



From sufferings to self of dalit women: A study of bama's Sangati

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Abstract

Dalit Literature describes about the miserable conditions of the downtrodden people in Indian society. It focuses on the lives of the people who are deprived at all levels of the society whether it is about school, college, temple, church and field of jobs. These people are discriminated on the basis of caste, gender and class. The book Sangati by Bama presents a sad and gloom picture of the dalit people especially of the dalit women who face ignorance and sufferings for being a dalit and being a woman. Bama's works depict the marginalisation and exploitation of dalit women by the upper caste people in fields as well as by their husbands at home. So, they feel segregated and as other.

Keywords: women, caste, dalit, marginal, patriarchy etc

Introduction

Sangati is a significant novel which presents a live picture of the plights of dalit women due to severe caste and patriarchal system. The female protagonist of the novel experience sufferings and discrimination due to her caste and class and above all for being a woman. This makes the dalit women feel subjugated and subalterns. Wherever they go they are burdened by many difficult situations caused by traditional caste system. They are bound with cruel patriarchal rules at home and caste discrimination outside the home. Bama describes the sad reality of these women in this novel.

Madara Chennaiah, an 11th century cobbler saint who lived during the reign of western Chalukyas in Karnataka, was one of the first Dalit writers who wrote in Kannada language about the pitiable condition of lower caste. This miserable and pitiable conditions of lower castes may be attributed to the Hindu concept of 'Chaturvarna' in Manusmriti in which there are four Varnas Brahmins, Kashatriyas, Vaisyas and Shudras. In this hierarchy of caste system, Shudras were treated like the animals and were given the jobs that are still despised and abhorred. These oppressed people after tolerating humiliation, injustices and inequalities, encouraged by the philosophy of Ambedkar, got courage to revolt against this system.

Dalit issues are highlighted in a variety of genres like autobiography, novels, poetry and plays. It is thoroughly based on Ambedkarite thoughts and philosophy. Prof. Yashwant Manohar defined Dalit literature in Dalit.

Literature: Nature and Role

Dalit literature is the literature of victims of class and Varna. This is the literary conflagration of Dr. Ambedkar's speech. There are the creative expressions of these neglected hearts and brain whose stomachs and minds have been kept hungry by culture. In the womb of this literature an embryo of human centered civilization is growing with stormy determination. (36)

Many Dalit writers expressed their real feelings and anguish what they suffered in their lives. This writing is based on

Dalit consciousness which separates them from the others writers who wrote about the Dalits. Wrote their confessional works from the Dalit consciousness to awake people for getting their rights. They are Kanwal Bharti, Mohandas Nemishray, Omprakash Valmiki, Surajpal Chauhan, Arun Kamle, Shantabai Kamble, Raja Dhale, Namdeo Dhasal, Daya Panwar, Sharn Kumar Limbale, Raj Gautaman, Ravi Kumar, and 'Bama' whose works proved a milestone to bring awareness about their rights among Dalits.

Bama became famous as a writer with the publication of Karukku (1992) an autobiographical work in Tamil language which was translated into English language in 2000. It gained the Crossword Award in 2001. It is the first dalit woman autobiography which describes the oppression of Dalits on the basis of class, gender and caste. Bama herself is also tormented mentally often and again by the upper caste priests and nuns in church and in convent respectively. She is well educated but could not get any dignity in the society.

Sangati presents a series of events occurred in the lives of Dalit and a joint struggle of Paraiyar community in search of their existence, and is a critique of patriarchy as well as of casteism within church. This book dwells on the impoverished and miserable condition of Dalit women suffered from double discrimination; they are molested by the so-called high caste people and also by Dalit males. They do the same job as their male counterparts but are paid much less than their male labourers. The inequality against women is a main issue in Sangati. The plight and miseries of Dalit women and discrimination between Dalit male and female can be seen in this work, and accepts Bama that dalit males cannot revolt against their landlords, they show their anger and strength at home on their wives.

Sangati is the autobiography of a Dalit community. The word 'Sangati' is literally translated into English as events. Sangati describes about the community and as the name means it is a recollection of events from the lives of the marginalized Dalits. Bama through the arduous task of narrating her experiences and of her community brings the Dalit women to the centre of the discourse. As Smriti Singh in an article justifies:

In Sangati Bama uses the form of the autobiography not only to portray her life but also to portray the lives of other Dalit women by giving them an identity through the narration of their story. (IJEL 114)

In Sangati Bama presents the impoverished and violent world of her community's women. Her female characters suffer from double discrimination; they are oppressed by the so-called upper caste people and by their own Dalit males. They constitute the majority of labourers, doing hard work and engage in agricultural operations. Women do productive works, earn wages and participate in the economic chain. But they are paid much less than the male workers. This unequal division of wages becomes a major issue in Sangati. The Dalit community is also under the reigning patriarchal system whereby Dalit men who themselves are oppressed by the upper caste land owners, in turn they oppress their Dalit women.

The condition of the Dalit women is more horrible in the Indian society as they are discriminated on the basis of class, caste and gender. Dalit women have been presented as the silent suffering community in the works of both in Dalit male writer and upper caste writers. They are not treated with respect. They are denied voice and are at the margins of such literature. Being illiterate they are the most exploited community in the society. Dalit women have been sexually exploited. They are deprived of education, and there is also gender bias. It is only in the writings of male writers that they show some sympathy towards Dalit women. But in real life the picture is different. Even within their own Dalit community, Dalit women have been alienated by the dominant male and are considered as mere objects for sexual pleasure and for reproduction. They are considered ugly, sluggish and unintelligent.

Dalit women among whom Bama has lived are subject to sexual exploitation by both upper caste men and their own husbands. However, Dalit women are clever to cope with their situation. In this they show a marked difference between upper caste women, whose torment is silenced within the four walls of their homes, and Dalit women.

Thinking about it, Bama says that Dalit women really are the worst sufferers and writes herself:

It is not the same for woman 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. (Sangati 65)

Bama describes how the men in their streets went about drinking and beating their wives. She wonders that all the violence was because there was no one else for Dalit men to exert their male pride or to show off their power. All their suppressed anger was vented when they came home and beat up their wives. Bama feels very tormented and says they are like dogs with their tails rolled up when they work in the fields, and deal with their landlords. They can't show their strength against their landlords. So they give vent their anger at home on their wives and children. But it is the fact of Dalit women to be tormented both outside their houses and within. They were not allowed to sleep, they had to finish their work whether they died or survived and they lay down with bodies wracked with pain.

Although both men and women come home after a hard day's work in the fields, the men go off straight away to the bazaar to spend their time and come home only for the meal but the women have to do much chores at home. Besides all

this, Bama tells, upper-caste women don't show any pity or kindness to Dalit women and treat with contempt as if they are creatures of a different species, who have no sense of self-respect. As Dr.

C.S. Robinson justifies in an article what Bama wrote in Sangati:

In the second novel, Sangati Bama becomes the voice of the Dalit women. She candidly narrates the harassment meted out to the Dalit women by the upper caste men. Even as Bama articulates the harsh reality of the Dalits she assumes a Dalit feminist position by espousing a positive sense for the Dalit women. (Research Nebula 10)

Bama exhorts women to take pride of their caste and come forward to social empowerment. She makes them remind to their extreme strength for hard work, their spirit of protest, their culture's absence of dowry and their rich cultural heritage. She tells about her grandmother's courage who pawned her tali to bring her children up, Katturaasa's mother who bore her son by herself while cutting grass and about Mariamma who returned to work even after an accident. But their voices are nipped in the very bud. When the narrator admonishes her grandmother for not protesting, her grandmother says that what the men say is right. Don't think that everything is going to change just because she have learnt a few letters of the alphabet. So, it can be said that even elders are become victims of preconceived notions that men are dominant than women and they must obey the men.

Indeed, the revolutionary intention behind writing Sangati grew out of the hope that the Dalit women who read it will rise up forwards to revolt and to begin their struggle as pioneers of a new society in which everybody will be equal. Everyone will get justice in this society. And the ideals Bama wants in Dalit women are told by Lakshmi Holmstrom in her introduction to Sangati:

And the ideals Bama admires and applauds in Dalit women are not the traditional Tamil 'feminine' ideals of accham (fear), naanam (shyness), madam (simplicity, innocence), payirppu (modesty), but rather, courage, fearlessness, independence, and self-esteem. (XIX)

Bama in Sangati shows the ability of her community women to think and analyse situations for themselves. They are independent subjects in the process of recognising their value in society. A close and critical reading of Sangati shows how Bama has tried to give Dalit women their voice. The novel Sangati is more than a study of Dalit's oppression. It is a womanist study and is written from a feminist perspective. It is true that both Dalit men and women are tormented but Dalit women's position is worse than Dalit men. While Dalit women face discrimination due to their caste identity, their oppression both at home and at fields on accounts of their gender adds another dimension to questions of identity. The double oppression of caste and gender place Dalit women in a more worse position than Dalit males.

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