



## Social empowerment of the Dalit woman in Bama's Sangati

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### Abstract

Dalit feminist writings are developing faster. Watching their men participate in struggle. And write about their oppression, the Dalit women have also learnt to give voice to their troubles. This does not detract from the patriarchal oppression of the Dalit women. One of the important literary genres is the autobiography through which the women in general and Dalit women in particular express themselves. Bama's Sangati, for example deals with Dalit women's dual oppression, agony and anger. The Dalit women are downtrodden and oppressed because of suppression by their own men and by the upper caste men and women. Being illiterate, they have become one of the most exploited peripheral groups in the society. The proposed paper examines Bama's Sangati in terms of the aspirations and struggles of a Dalit woman towards social empowerment. The focus of the argument in the paper would be on how the Dalit women use literature in general and autobiography in particular as a means of expressing themselves and their aspirations for social liberation and empowerment.

**Keywords:** Oppression, suppression, downtrodden, empowerment, etc

### Introduction

Sangati is a series of episodes of Dalit women talking about demonstrate their how Dalit women's bodies are scarred by the many burdens of domestic, farm and sexual labour and yet how in ways they are better placed than caste Hindu women. The 'book', as this formless narrative is termed in the blurb, is more an ethnography of the Paraiya self than creative writing. An insider account of the onset of menstruation, food culture, marriages and domesticity are offered yet it's not quite ethnography. Sangati informs, does not enlighten perhaps the creative aspects how the stories are told, the use of 'rough dialectal Tamil are lost in translation.

Within the genre of the Dalit literature, the writings of the Dalit women are considered an important sub-genre. A Dalit woman is Dalit within the Dalits. She is oppressed twice by the patriarchal and caste-based society. However, suppression invariably leads to resistance and protest. A Dalit woman has indomitable spirit to bounce back the patriarchal repression against all odds. The Dalit women writers not only lament their subjugation but also celebrate struggles with pride. It took a long time for Dalit women to overcome their oppression as women, and put to use the gains of social and literary movements. There are common issues like untouchability and caste oppression that bind Dalit men and women. Yet what is special about the Dalit women is that they also suffer from patriarchal oppression. These concerns are constantly foregrounded in the writings of the Dalit women. Their concerns became evident in form, content and emotions in their writings. Dalit feminist writings are developing faster. Watching their men participate in struggle and write about their oppression, the Dalit women have also learnt to give voice to their troubles. This does not detract from the patriarchal oppression of Dalit women.

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The novel depicts the oppression, agony and anger of the Dalit women. The Dalit women have become one of the most exploited peripheral groups in the Indian social system. The double oppression of Dalit women signifies a power struggle in the patriarchal society. The historical double oppression of Dalit women is institutionalized in India. Women are subordinate to men through their acceptance of sex or gender system. Gerda Learner says, Women have internalized the values that they subordinate them to such an extent that they voluntarily pass on to their children. Most of the Indian women have been oppressed on one aspect of their lives by fathers, husbands and patriarchy. (Gerda 1)

Instead of creating a healthy atmosphere for the nourishment of Dalit women, her own men such as husbands, father, and brothers suppress her freedom in the name of Hindu tradition. In this regard Chalam's views are worth considering: 'The real liberation for a wife is the liberation from her husband's violence, his abuse, her servitude to him, and the daily quarrels.' Being a Dalit, a woman is suppressed by upper caste men and women in the society. Dalit women face menaces of rape by upper caste men at workplace. In the novel, Mariamma goes to collect firewood as usual. While getting back home, she goes to drink water from Kumarasaami Avya's fields. When she goes innocently to get some water, Kumarasaami seizes her hand and pulls her inside. She escapes from him, leaves everything and gets back home. She reveals the incident to her friends. Mariamma's friends warn her not to reveal what actually happened. Her friends say: 'It is you who will get the blame; it is you who will be called a whore. The land owner is an evil man, fat with money. He is upper caste as

well (20). Being a Dalit woman, she is unable to protest against the landlord. But Kumarasaami, being afraid of this news may spread and it loses his reputation. He complains to be headman of the paraya community.

He misinterprets that Mariamma uses his fields to behave in a very dirty way with her uncle Manikkam. Male elders do not give a chance to Mariamma to speak the truth in the village meeting. She is abused in front of the villagers and is forced to pay a fine of Rs.200 whereas Manikkam is fined only Rs. 100 because he is a male. Mallikarjuna Rao's statement is absolutely right in this context. He states: She (Dalit woman) is twice oppressed. When it comes to sexual exploitation, even the Dalit male is no exception as the oppressed becomes the oppressor. It should however be noted that these women are not at the mercy of some immanent metaphysical force like Thomas Hardy's Tees, but are victims of materialist forces. (Rao 4)

According to Bama, the Dalit women, over the years, have been living in sub-human conditions both within and outside Dalit community. They are subjected to economic exploration and cultural oppression. Dalit women's economic exploration greatly restricts their freedom. This lack of economic power endangers their education, social equality, and quality of life. Bama says that rape, sexual attack, molestation, harassment and disrobing, etc., are everyday occurrences for Dalit women. Dr. Ambedkar writes in his book *Ostracized Bharas*, Dalit hood is a kind of life condition that characterizes the exploitation, suppression and oppression, and marginalization of Dalit people by the social, economic, cultural and political domination of the caste Hindus and Brahminical ideology. (Ambedkar 5).

While Karukku depicts the sufferings of a Dalit woman, Sangati moves away from the individual to the community. It is a statement of pride underlining the inherent liveliness and indomitable spirit of Dalit women against oppression. As Bama she writes in the preface to the books: In Sangati, many strong Dalit women who had the courage to break the shackles of authority, to propel them upwards, to roar (their defiance) changed their difficult, problem-billed lives and quickly stanch their tears. Sangati is a look at a part of the lives of those women who dared to make fun of the class in power that oppressed them. And through this, they found the courage to revolt (Bama 6). Some Dalit women don't have the mental strength to fight against the oppression and become mentally ill; but most of them survive against all these odds. Sangati does not stop with just an analysis of the plight and sufferings of the Dalit women. The book takes us to the inner premises of Dalit culture asserting its richness and tradition substantiating Francois Gros (2004), following observations: Dalit communities do indeed have a very rich and deep cultural heritage, a folk tradition of tales, songs and performing arts, an amazing variety of practices and usages in the daily life, and craftsmanship, etc., and a wonderful world of gods, goddesses and devils, all elements contributing to the creation of an original, world which is no way less important nor less fascinating than classical mythology or orthodox manners and customs. (Gros 14)

Sangati also reveals the innermost feelings of the Dalit women. In spite of all their sufferings and oppression, Dalit women consider themselves privileged than the upper caste women. Through Sangati we get to hear the inner voices of the Dalit women. We find that within their close circles, Dalit women ridicule the upper caste women. They take

pride in having the liberty to swim and bathe in pond, whereas the upper caste women are confined to the wells in the house: They are all scared-cats, di. They can't swim at all, that's the truth. They stay at home get a couple of buckets of water which they dip into pour over themselves little by little. God knows how they manage to bathe in such small, small amounts of water. How different it is to go right under the water like this. (Bama 116). Dalit women also take great pride that they are financially independent and capable of doing the toughest of jobs. 'Ask these upper caste women to do the work we do-to transplant paddy in the wet fields, to do the wedding, to reap the grain and carry it home. You'll see soon enough. They'll give it up in no time and go lie down (Bama 14-15). Akin to the Afro American concept of Black aesthetics, where Black is considered beautiful and superior to the fair skinned upper caste women. even if children are dark-skinned, their features are good and there's liveliness about them, Black is strongest and best, a diamond. Just go to their streets and look about you. Yes, they might skin, but just take a close look at their faces. Their features are all crooked and all over the place, inside out and upside down. If they had our colour as well. not even a donkey would turn and look at them. (Bama 114). Sangati reveals the inexplicable and unarticulated bond that strengthens the Dalit women. In the midst of all the misery spirit of there is an inseparable liveliness in the Dalit women. They would always laugh and chatter 'even though they left at dawn and hardly ever came back until after dark, they still went about ever laughing and making a noise for the greater part' (Bama 76). The language of the Dalit women is rich and resourceful giving way to proverbs, folklore and folksongs. The women have an innate talent to give appropriate nicknames to others. The Dalit women also possess an inborn talent to spontaneously sing songs befitting any occasion:

I really don't know how they could make up songs like that, in an instant, quick as anything. They used to sing lullabies, roratti songs to the babies in their cradles. If anyone died, the women sang opparis and wept loudly. Thinking about, from birth to death, are special songs and dances. And it's the women who sing them (Bama 77-78).

Sangati is a record of their experiences of the joint oppression of caste and gender Dalit faced by multiple Dalit women; is in a sense an autobiography of a community. It analyzes Dalit women's oppression as a triple jeopardy of oppression by double patriarchies – 'Discreet' patriarchy of their own caste and an 'overlapping' patriarchy of the upper caste - as well as poverty. 'Discreet patriarchy dictates that power rests with men in the community and in the institutions led by them - the caste courts, the Church, the panchayats. The text traces an account of the aggressive exploitation of Dalit women in terms of Doubleday labour, domestic violence, priests in the Church, upper caste landlords and their own ignorance and suggests remedies. Bama locates male violence unleashed by their caste men in their own sense of powerlessness vis-à-vis upper castes.

Exploitation, threat of rape by the upper castes is analysed in terms of values of 'overlapping' patriarchy which maintains a strong sense of gendered spaces and sees the habitual visibility of Dalit women which they inhabit as sites of work as a sign of their availability and inscribe them as lustful women whose sexuality cannot be controlled by the Dalit men. Bama foregrounds the 'different' of Dalit women from privileged upper caste women and also celebrates their

strength, labour and resilience. As a feminist writer Bama protest against all forms of oppression and relying on the strength and resilience of Dalit women, makes an appeal for change and self-empowerment through education.

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