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## RE – PRESENTATION OF DALIT FEMINISM IN BAMA'S *SANGATI*

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### **Sangati**

Bama, a Dalit Writer was born at Puthupatti, Tamilnadu. Fighting impossible odds she went through both school and college and trained as a teacher who imparts values aimed at building self-esteem and social consciousness. Besides Karukku, she has published *Sangati* and 'Kusumbukkaaran', both novels.

Marked by startling language, ethnographic detail and native idiom, Dalit writing in Tamil has gone hand in hand with political activism, and with critical and ideological debate. *Sangati* flouts received notions of what a novel should be. It has no plot in the normal sense, nor any main characters. In terms of structure, it seeks to create a Dalit-feminist perspective and explores the impact of discrimination-compounded above all, by poverty-suffered by Dalit women. It is remarkable that, writing in the first half of the last decade, Bama was already formulating a 'Dalit Feminism' which redefined 'woman' from the socio-political perspective of a Dalit, and examining caste and gender oppressions together.

Thus many voices narrate personal experiences, that are first counterpointed by the generalizing comments of the grandmother and mother figures, and then by the reflections of the author-narrator. There is one set of stories in the book, of women who have worked hard all their lives, from the moment they are able to help with the care of younger siblings, or with chores about the house, or outside. There are other stories as well: telling of rites of passage, a coming of age ceremony, a betrothal, a group wedding, and of possession and exorcism.

*Sangati* is a book about a community's identity, not about the single self. Yet it ends by pointing out how Paraiya women are always the most vulnerable, even when educated, economically independent and choosing to live alone.

Written in a colloquial style which overturns the decorum and aesthetics of upper-caste, upper-class Tamil, the novel seeks to tease out a positive cultural identity as Dalit and woman, which can resist upper-caste norms.

This novel will appeal to readers interested in Indian writings in translation and students of political and social history. The economic precariousness of Dalit women leads to a culture of violence, and this is a theme that runs through the book: the terrible violence and abuse of women by their fathers and husbands, and sometimes even brothers women fight back. Raj Gauthaman says: "Dalit Literature describes the world differently, from a Dalit perspective. Therefore it should outrage and even repel the guardians of caste and class. It should provoke them into asking if this is indeed literature"(pg. 98)

But set against these tales of hardship are other stories, of everyday happenings: of women working together, preparing and eating food, celebrating and singing, bathing and swimming. A positive image is created as well, of certain freedoms enjoyed by Dalit women no dowry is required of them, for example, and widows re-marry as a matter of course. There is also a very strong sense of a Dalit woman's relationship to her body in terms of diet, health, and safety.

*Sangati* is primarily about a community's identity not about the single self. The Dalit woman, once she steps outside her small-town community, enters a caste-ridden and hierarchical society, which constantly asks questions about caste identity. She must then ask herself questions about who she is, and where she belongs.

#### **The Subaltern 'Can' Speak: Bama's *Sangati* as a Narrative of Resistance**

*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, their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter them . . . about their passion to live life with vitality, truth, and enjoyment; about their hard labour. I wanted to shout out these stories. — Bama*

At a time when Subaltern Literature is gaining momentum in terms of its knowledge production and dissemination, regional writers translated into English have obtained wider readership. Bama, one of the pioneers of dalit feminist literature has also become a significant regional voice among the subcontinent women. Her text *Sangati* (translated from Tamil by Laxmi Holmstrom), serves to draw an aesthetics of not only dalit fiction but also a dalit feminist polemics that is inclusive of a clarion call for action and transformation. Belonging to the oppressed group herself, Bama has personally experienced the marginalizing condition which is at once two fold — one, she falls within the marginalized caste and two, she is a woman, a condition of 'being', that is similar to a black woman. In spite of being doubly pushed to the periphery, Bama in speaking her 'self' has not only invented her own narrative discourse but at the same time has sought to represent the so far non-represented in the postcolonial literary discourse. In writing the subjective self she is no more the subaltern that listens to or is spoken of but the one who shouts out her "I", thereby relocating to the center and making heard the silenced other.

Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, for example, "points to the instability of the notion of women's identity, and to the power imbalance which exist between different groups of woman, under the blanket notion of gender"

The text as such deals with the variegated experiences and stories of the dalit women strung together, thus breaking the normative literary narrative of a single plot or story. It falls closer to the narrative pattern of ethnographic/anthropological studies wherein testimonials of the concerned peoples form the manner and method of constructing experiences and personal narratives which actually serve to

build their history as a community or ethnic group. As Lakshmi Holmstrom points out in her introduction to the text:

*Sangati* flouts received notions of what a novel should be . . . It has no plot in the normal sense, only the powerful stories of a series of memorable protagonists. ‘Sangati’ means news, events, happenings, and the book is one of interconnected anecdotes. These individual stories, anecdotes, memories of personal experience are narrated in the first person . . . (xvi).

At the very outset of *Sangati* we learn that the oppressed class too has its own gender discrimination wherein dalit men who are on the margins of the structured society in turn marginalize their women on the basis of fixed gender roles. Bama’s Paatti surmises the situation of women in a subaltern community when she explains to a query from her granddaughter as to their plight.

**Dalit Feminist Critic Sharmila Rege says:**

“The Dalit Feminist standpoint 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 difference ignored for the feminist cause”

The irony of these women’s condition is highlighted when she compares the life of the pigs grown by the white nuns. The pigs are not only as white as the nuns but as healthy and well fed too. While these women had to slog like dogs for their milk and wheat the pigs seemed to be luckier than they. Women like Mariamma not only had to face the wrath of their fathers at home but also the danger of being molested by men outside the family, mostly upper caste men. The paraiyar men did not have the power to question the landowners for fear of losing their favors and finally accepted as truth the mudalali’s words in condemning the innocent girl. This incident literally breaks the child with the author raising questions to her Paatti that whatever men say is bound to be right while whatever women say is deemed to be always wrong.

In talking about the particular, Bama cleverly ropes in the prevailing subordinate condition of women through the ages thereby touching upon the history of gender issue that is universal. Bama registers the fact that church, home, marriage, workplace, all of these proved claustrophobic to the women folk and to add to this the poor health facilities that available to these women of lower caste proved hazardous to their life. The stories of Mariamma and Thaayi, whose marriages have ended up in their being beaten up everyday and being humiliated at the hands of their husbands who consider it their right to beat or kill their wives, stirs up emotions of anger, fury, resentment and hatred in Bama.

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, must we strengthen our hearts and minds in order to survive. (*Sangati* 59)

Playing the spokesperson for the women of her community, Bama states that it is on her to speak out the truth that though all women are slaves to men, her women are the worst sufferers: “it is not the same for women of other castes and communities. Our women cannot bear the torment of upper-caste masters in the fields, and at home they cannot bear the violence of their husbands” (65).

The writer also comments on how the upper-caste women treat them with contempt. This is where Bama draws a comparison between the lifestyle of those women and that of the paraiyar. She takes pride in saying that here women at least work hard and earn their own money and do not depend on their

husbands for economic freedom. In spite of being subjugated in body and mind to men, these women resist their men through means of shouting names of their body parts, and obscenities. Shouting and shrieking is tools of survival for these women, observes the author. She only hopes that they would realize that they too have their own “self-worth, honour, and self-respect” (68).

The narrative methodology is woven in such a manner that the particular is interwoven in to the general status of women across the society. She also deftly brings out the ignorance and innocence of her women when it comes to voting and electing the government. Every aspect of society is discussed, analyzed, issues including cinema, inter-caste marriage, of how it's not for a woman to marry outside of her caste while enjoyed the power of doing so. Even when a girl writes or speaks in public places at once the men condemn her saying that she is after all a girl. They don't credit her with any kind of achievement, “a girl who has a little education and has progressed somewhat, is not allowed to seek a like-minded man, and certainly not marry anyone of her choice” (109).

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. When they humiliate us we do get furious and frustrated . . . because we haven't been to school or learnt anything, we go about like slaves all our lives, from the day we are born till the day we die. As if we are blind, even though we have eyes. (118)

Bama has been the difference she has wanted to be with her education and vocation. She brings in the autobiographical element full circle at the end of the book when she says that being a woman and a dalit woman at that, unmarried has posed great difficulty for her in everyday life. She asks the basic question as to why a woman can't belong to no one but herself. She not only speaks for herself but for her community at large when she says: “I have to struggle so hard because I am a woman. And exactly like that, my people are constantly punished for the simple fact of having been born dalits. Is it our fault that we are dalits?” (121). She also speaks for women on the whole when she says that women too as individuals have their own desires, and wishes, that if women do not speak for themselves, come forward to change their condition then who else is going to do it for them. A change in attitude is the need of the hour, and with this she is optimistic of inequalities coming to an end. Therefore in speaking the unrepresented in literary discourses so far, Bama has linked together the caste as well the gender oppression, in the process redefining woman from the socio/cultural perspective. She has made herself heard in her attempt to move from the position of the subaltern to the center.

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