

Subaltern Consciousness in Bama's *Sangati* and *Karukku*

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Abstract. Bama (Bama Faustina Soosairaj) is one of the most celebrated contemporary Dalit women writers whose work has been translated into English. Bama's *Sangati* loosely strings voices that showcase how Dalit women's bodies are scarred by the many burdens of domestic and sexual labour and yet how in ways they are better placed than caste-Hindu women. Although *Karukku* was persona in nature, *Sangati* deals with the community at large: the community of Dalit women who are marginalized, discriminated, isolated and humiliated both on the grounds of caste as well as gender. It also discusses how Dalit women are constantly exploited by the powerful castes and experiences faced by the two protagonists - Maariamma and Maikkanni in the novel. The plight of Dalit women in the Indian society as depicted in *Karukku* is sad and labeled with considerable misery. *Karukku* very significantly raises questions on caste and religious issues that damage our society. These two fictional writings of Bama portray several issues of violence on Dalit women, wife beating, sexual harassment, loneliness, ignorance, etc at their own homes within the community. Because of the unkind customs prevailing, they cannot speak of their own and finally becomes subalterns. This article reflects on the issues of women portrayed in both novels- *Sangati* and *Karukku*. It is emphasized in terms of class, caste and religion with proper lens of subaltern context.

Keywords : Caste; dalit; subaltern; marginality; patriarchy; exploitation.

Bama is a Tamil Dalit novelist who was born in 1958. Her father was in the Indian army and was very specific about the children's education. According to Bama, education gave her freedom to get away from the control of the landlords and lead her own life. She was introduced to the world of books by her writer brother Raj Gautaman. From the earlier days she showed strong interest in reading books of prominent Tamil writers like Jayakantan, Akhilan, Mani and Parthasarthy. She also showed interest in reading books of Kahlil Gibran and Rabindranath Tagore. At the age of 26, Bama became a nun but seven years later in 1992, she walked out of the seminary. Later on, Bama followed a friend's advice and started to write her childhood memories. She rose to fame with the autobiographical novel *Karukku* (1992), which archives the joys and sorrows experienced by Dalit Christian women in Tamil Nadu. She consequently wrote two more novels, *Sangati* (1994) and *Vanmam* (2002) along with two collections of short stories: *Kusumbukkaran* (1996) and *Oru Tattvum Erumaiyum* (2003).

As an exemplar of Dalit feminism, Bama's *Karukku* is her autobiography which explores the sufferings of Dalit women, whereas *Sangati* is an autobiography

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of her community which revolves from the story of individual's struggle to the insight of the Paraiyya women, a neighbourhood group of friends and relatives and their joined struggle. In *Sangati*, many strong Dalit women who had the handcuffs of authority are also centered.

To the great extent, writers like Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir speak out about the representation of women in literature. In 1980's first feminist criticism became much more power-driven. It focused upon criticizing male version of the world to explore the nature of female experiences. When we talk about Indian social ladder, dalit stands on the lowest step. In Dalit society every woman lives under the double power of caste and patriarchy and they are extra oppressed.

Women are considered as the symbol of sex and mere object of pleasure. A study of dalit feminist writing reveals a saga of endless miseries, inhuman oppression and awful gender discrimination. Bama – a Tamil Dalit Christian was a writer and a dalit feminist. The book deals with gender bias faced by dalit women right from the childhood. Girl babies are always considered inferior and are given less care. Dalit girls are hardly enjoyed their childhood. They have little time to play as they have to take care of their younger siblings. Through her novels, Bama tried to raise the voices of socially and economically exploited class and project the social reality of Dalit women struggle almost every day for their survival. This type of discrimination was based on identity similar to racism.

Karukku is a substantial novel which reflects the sufferings of Dalit women in a patriarchal and caste-based society. The protagonist of the novel always experiences some sort of patriarchal or traditional sufferings. Such sort of sufferings chronically push women into the class of subalterns. Outside their home wherever Dalit women go, they are enclosed by countless circumstances developed out of traditional caste backdrops. While, at home, they are compelled with patriarchal norms and they often feel trapped with many societal and patriarchal rules. Bama successfully portrays the sad life of Dalit women in her novels. Through *Karukku*, she has tried to explore her own story of suffering.

The text *Karukku* portrays the sufferings of women in the Dalit community in arrays of ways right from a young girl to an old woman. Through *Karukku*, Bama attempts to question several patriarchal rules existing in our society that suppress women. Through her work, Bama has also tried to explore the hardship and everyday truth of Dalit women. By projecting herself, she tried to question various post-colonial and traditional institutions that oppress the Dalits.

Though women in her text are hardworking, they failed in getting a proper status and recognition in the family. The daily wage women workers are not paid a genuine price when compared to men. The author further narrates that the money earned by women is dutifully utilized and spent on household affairs to run the family. On the other hand men were free to spend their money as per their desire.

without taking any sort of responsibilities of the family. Another significant issue projected in her text is sexual harassment. Women are considered mere sexual objects. Through her novels, Bama throws light on sexual exploitation of Dalit women both at the work place as well as inside their homes. At the workplace, they were sexually harassed by the upper-caste men.

In her text *Sangati*, Mariamma is misbehaved by Kumarasami Ayya near the pump set, but when he realizes his fault, he quickly informs the village headman of the paraiyya community and prejudices everyone so that he can save his reputation from getting ruined. But in the meeting everyone blamed her only for such misbehaviour. On the other hand, women are sexually harassed by their own husbands at home. Even though their body is fully tired after full day work, they have to surrender their exhausted bodies to their husbands.

Poverty and hunger are the two worst evils Dalit society experience. Because of hunger Dalit women are forced to do the messiest works at the homes of the upper castes. The poem "Hunger" of Namdeo Dhasal reveals the sufferings of Dalit's because of hunger. The question of survival becomes the prominent thing, either through accepting physical torture of the upper caste or by cleaning wastages at their homes.

In the novel *Karukku*, Bama has portrayed a series of incidents that replicate Dalit poverty and hunger. Dalits are withdrawn from land and properties. They are not given pieces of land by upper castes to grow their own crops. Also they have to stay in particular street provided to them. The Dalits are neither given enough food nor properties. They have to survive with minimal resources so that they could remain dependent on the upper castes. If they fail in obeying the instructions of the upper castes, the Dalits would remain jobless and unwaged. This kind of dependency on the upper castes pushes them to become subaltern in the eyes of society. The question of living becomes more significant than suffering. For their survival, Dalits have been suffering from upper caste oppression since ancient times:

Both my grandmothers worked as servants for Naicker families.... My other Paatti was the same. As soon as dawn broke, she would go to the Naicker houses, sweep out the cowshed, collect up the dung and dirt, and bring home the left-over rice and curry from the previous evening. And for some reason, she would behave as if she had been handed the nectar of the gods. (*Karukku*, 43)

The phase in the quoted line above reflects everything or can say the only answer to the question of hunger. Whatever the upper caste gives in exchange for service provided, the Dalits have to accept that with smile and satisfaction. The acceptance of the tasted food ultimately evokes a question of their identity. The

old Dalit women are forced to go to work early in the morning or else even the left-over food would not be served. These poor women have to work throughout the day and return back home late at night and continue to do the same on the other day:

There is enough work to and there is always much work to do. But that is behind. The worst that you can do is set me back a little more behind. I can't catch up in this world, anyway. (Robert Frost)

These lines from Robert Frost's poem signify the feeling of being put at the back on the societal front. It is a kind of feeling of being behind the others that is explored by subaltern writers. Subalterns refer to those people or groups who are located outside the hegemonic power structure of the society. They are discriminated on various grounds and lack the basic rights and opportunities of the people living in the society.

The novel *Sangati* was originally written in Tamil in 1994 and was then translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom. The whole narrative is divided into twelve chapters. The word 'Sangati' means events and hence the novel takes the readers through individual stories, anecdotes and memories that takes place in the life of a woman in paraiya community.

The narration accommodates more than 35 characters most of whom are female but in conventional sense, there is no protagonist. The novel deals with several generations of women. Through this work Bama gives another picture of the community. The older women belong to narrators narrating the grandmothers' generation, Velliamma Kizhavi's generation and downward generation. If a woman belongs to Dalit community, she has to suffer in two ways. The first being a woman and the second belongs to the lowest community. Bama's *Sangati* is a unique Dalit feminist narrative carrying autobiographical elements of the whole community. It focuses the double oppression of females. The novel encompasses many individual stories, anecdotes and memories that portray the events taking place in the life of women in paraiya community in Tamilnadu.

Women are presented in *Sangati* as daily wage earners. They earn less than men do. However, the money earned by men, can be spent as they please whereas women have to bear the financial burden of running the family. Women are also regular victims to sexual harassment and are often abused in the place of work. In this novel Marriamma tells a lot about the sexual assault faced by her and her community women and their inability to stand up against it. The physical violence is realistically portrayed in this novel like lynching, whipping and canning by fathers, husbands and brothers.

Sangati examines the difference between women and their different ways in which they are subject to apportion and their coping strategies. In the novel the

language of Dalit women is rich and resourceful giving way to proverbs, folklore and folk songs. Bama as a feminist writer, protests against all forms of oppressions and sufferings faced by Dalit women in the first half of *Sangati*. But later part of *Sangati* moves away from the state of depression and frustration. Instead it presents a positive identity to Dalit women focusing their inner strength and vigour. She also attracts our mind towards the education system about Dalit community. She gave the example of Pecchiamma, who belongs to Chakkili community, studied only up to fifth class. The girls of that community do not go to school all that much. Through *Sangati*, Bama holds the mirror up to the heart of Dalit women. She makes an appeal for change and betterment of the life of a Dalit woman in the variety of fields, including sex and gender discrimination, equal opportunity in work force, education rights etc.

Through her work, Bama gives the narrator a key function and controls all the incidents and events in a proper way. The narrator becomes both omniscient narrator and a controlling agent of their story, who speaks out historical aspects of Dalit community through variety of characters. Bama is clear that no one is going to help the hopeless women in her community, it is up to the women themselves to take their lives into their own hands. Hard labour and precariousness of Dalit women lead to a culture of violence, and this runs through the novel.

Women in Bama's *Sangati* and *Karukku* were not allowed to participate in any occasion. The novel deals with gender disgrace faced by Dalit women right from childhood. Baby girls are always considered inferior and are taken less care. Maikkanni is one such girl who has started to work from the day she learns to walk. She has to go to work when her mother delivers a baby.

In the novel many strong Dalit women had courage to break the shackles of authority. Bama said that they live under pressure and enjoy their life fully. In India there is prevalence of caste - hierarchy within sub castes of Dalit community. In *Sangati*, the Catholic priests were also gender-biased and they ill-treated the converted Dalits.

Bama in *Sangati* shows the ability of the Dalit women to think and rethink and analyse situation for them, while through *Kurukuu*, she wants to say that Dalit societies suffer from various issues. At every step of their lives, they have to face some kind of atrocities in society. Subaltern women try to resist oppression in different modes like anger, chiding, shouting, actions, etc. Subaltern is not only a sophisticated word for oppressed but also for other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie. Contemporarily, though many democratic and constitutional rules have been introduced for the rights of Dalit women, it has been witnessed that such rules are not effective to an appropriate level. The exploitation of Dalit women is still prevailing around us. They are continuously pushed to the subaltern positions through many conventional and imperial forces.

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