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CULTURE OF SILENCE: GENDERED VIOLENCE AGAINST DALIT WOMEN IN BAMA'S
SANGATI: EVENTS

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Abstract

Dalit males in the pyramidal caste structure posit at the bottom in Indian society and Dalit women are assigned a position even below at them. Dalit women are often ill-treated and exploited by the Dalit males and the upper castes due to their position at the bottom of the hierarchical society. The lower caste women are aware of the web of powerlessness that has trapped them. Bama's novel *Sangati: Events* describes how the Dalit girls and women always remain silent in spite of being repeatedly humiliated and relegated as non-human being. These silences are profoundly more meaningful than speech to them and exert as a weapon against all sorts of negativities after attaining maturity. This paper carries on to probe into the predicament of Dalit women and the ways by which they internalize, reproduce and challenge the culture of silence presented in Bama's *Sangati: Events*.

Keywords: silence, Dalit, culture, discrimination

The customs and social behavior of a particular group or society are expressed through culture (Wehmeier 373). So, people play a pivotal role in the process of constructing the culture. A lot of invaders from different nations, communities and races have transformed India as a nation of a composite culture where various beliefs and ideas exist. The emergence of the Aryans and their conquest over the natives, aborigines and the Dravidians are marked as an epoch-making in the history of India. To avoid interacting and behaving with people from other social positions, the Aryans created four hierarchical-ranked races called castes – Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (political rulers or

soldiers), Vaishyas (merchants) and Shudras or Untouchables (laborers, peasants, artisans and servants). The last groups were also destined to serve the above mentioned three upper caste people. The Shudras or 'Untouchables' are now called 'Dalits'. Caste as a closed system of stratification determines the social status of an individual by adopting the caste of his ancestors.

Before the advent of Aryans, Indian society was matriarchal, egalitarian and casteless. But the Aryan culture which is patriarchal as compared to aboriginal culture, subdued the pre-Vedic civilization and thereby the patriarchy of the conquerors took

the place of the matriarchal society system. Aryans bound the women in the strict parameters of strong patriarchal norms and they idealized them as 'pativrata', 'saubhagyabati', 'bhadramahila' and 'grihalaksmi' embodying the qualities expected from the females – pure, respectable, virtuous, sacrificing and passive. These stereotypical images were used as weapons against women to control and contain their sexuality. Being weak in biological perspective women are confronted in a male dominated society to adjust their role as the 'Other' to the males and were thus contented. A female is not only supposed to be inferior in most of the physical aspects but her experiences, feelings, perceptions are also supposed to be inferior.

Lust for power and a propensity to dominate others in order to establish supremacy over them are the inherent traits of human nature. This is one of the major reasons for the creation of the 'Varna' system. Ambedkar adjudges the caste system as the 'graded inequality' and further expounds:

There is no such class as a completely unprivileged class except the one which is at the base of the social pyramid. The privileges of the rest are graded. Even the low is privileged as compared with lower. (Ambedkar 102)

The 'base' and 'low' of this 'social pyramid' is no other than the Dalits and these Dalit males, as per Ambedkar's proposition, even enjoy privileges over the Dalit women who are nothing but 'lower' in this hierarchical structure. Guru rightly ascertains the position of Dalit women in the society as he asserts that they experience discrimination and subjugation in a thrice manner – first being as Dalit (caste), secondly being poor (class) and thirdly as women (gender) (2549). Dalit women are often brutally ill-treated and exploited by both their males and the upper castes. This paper carries on to probe into the predicament of Dalit women and the ways by which they internalize, reproduce and challenge the culture of silence presented in Bama's *Sangati: Events*.

Bama's novel *Sangati: Events* is acclaimed for celebrating Dalit women's lives, wit and humour. The exposition of this novel ushers a positive

assertion and celebration for the birth of a girl child with a popular belief that if the third child of a family is a girl, she will bring happiness after her birth (3). But this positive aspect is very short-lived because it is crushed at the very beginning of the process of their upbringing. Growing up is one of the problematic tasks for those who belong to the marginalized section of the society or Dalits in India. Caste, class and gender determine and define girlhood. These forces take shape in larger spheres of society and family. In this context Imayam, a Tamil poet in her poem portrays that a Dalit girl conveys how her mother condemns and curses her birth:

When I was born

Mother wept, saying

"A row of worries,

Endless trouble." (Imayam 37)

The reasons behind this kind of 'unwelcome' gesture for the birth of a girl child, according to Rege, are the constant concern to protect her virginity as well as the burden to pay dowry, gifts and festive offerings to the groom's family (21-22). The earlier matriarchal society of the Shudras was free from all these negativities which were gradually imitated in their life and thus made the lives of the Dalit women more vulnerable.

Gender-specific roles for both men and women form the concept of family as a power structure. Sex and gender are completely separate connotations where the former is biologically but the latter is socially constructed. Both men and women are expected to be 'masculine' and 'feminine' respectively through performing gender specific roles in the society. The process of acquiring gender norms begins in childhood. The birth of the girl child in the male dominated society is assumed to adjust and compromise with the situation. This novel presents how the girl children and women have suffered for the lack of proper food and nutrition. The reason behind it is that they have to eat after the male members of the family. As a result, they spend most of their lives in starvation because there is as such nothing left for them. "Here dalits show traits normally considered upper castes'

domain in which males are preferred and pampered species" (Sing 134).

Vellaiyamma, the *patti* (grandmother) of the narrator, again describes the discriminatory attitude towards the care and treatment of boys and girls as she states that the baby boy gets more time for breastfeeding than the girl child, even if both are sick or have a fever, the latter is looked after with 'half-heartedly'. When the children grow up, the girls have to do housework, such as cleaning dishes, fetching water, sweeping the house, collecting wood, washing clothes, and even taking their younger siblings with them when they play (7). The narrator also describes the pathetic plight of Maikkani, an eleven-year-old girl who, after her mother getting pregnant for the seventh time, performs all the domestic activities like sweeping the house, scrubbing the cooking pots, collecting water, washing clothes, gathering firewood, going to the shops and cooking the kanji (69-70). Along with these works she also engages herself to provide her family an economic support through her working in the match factory of her neighbouring town because her mother after the birth of a baby "could not go to work in the fields then" (70).

This novel also explores how the Dalit girls have to face great hardships as compared to the Dalit boys to get education. Since they have to maintain all domestic chores along with the nurturing of babies, they find little opportunity to educate themselves. The result is that they are firstly deprived of the benefit of learning and secondly, they are seen as ignorant fools and they are often abused for their lack of knowledge. Foucault emphasizes the interrelationship between power and knowledge where the former is maintained to monopolize the latter and thus the repression to the knowledge-less individual or groups is easily executed (119). This is the prime reason that education which leads to employment and empowerment of the dominated, is often denied to the Dalit girls by the dominant group – the Dalit males.

The girls in this novel are restricted to play only certain kinds of games like cooking, getting married or playing the games with stones and shells.

Girls are criticized for trying to be manly if they dare to play games like kabaddi or marble or *chelanguchi* which is traditionally believed for boys (7). The division of children's games into masculine and feminine works for inculcating the 'feminine virtues' in women. The narrator describes that the boys, even in their childish play, always become policemen, shop owners, bus drivers or conductors which are usually associated with male authority and the girls are always dominated by the boys due to their presentation as weak (31). An analysis of the games played by the children show how power structures impress upon the adolescent psyche and how it is inculcated in children through the observation of the social milieu.

Child marriage is another concern dealt with in this novel. Most of the female characters like the narrator's mother, *Periamma* (senior aunt) and *Patti* (grandmother) The grandmother of the narrator Pathima, while studying in class eight, persuades her mother to stop her study after her puberty and arranges her marriage so that they can spend the rest of their life peacefully. But her mother rejects the idea because her father wants her to study at least in the tenth grade because they realize that their illiteracy is responsible for their worst kind of living. The narrator's grandmother then becomes enraged and advises her mother that keeping young women at home is like setting fire to your stomach and how long they will protect her (9-10). Babasaheb Ambedkar also advises the Dalit masses to stop their daughters' marriage at the tender age because it is not conducive for their progress and they should be the 'partner' or 'friend' of their husband instead of being the slave to their husband (qtd. in Paik 42)

An important aspect of patriarchy is revealed through the unequal division of work between Dalit men and women. Though both the Dalit men and women have to work hard, it is the Dalit women who have to work doubly hard – within home and in the fields of the upper castes. Sharmila Rege explores the reason to adopt the role of a wage earner by the Dalit women as their income is spent for the survival of the family where their husband's earnings are spent on alcohol or maintaining the 'preferred wife' (30). The novel also describes that the lower caste women witness the economic inequality when they

earn much less than the males though they provide the same labour (18). Chhaya Datar analyzes the occurrence of such incidents: "The process of capital accumulation uses all kinds of cultural and material hierarchies to get cheap labour and recruit the marginalized population as a part of a reserve army of labour to push wages lower" (2964).

Dalit girls and women always suffer from the threat of rape and sexual harassment while working in the fields or collecting firewood from forests. Kimmel has rightly asserted that rape is the violent sexual activity which is nothing but a crime of power that only demonstrates the idea of 'conquest' and 'contempt' (330). Sexual harassment of women at work places is interpreted as a strategy to disgrace and dominate them. It creates an uncongenial atmosphere in the work places where female workers have to satisfy the sexual favours of the land-owning upper castes. In this novel Mariamma is sexually assaulted by Kumarasami Ayya while drinking water in his fields and is finally able to escape from there. She is warned by her caste fellows not to disclose this incident to anyone else otherwise she will be blamed and addressed as a 'whore' because the upper caste landowner is a rich wicked man and no one dares to protest against him or believe that he has committed this indecency (20). The lower caste women are aware of the web of powerlessness that has trapped them. Mariamma chooses to remain silent because she is aware that by exposing the incident of molestation, she would face much more humiliation in the society. Ironically, it is the Ayya who complains before the headman with a fabricated charge that Mariamma was seen in an indecent position with Manikkam. The village court finds her guilty because an upper caste man makes the allegation. She is not even allowed to defend herself and is obliged to be silent. The result is that she was fined Rs. 200 and had to bear insults and beatings for the crime she never committed. The *naattaamai*, headman of the paraiya (lower caste) community concludes the meeting with a verdict that a woman should always be 'humble' and 'modest' in spite of being repeatedly teased by the males (26). Sharmila Rege has effectively expressed the plight of the Dalit women that they are supposed so 'impure' or 'lacking virtue' due to 'double

oppression' that they do not have the 'honour' to claim for the redressal of the crime committed against them (29-30).

Domestic violence is another form of patriarchy. Dalit women face severe beatings from the hands of their husbands though they have not committed as such any faults. Through it men show their pride of masculinity and seek to belittle the identity of women. Domestic violence is justified by the institution like marriage which confers an exclusive right to the husband in matters of treatment of his wife. In this novel the narrator's 'Periamma' dies because of the rigorous beatings from her husband in a routine manner (10-11) and Thaayi, another female character in this novel, is mercilessly beaten like an animal with a stick or belt by her husband and if the onlookers protest his brutal behavior, the husband arrogantly declares that he is his wife and that he can do anything to her, even killing her if he wishes (42-43). In the complex web of the hierarchical society, Dalit men are subordinated to the upper castes and in turn subordinate their women. Thus, Dalit women are despised as either animals or objects.

The main target of society's denial of inter-caste marriage is women. The novel narrates a story of a particular *pey* (bad spirit) named Esakki and also describes how the girl is savagely killed by her seven brothers in the name of the honour of the family as she had a relationship with a boy of the Vannan (washerman) caste and married him despite the repeated objections from her brothers. Her brothers, incensed with anger, pretended to reconcile with her and while taking her back home, murdered her in the forest in a most horrible manner. They did not even spare her unborn child and killed it by twisting its neck (50-54). There is another instance of a girl who showed her courage to have an affair with a Palla boy. The girl was beaten and humiliated by her brother and father. The narrator raises the question of losing the honour of a family through inter-caste marriage where if a girl marries outside her caste, the honour and pride of her family is questionable but in case of men the matter is completely different (109). Uma Chakravarti explains it in a very apt manner that a family in India acquires or loses 'honour' through

'proper' and 'improper' conduct of women in which the latter leads to disgrace the 'purity' and reputation of their caste and clans (151).

Bama's novel *Sangati: Events* explores how the Dalit girls and women almost unquestioningly internalize silence as a natural part of their life. These silences are profoundly more meaningful than speech to a woman. When she grows into a woman, she recoils into her silent recesses to mark her protest against injustices, violence and inequalities inflicted on her by both the upper caste and Dalit males.

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