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## Portrayal of Dalit Women in Bama's *Sangati*

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Dalit Literature is one of the literary movements which emerged in post-independent India. It is articulated and developed on the counter memory of caste system. It is an experiential literature, a protest literature based on oppositional mythology, oppositional language and oppositional aesthetics. Hence it is a dislocate literature. It is a new and distinct stream of Indian literature that has contributed "a fresh experience, a new sensitivity and vocabulary, a different protagonist, an alternate vision and new chemistry of suffering and revolt to Indian literature." (Limbale, 37) In the words of Arjun Dangle, "Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows, and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of society." (Dangle, 264)

Dalit literature made its advent in Marathi in 1950 and subsequently spread too many other languages notably Tamil, Telgu, Malayalam, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi and English. Earlier literature was the domain of high castes. Untouchables were either absent from literary representations or shown as victims in need of saviours or as objects without voice and agency. Because of Dalit literature is the process of social convergence began and the winds of change became brisk. Many Dalit writers started writing and thus writers started emerging from different strata of society. The horizon of Indian literary criticism expanded and reader's tastes gradually began changed. However, as pointed out by S. Anand, "While Dalit tales seem to have become touchable, the creators and protagonists of these tales continue to deal with dehumanizing untouchability, which is reinventing itself in various subtle and crude ways." (Anand, 4)

In an autobiography, it is an abnormal trend to glorify the 'self' and boast about the extraordinary quality of oneself. But when a Dalit writer writes, he writes about the denial of opportunities like an ordinary human being. The self represents all other Dalits who were crushed down because of their Dalit identity. The entire life of narrative gains a representative quality and imparts the true feeling of the sting that they have suffered. The protagonist of the autobiography is, of course, the writer himself, but his personal experiences, instead of being mystically unique and individualistic, encompass the general condition of the whole Dalit community. Dalit autobiographies have been described as "capsules of agony" and "narratives of pain". In Marathi, a whole generation of Dalit writers have developed it as narrative of resistance against caste stranglehold as Daya Pawar's *Baluta: Social Claim* (1978), Laxman Mane's *Upura: The Outsider* (1980), Laxman Gaekwad's *Uchalya: The Branded* (1987), Kishore Shantabai Kale's *Kolhatye Chepor: Against All Odds* (2000), Vasant Moon's *Vasti: Growing up Untouchable in India* (2001), Narendra Jadhav's *Amcha Baap: An Mahi, Outcaste: a Memoir* (2003) and Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi: The Outcaste* (2003). These are prominent Dalit Autobiographies in Marathi but there are several other books written in various other regional languages. Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (1997), Mohandas Namisray's *Apne Apne Pinjrey* and Suraj Pal Chauhan's *Triskrat* (2002) are important books in Hindi. Bama's *Karukku* (1992) and K.A. Gunasekaran's *The Scar* (2009) are the prominent works in Tamil. Prominent Dalit

autobiographies in Kannada are Arvinda Malagathi's *Government Brahmana*, Siddalingaya's *Ooru Keri*, Ramayya's *Ma Neyara* and Govindareya's *Manavilleda varamadhye*.

*Sangati* is written by Bama and it is her second work. The meaning of *Sangati* is news, events, happenings. The book is one of the interconnected anecdotes. The narrator in the earlier chapters is, a young girl of about twelve, and in the last three of four chapters, a young woman. The structure of the book as a whole seeks to create a Dalit-feminist perspective. *Sangati* is struggle of the whole Paraiya community women, and their joint struggle. In this sense *Sangati* is perhaps the autobiography of a Dalit community. *Sangati* is uniquely placed in contributing both to the Dalit movement and women's movement. Dalit Feminist critic Sharmila Rege Writes, "The Dalit Feminist standpoint is 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'." (Sangati, XVII)

One the one hand *Sangati* teases out the way patriarchy works in the case of Dalit women. Women are presented in *Sangati* as wage earners. They work as much as men work in fields and in the agricultural and building-sites, but they earn less than men. They are also constantly vulnerable to sexual harassment and are abused in the world of the work places. Bama writes about the violent treatment of women caused by their fathers, husbands, and brothers. She describes the violent domestic quarrels which are carried on publicly. *Sangati* also deals with the predicament of several generations of women: the older women belonging to the narrator's grandmother. Vellaiyamma Kizhavi's generation comes after her as she grows up. *Sangati* also examines the differences between women, their different needs and ways in which they are subjected to oppression. 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. Bama appreciates the zeal and confirms:

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 let the life crush or shatter them, but rather to swim vigorously against the tide; their passion to live life with vitality, truth and enjoyment, about their hard labour. I wanted to shout out these stories. (XVI)

Bama shows the condition of pregnant women, who are compelled for cutting grasses for their cows even in the child-bearing days. The mother of the protagonist, (14 year old girl) spends whole day transplanting in the Western fields in the days of pregnancy. Patti describes that, "We have to labour in the fields as hard as men do, and a top of that, struggle to bear and raise our children. As for the men their work ends when they are finished in the field. If you are born into this world, it is best you were born a man." (78)

The condition of a girl baby in the Dalit society is not supposed to be good because a boy gets more respect. Boys can eat as much as they wish and are free to play. As for the girls they are for cleaning vessels, drawing water, sweeping the house etc. Even in the game girls can't play a boy's game? Girls only can play at cooking or getting married. *Sangati* also pervades the condition of Mariamma, who fell into the well but miraculously was saved, one day while returning after collecting firewood's she was pulled by an upper caste man but she could escape herself by own effort. When she complained about it she was fined. Women were not allowed to interfere in the meeting of male; whether they are right or wrong. It is

better for women not to open their mouths. If they try to speak out what do they realize is right, they get kicked and beaten and then trampled on for pains. Women are not given respect, and not allowed to talk loudly or laugh noisily; even when they sleep they can't stretch out their backs, or lie face down on their bellies. They always have to walk with their heads bowed down, gazing at their toes if they are hungry, they mustn't eat first.

If men put on a play or something on a festival day, they never allow women to take part. Men themselves would dress up and act as women rather than allow them to join in. During festivals Dalit people used to sing over the mile. There were many women who could sing better but they were not allowed to sing in the public. The position of women is both pitiful and humiliating in Dalit Community. In the field they have to escape from upper-caste men's molestation. At church they must lick the priest's shoe and be his slave because he threatens them with tales of God, and with the fear of Heaven and Hell punishment. When they return to their own home from the work place they have to cook some Kanji first and then submit themselves to their husband's torment before lie down and rest. If a woman dies, soon after the men would marry the second time. As for birth control, men won't control it because they think they'll lose their strengths if they do so. The mother of the protagonist's arguments, 'It's as if you became a slave from the very day you are married. That's why all the men scold their wives and keep them will under control. (43) 'It's not so easy to get away. Once you are married once you have put your head in the mortar, can you escape from the pestle? No, she must continue to suffer until her head rests on earth at last.' (44)

Bama describes the love of Esakki, who fell in love with a fellow of *Vanaan* caste. The brothers somehow came to know about it, they became furious and went away saying 'so long as we are alive, that will never happen.'(51) Esakki left home and ran away with *Vanaan* boy to another town. Somehow brothers find out where Esakki was. By that time she was pregnant nearly full-term. The brothers showed their love and told that we can't be hard-hearted to you and then insisted her to return to their parents' house for the birth of her first baby. They took her straight to mountain forests tied her hand and foot, dragged her out of cart and with one sweep of a sword they separated her head from her body, sliced open her stomach, took out the baby twisted its neck and killed it. In the Dalit society once a girl comes of age she has no more freedom, people gaze them, 'we're afraid of very little thing, we shiver and die, they loose their strengths and become good for nothing. If they are brave enough, we can dare to accomplish anything you want'. (48) From the movement they woke up, they set to work both in their homes and in the field. At home they are pestered by their husbands and children, in the field there is back-breaking work besides the harassment of the landlord. When they come home in the evening, there is no time even to draw a breath. Even if a women's body is wracked with pain, the husband is bothered only with his own satisfaction. Women are overwhelmed and are crushed by their own disgust, boredom and exhaustion.

Although both men and women return home after day's hard work in the fields but men went off straight away to the bazaar (*chavadi*) returning home only for their meal. As for women they have to wash vessels, clean the house, collect water, fed their husbands and children before they could eat what was left over and then go to the bed. Dalit males are like dogs with their tails rolled up when they are in the fields, and dealing with their landlords. But all that suppressed anger was vested when Dalit men return home and beat up and their wives to a pulp. There is no way for them by which men could show their strength in those circumstances. So they show it at home on their wives and children. But then, is it fate of Dalit women to be tormented both outside their houses and within? All women in Dalit

communities are slaves to men. Dalit women's are worst sufferer. Bama questions on it and says that Dalit women can't bear the torment of upper caste masters in the fields, and at home they can't bear the violence of their husbands.

Bama reveals that it seems to me that at least our women work hard and earn their own money and have a few coins in their hands. They can't hold out their palms to their husbands for every little expense. It is because of the system of their caste and poverty, every fellow treats Dalit women with contempt. It is like the proverb that says, "If a man sees a terrified dog, he is bound to chase it. If we continue to be frightened, everyone will take advantage of us. If we stand up for ourselves without caring whether we die or survive, they'll creep away with their tails between their legs."(66) Upper caste women give a superficial impression that they never quarrel amongst themselves or with their husbands. If you go inside their homes the real truth is revealed. It's as the saying goes: "It looks a stylish hair decorated with screw pine flowers, but it's all lice and nits within. They submit to their husbands like cobras that shrink back into their boxes. And they have to do that. Because it is the money that he gives her drives the cart. It's because of this that she even stands and sits according to his orders."(67)

All Dalit women are not like this. On the one side she is worn out with physical toil, on the other, she is beaten until she is left with only a half or a quarter lives. The women never got a proper night's peace. They had to go for pleasure with their husbands whenever they demanded it so they never get any rest. Neither their bodies nor their minds felt vested when they woke-up. When Bama examines the words women use in their quarrels which are full of obscenities, very direct and ugly, often dealing with sexual relationships. But, when she's quarrelling with any other women she un-hesitantly calls her "my husband's whore." A women's body, mind, feelings, words and deeds, and her entire life are all under their husband's control and domination. On the other hand upper caste women keep all these oppression suppressed but they can neither chew nor swallow it so they lose their nerves, and many of them become unstable or mentally ill.

Bama also gives several examples of Willy rhymes and verses made up on the moment to fit an occasion. A women playing a dice game watches a girl grinding *masala* while his cross-cousin (Macchaan) walks part. Immediately she makes up a song to tease her. Another makes up a song for her husband who is angry with her over some trifling matter:

We dug a water-spring in the river-bed  
 We cleaned our teeth together, he and I –  
 It is because I spluttered water over him  
 He hasn't spoken to me for eight days? (XX)

If Karukku is told in Bama's own speaking voice, Sangati is in the voice of many women speaking to and addressing one another as they share the incidents of their daily lives. These voices sometimes rose in anger or in pain as they lash out at each other or against their oppressors. Such type of language is full of expletives, quite often with explicit sexual references. Bama suggests several other reasons for the violence of this language, and the sexual nature. Sometimes a sharp tongue and obscene words are a women's only way of shaming men and escaping extreme physical violence. At other times, Bama reflects, such



language may grow out of frustration, lack of pleasurable experience, or it might be the result of the internalizing of a patriarchy based on the sexual dominance and power. If a married one's husband dies then:

'The Girl's life is finished, she can't wear flowers, nor use *kunkuman* and turmeric every again. She can't wear jewels; she can't even wear coloured saris. They'll call her a widow and keep her away from all the auspicious occasions. That Ayya Kuppusami Nayakkar's daughter becomes a widow just two years after marriage. Family doesn't even give her enough kanji to fill her belly properly. Does that happen among us? We don't even use the word 'widow'. We are all the same, and live alike.' (113)

Bama also describes the condition of church where Dalit women were kept to clean and sweep the church while women from other caste stand on one side. When they told it to nuns they told you will get special bless to God:

'Just look at what goes on in our church as well. It is our women who sweep the church and keep it clean. Women from other castes stand to one side until we've finished and then March in grandly and sit down before anyone else. I've stood it as long as I could, and at last I went and complained to the nuns. And do you know what they said? It seems we will gain merit by sweeping the church and that God will bless us specially. See how they fool us in the name of God! Why, don't those people need God's blessing too?' (119)

If a woman wants to remain unmarried, it creates another big problem for her to survive. They call her prostitute. Thus Dalit women ask for their right and speak:

"To live a life as unmarried women raises another huge problem. Because I have remained unmarried all this time, people assume that I have known many men as a prostitute; they gossip about me. They seem to think that once a woman is married and has a tali round her neck, she is also signed, sealed, and delivered over to one man. They assume that otherwise she is the common property of many fellows, and they will peer at her suggestively, why? Why shouldn't a woman belong to no one at all but herself? (121)

Thus a close investigation of Bama's Sangati shows the condition of the whole Dalit Community where Women are the worst sufferers in their ambit.

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