed and ill-treated by the people around her. The novel depicts an incident where an educated and employed Paraiya girl loves a Pallava boy. She was abused and controlled by her family and society, and when she finally marries the boy, she was forced to leave her village and job. The girl's act is met with

hostility and she was not supported by anyone else, she approaches church for getting help but even church is not ready to stretch a helping hand to the girl. This incident shows how biased is the society towards women and how the women is restricted from exercising her agency in choosing a life partner. No one questions the violence inflicted upon the Paraiya girl by her own family and neither her education nor her employment empower her to break the shackles of caste and gender oppressions.

The caste and gender oppressions come together as a stigma that traumatises the Dalit women even when she is educated and employed. In the last chapter of the novel, the narrator who has grown up an educated woman finds it hard to find a job and rent house as she is unmarried and Dalit. Marriage is seen as the inevitable development in the life of a girl and the male dominated society find it hard to accommodate a woman who chooses not to marry and do the jobs she likes to do. In the case of men, it's not seen as a taboo to remain single but for a woman it is seen as a problematic. The caste status also becomes a burden that is imposed on the woman which traumatises her very existence.

She writes:

I often get angry enough to shout it out aloud: I am a paraichi. And I don't like to hide any identity and pretend I belong to different caste. The question beats away in my mind: Why should I tell a lie and live a false life? Women of other castes don't face this problem. They can move where they choose, take a house, set up a livelihood. But we are denied the basic right to pay our money and rent a house. Are we so despicable to these others? (p 120-121)

Women's participation in the election and caste panchayath is another site that shows how gender plays a role in political activities. In the caste panchayath, their opinion was not asked for and even their presence was not a desired one by men in the scene. Mariamma's case is an instance where a woman is made victim of an upper caste man's lie and panchayath's caste and gender biased judgement. Land lord Kumaraswami Ayya tried to molest Mariamma and she escaped from the attempt. The landlord filed a fake complaint in the Paraiya panchayath against Mariamma stating that he has seen her and Manikkam in a shameful situation. Mariamma's testimonies are not accepted by the panchayath and the upper caste man's lie wins over her truth and she was punished by the panchayath. The victim is again victimised by the patriarchy as she is a lower caste woman, she has to pay a double fine where as the man accused as involved in the case has to pay only half of it. In another scene, women are talking about elections and their participation in the voting

process, and it is implied that women are neither bothered nor conscious about their political role as citizens.

However much we strain to leap forward, caste holds us down like a tap root. It is at the centre of religion, politics, education, and every other wretched thing. In our streets, most importantly, women never have anything to do with this stinking party-politics. They don't care who comes and who goes. They know they have to look after their stomachs themselves. (p 102-103)

The novel presents everyday struggles and structural oppressions faced by women but at the same time, there are scenes and events that shows how do they face and offers resistance to these difficulties by ridiculing and laughing at them. In a sense, it can be said that these women characters are unwilling to be crushed by the difficult and discriminating circumstances around them. The range of resistance varies from common everyday activities and celebrations to fierce responses. Bama's subversion of the dominant ways of writing a novel and the use of language that is very close to the spoken language of Paraiya community itself can be seen as an act of resistance. The incorporation of proverbs, stories and folk songs to the narrative presents the life of the people lively and active and thus the community identity is projected over the individual identity.

The conditions of poverty and oppression are compensated by celebrating very simple daily activities like cooking, feeding and sharing. Further there are descriptions of community ceremonies like marriage and attaining puberty. The writer consciously gives a positive sketch of Dalit women as a community. At another level, there are women like Rakkamma who lifts her saree in public and use vulgar language in order to stop her husband Pakkiaraj from inflicting violence on her. The strength and vigour of Dalit women are expressed through a range of characters in the fiction. An inter-caste comparison is brought into the narrative and the narrator states that Dalit women are better as they could go out, work and earn and live in financial independent whereas the upper caste women are living inside the domestic space depending financially on their husbands. Another aspect of comparison was that Dalit woman are not restricted by widowhood as the upper caste women do and Dalit women could remarry and continue with their work. This angle of comparison brings out one of the positive side of being a Dalit woman.

This Dalit fiction can be considered as a social document that presents multiple levels of oppressions and marginalisation faced by Dalit women in their everyday life. The evolution of the Dalit women and her empowerment through education serves to make her

condition relatively better than that of the older generation people. From the grandmother to the narrator, this self-consciousness of the marginalization and the call for resistance is getting louder. When the grandmother takes instances of oppression for granted, the narrator reflects on each incidents and questions the structures of multiple oppression. Thus *Sangathi* not only fictionally represents gender and caste oppression in the paraiya community but also evolves an ideology of resistance and a call for action.

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