



Assertion of the 'Self' and 'Community' in Bama's Karukku and Sangati

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Abstract

Dalit literature has evolved to help Dalits create new identities and modes of consciousness. Dalit consciousness, ingrained with Dalit aesthetics, expresses writers' emotions about being Dalit, focusing on beauty, justice, truth, and honesty. Dalit women have felt the need for a unique platform to forge their identities, fight for their rights, and find solutions to their unique issues. Bama, a well-known Tamil Dalit writer, is one of the earliest Dalit women authors to be read and published. She focuses on raising self-respect in her local neighborhood while emerging as a significant voice of opposition. Bama's autobiographies, *Karukku* (1992) and *Sangati* (2000), explore the assertion of the 'self' and 'community' in Dalit literature. *Sangati* shifts focus from a single person's battle to the perception of a community of Paraiya women, their local network of friends and relatives, and their own struggle.

Keywords: Dalit, dalit literature, dalit voice, self, dalit consciousness

Introduction

India is known for its cultural heritage and population diversity, which have contributed to the country's vibrant character over the years. The caste system in India has a history that traces its development over time, and those who are at the lowest of this system are called low castes and untouchables. Following the British era, the 'untouchables' have picked the term 'Dalit' for themselves. The history of struggle for self-liberation, made Dalits to organize into Dalit movements which became pathways for Dalits to raise their voice of protest for equality which was heard through their personal narratives; thus, Dalit literature appeared around 1960s. A recent trend in Indian literature is the creation of works by writers who identify as Dalits. This genre, which is frequently referred as 'Dalit literature', has emerged with new indulging conceptions and set ideals of principles in the social engineering structures of human streams of consciousness. Since Dalits naturally possess this literature as a result of their position in the caste-based Hindu society and their efforts for self-worth, justice and perfection, this phenomenon provides an overarching employment. Dangle in *A Corpse in the Well: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Autobiography* (1994) quotes:

Dalit literature is not simple literature... Dalit literature is associated with a movement to bring about the change... At the very first glance, it will be strongly evident that there is no established critical theory or point of view behind them (i.e. Dalit writings); instead, there is new thinking and a new point of view. (Dangle 1994, p. 08)^[4]

The finest way to convey the realistic experience of Dalits is through Dalit writings. Dalit literature has struggled to accurately depict reality because of the unique Dalit experience. By illustrating the social realities of oppressive power and structures and poor working conditions, this literature employs both positive and negative forces. As a result, mimetic literature has been developed. In order to help Dalits create new identities and modes of consciousness, Dalit literature has evolved. The 'Dalit consciousness', which is ingrained with Dalit aesthetics, is a

free expression of the writers' real emotions about being Dalit. With the categories of beauty, justice, truth and honesty, Dalit writings demonstrate dynamism with the flavor of their Dalit experience, a form of untouchability that refers not just to the past's growing brutalities but also to the present's sneaky violence. The authors did make a sincere effort to highlight the fundamental problems with its philosophy. Dalit literature is concerned with the socially excluded and emphasizes the socio-political makeup of those who are oppressed and impoverished. In "Signifying the Self: Women and Literature" (2004), Dr. Pathak Paramar writes that "Dalit literature is replete with the silenced voices of the Dalits, their experiences of injustice and atrocities, their enraged expressions against Brahminical traditions, etc. (Paramar x)."

In its early years, Dalit writings mostly focused on expressing dissent, self-respect, anxiety, torment, identity and dignity while also criticizing politics, religion, patriarchy, Dalit patriarchy and the desire for space for Dalits in social, cultural and political arenas. The most progressive and revolutionary-minded authors who have attempted to convey the feelings of Dalits have encountered resistance because they consistently portray Dalit women as the objects of higher caste men's lust rather than as rebels seeking to end the injustices meted out to them. The patriarchal social structure has considered women as the "other" throughout history. Women have distinguished themselves as writers in a totally different way from men, and this is also true of the literature of Dalit women. In Dalit society, women are doubly oppressed under power of caste and patriarchy. Women are considered as the symbol of sex and object of pleasure both for Dalit men and upper caste men. Hence, Dalit women writings reveal a tale of endless miseries, inhuman victimization and gender discrimination at all levels of society.

Since the late 1980s, Dalit women have felt and expressed the need for a unique platform that they could create, develop and control, one that would allow them to forge their own identities, fight for their rights and find solutions to their unique issues as Dalits and women. The Tamil literary canon was opened up to the Dalit voice after the

1980s and 1990s, but the Dalit voices continued to go unnoticed and the Dalit consciousness was absorbed into the larger mainstream ideology of discourse. A few Dalit women have chosen to write their autobiographies in Indian languages than in English because English is still the language of the higher caste and class. There are also a few 'narrated autobiographies' written by Dalit women who lack literacy and are unable to write their own autobiographies; so they narrate about their lives to be recorded by other writers.

In India's expanding Dalit literary heritage, Bama is a well-known author. Her dual battle is focused on raising self-respect in her local neighborhood while emerging as a significant voice of opposition. Tamil Dalit writer Bama, also known as Bama Faustina Soosairaj was born in 1958 in the village of Puthupatti in the southern Tamil Nadu district of Virudunagar. Faustina Mary Fathima Rani is her real name, while Bama is her pen name. One of the earliest Dalit women authors to be read and published is Bama. In Bama's life, self-reflection and healing from institutional and social betrayal are ongoing processes. Some of her writings are *Karukku* (1992), *Sangati* (2000), *Vanmam* (2002) and the collection of short stories *Kisumbukkaran* (1996), *Oru Thathvum Erumayam* (2004) and *Kondattam* (2006).

In light of the above discussion, the author here attempts to explore the assertion of the 'self' and 'community' in Bama's *Karukku* (1992) and *Sangati* (2000). The autobiography *Karukku* discusses the self and the community, while *Sangati*, on the other hand, shifts focus from the account of a single person's battle to the perception of a community of Paraiya women, their local network of friends and relatives and their own struggle. It also incorporates autobiographical elements to produce radically original literary forms.

Deciphering the dalit lives in bama's works

Bama made a significant contribution to Dalit literature. She writes from the perspectives of socially outcast groups. Bama talks on various brutal oppressions perpetrated against the Paraiyar caste and Dalits in general. Bama's *Karukku* includes a major section on the church's subjugation of the Dalit. It is shown that Dalit Christians are prohibited from participating in church choirs, are required to sit apart from upper caste Christians and are not permitted to bury their dead in local cemeteries. It is evident that Paraiyars who joined Christianity in an effort to escape caste discrimination at the hands of orthodox Hindus are deeply disappointed because they are unable to do so within the church. Bama describes how she became personally disillusioned with the church and left a nunnery after seven years of residence in protest to the church's treatment of Dalit Christians in ways that were unjust, unchristian and discriminatory.

Her second work, *Sangati* was originally published in Tamil in 1994 and Lakshmi Holmstrom translated it into English in 2005. The name "Sangati" means news, events or happenings, therefore it naturally drawn us into the lives of Dalit men and women through the incidents and conflicts they experience. This book is out of the ordinary because it lacks a storyline and a protagonist in favor of incorporating Dalit community events that the author has personally witnessed in real life. The book's premise is made plain in the Introduction by Lakshmi Holmstrom-

"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." (Holmstrom xv)

The concern posed by Tamil Dalit author Bama aid to restructure literary criticism and questioned conventional writing assumptions, thereby redefining the subjects and the manner of storytelling. Although she explicitly discusses inequality in her writings, they also have an aesthetic vision. The main goals of Dalit literature are to explain a shifting Dalit identity and to increase awareness of the Dalit experience.

In *Karukku*, a Dalit lady with low self-esteem writes specifically about Dalit women's experiences, and makes an argument against patriarchy and caste injustice. Bama expresses the beliefs, goals and concerns of her society's history and present. She explains the protagonist's fight against patriarchy in *Karukku* as well as the existential plight of Dalit women. In *Karukku*, Bama discovers her own identity despite her personal struggles. It is a meditation on several subjects, such as religion, education and recreation, among others. She paints a vivid picture of the caste discrimination experienced by Dalit Christians, which extends beyond upper caste society and into the Catholic Church. Bama says that, "...after seven years of living in the convent, on 8 November, 1992, I left behind my renunciation and came out into the world... After that, I wrote my book *Karukku*" (*Karukku* xi).

The oppressive and exploitative patriarchal systems, as well as caste and gender inequality are all depicted in Bama's *Karukku*. She narrates the horrible experiences that Dalit men and women had as a result of caste oppression in this fictional autobiography. Because of their caste, Dalits endured centuries of brutality. Bama exposed the deception of the higher classes, the church, and the educational system in her autobiography *Karukku*. She gave examples of how upper caste members exploited Dalits in her own community, at church, in schools, and at her place of employment. Being a Dalit made her a target of discrimination everywhere she went. She notes that although Dalits may become monetarily independent, they would always be considered Dalits. Regardless of their income and educational status, upper castes do not view them as equals in social terms. Laxmi Holmstrom in the Introduction to *Karukku* remarks:

"*Karukku* is concerned with the single issue of caste oppression within the Catholic Church and its instructions and presents Bama's life as a process of lonely self-discovery. The tension throughout *Karukku* is between the self and the community: the narrator leaves one community (the religious order) and affirms her belonging to another (a Dalit community, particularly of women)." (*Karukku* xviii)

Bama painted a vivid image of how the church exploited and degraded Dalit Christian women. They were not allowed to sing at the church service. Bama commends Dalit women for their inventiveness and capacity for resistance despite constant humiliation and exploitation. Dalit women's lives are sad since they are not given the chance to

go to school. Bama also talks on the abuse of Dalit women and sexual harassment.

An adult Dalit man carrying pakoras for his Naiker employer was the person Bama mentioned. The packet containing these pakoras was rolled in newspaper and covered with a banana leaf. Even this newspaper wasn't allowed to be touched by the Dalit employee. The worker held the package from the end of the lengthy rope in which it was tied. With extreme humility, the Dalit employee delivers it to the Naiker boss. As a young girl, Bama finds it to be quite humorous, but her older brother informs her that this is how Dalits are expected to be treated by Upper Caste because it was once thought that the touch of that Dalit worker would contaminate the package and spread sickness. At this the writer retorts: "How could they believe that it was disgusting if a Paraya held the package in his hands, even though the vadai had been wrapped first in a banana leaf, and parceled in paper?" (Karukku 15)

Bama identifies herself with her community. Through her autobiography, she could raise Dalit consciousness with her self-respect and assertion. She does this by drawing a comparison between her situation and a bird whose wings have been clipped. Although she is free to fly, she feels that she is unable to do so because her existence at the convent has left her in many ways disabled. Bama concentrates on the many caste forms in the hamlet and describes how people strictly adhered to caste laws when engaging in daily socio-cultural and economic activities. According to Bama's memory, the parayas had a separate community away from the main village because they were regarded as being untouchables. Except on specific occasions when such connections were unavoidable for both parties, social interactions between the so-called upper caste and lower caste communities were rigorously forbidden.

Bama primarily addressed casteism within the Roman Catholic Church in Karukku. Her attention was drawn to the gap between the church's declared beliefs and actual societal behavior. Her criticism of the church is more general in Sangati. She brings up the subject of conversion, which took place when her grandma was alive. It addresses the various female generations. In reclaiming the language, particularly for the women in her society, she also accomplished a linguistic leap. If in Karukku Bama speaks for "herself," Sangati speaks for the entire Dalit community, particularly a woman-centered one. It is an autobiography of the community that shifts from the perspective of the paraiyars women, a local group of neighbors, friends, and relatives, and their shared struggle. The author decides to focus on the struggles of a single woman in each story. It includes various interrelated anecdotes, experiences, news stories, and occurrences of the people around, as well as the author's experience working in a diverse and oppressive society. Bama in her own words writes:

"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 (Sangati 9)."

Numerous women's voices may be heard in Sangati, some of whom are speaking out of bravery while others are speaking in anguish, hatred, or frustration. Being sanctioned and justified by religion and patriarchal culture, the triple

oppression of caste, class, and gender renders Dalit women an impoverished group. They are kept docile, dependent, and inferior to men and are prevented from rebelling by the merging of religious and societal myths that mirror and legitimize the caste system that is dominated by men. According to Bama, Dalit women use subversive tactics to combat their oppression. In Sangati, women are portrayed as wage earners who support their families financially. Additionally, she is frequently the target of sexual assault and harassment at work. Sangati focuses mostly on Dalit women on a variety of topics, including sexual and gender inequality.

Sangati, which tells the story of three generations of women—the narrator's grandmother, the narrator herself, and the generation following her—examines how viewpoints change with time. Beginning with Bama's birth, the book follows her life experiences and focuses more on her neighborhood. The story of Sangati is told in the first person, and the narrator, a little girl of about twelve years old, questions the unfair treatment she received from her own maternal grandmother (Patti), Vellaiamma Kizgavi, when she was a child. The narrative spans multiple generations of women and highlights different facets of her community's culture. She was motivated to convey the novel more effectively by exposing the Dalit characters and their plights as a result of her childhood observations, experiences, and inquiries regarding the issues facing Dalit women. Speaking on the subject of Sangati, Bama, in an interview with Jaydeep Sarangi says:

"A Dalit woman is the main theme of Sangati; it reveals their protest and strategic ways and means of resistance in times of oppression and rejection. It celebrates their resilient nature and builds up hope. It talks about the strength that enables them to swim against the current and live with zeal and zest." (Jaydeep Sarangi, www.muse India.com)

The protagonist of Sangati is Bama's grandma, Vellaiamma Paati. She is first mentioned in this book as a social worker who attends deliveries in particular without seeking any compensation. Ironically, though, because of caste prejudice, the women from the upper caste did not invite this knowledgeable woman. After her husband Goyindan vanished, she raised her two daughters alone and worked erratically till she passed away. She spoke openly about her interactions with Bama. She spoke about and gave an explanation of the prevalent customs and rituals in her society. Bama was able to learn more about the historical events from the time of her grandma to the present thanks to this. As Bama matures into a young woman, she places an emphasis on the need for change and is mobilizing her community to take action against the horrors committed against girls and women. Sangati addresses the gender bias that Dalit women experience beginning in their early years. Always viewed as inferior and given less care are newborn girls. Dalit females are hardly ever seen having fun in their youth. They don't spend much time playing because they have to watch over their younger siblings.

Bama goes on to claim that despite the fact that they have aged and this situation has not changed, boys are still afforded greater respect. After eating as much as they wanted, they would leave to play. The girls, on the other hand, are required to work continuously at home. Bama

remembers eating the remaining mango skin her grandmother brought:

“If she brought anything home when she returned from work, it was always the grandsons she called first. If she brought cucumbers, she scooped out all the seeds with her fingernails, since she had no teeth, and gave them the remaining fruit. If she brought mangoes, we only got the skin, the stones and such; she gave the best pieces of fruit to the boys. Because we had no other way out, we picked up and ate the leftover skins (8).”

Samudrikani, the daughter of Vellaiyamma, had a troubled past. Patti describes the tragic tale of her older daughter, who was married off at a very young age to a brute who tormented her day and night. He is an animal both inside and outside the home; he split her in half and beat her to death. From birth to adulthood, Bama describes the many stages of Dalit women in the Paraya society. All women are the property of men. Women are the biggest victims since they are continuously exposed to sexual harassment and abuse at home and at work. The home and social front women, who experience contempt, boredom, and tiredness, silently carry the burden.

Mariamamma, Annamma, and Seyakkodi were the three daughters that Samudrakani had. Mariamma is portrayed as a naïve, and uncomplicated peasant girl who lives for her sisters. She learns all the stereotyped methods of life from an early age. Mariamma is a prime example of a Dalit woman who has had to endure adversities throughout her entire life. As a motherless child, Mariamma looks after her two sisters and works tirelessly to provide for them. A landlord from an upper caste named Kumara Swami Ayya attacked her. He filed a complaint against Mariamma and Manikkam to defend himself from his unlawful act, Kumara Swami Ayya. In a highly dishonest manner, this matter was presented to the village panchayat with the statement, “I saw them with my own eyes. And it’s a good thing it was I who saw them. I’ve come straight away to tell you (20).” The male-dominated panchayat lends that upper caste man more weight than it should have when it could have rendered a fair decision. Only Mariamma was the target of the inquiries and harsher punishment from this panchayat's leaders. She was compelled to wed Manikkam, a depraved young man. Bama illustrates how a Dalit woman suffers severely when she has a negligent father and an irresponsible husband through the events of Mariamma.

Sangati pokes criticism at the way Dalit women are treated by patriarchy. They are frequently exposed to a lot of sexual harassment at work. Men have the majority of the power in their community because they dominate the caste courts and churches. It raises eyebrows that men and women have different sexual conduct expectations. Hard labor and unstable economic conditions contribute to a violent culture, and Bama bravely addresses this idea as well.

Conclusion

In the concluding remarks, it can be stated that Karukku is about this re-assertion of the self and identity that were destroyed by the atrocities Dalit’s have gone through. In Bama’s narrative, sufferings become a structure that induces trauma on Dalit self and provokes a reconstruction of the once destroyed self. It is this self-assertion and occupation of space that, hence the purpose of Dalit writing is the self-

realization among Dalit community makes them understand the need to struggle for their survival. Therefore Dalit literature becomes purposive as well as reflexive on the society.

On the other hand, Sangati is primarily about a community’s identities not about the individual self. So finally Bama conveys through Sangati is that, where ever you go the system of caste follows, After completion of her education, she struggled for her livelihood, being a Dalit, and unmarried she had faced many oppression and obstacles, at work places she was asked with many question, she rented a small house, near the place where she works, the owner of the house and neighbors around pestered her with hundreds for questions.

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