



BAMA'S SANGATI: A DALIT FEMINIST STUDY

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ABSTRACT

'Suppressed Voices' is what the men of literature term it in the world of writing, needless to mention here the African people's voices. It is within India for countless centuries, suppression, subjugation, ostracism, humiliation occur and continues to berejoiced by the large dominant section of the Indian society; the callous conduct against women and the lower castes; both inseparable sections of our society. Regional and English literary discourses barely acknowledged the anguish of the subaltern sections till their own writers articulated their life stories and histories of the communities.

Of the many writers belonging to the subaltern communities, Bama stands towering as the pioneer of the Dalit suppression in the Tamil Nadu state. *Karukkui* is her own manifestation depicting oppression she experienced and *Sangati* is a representation of her community. Bama, a Paraiyan, a lower caste in the state represents the oppressions caused by the upper castes and the women as victims at large. She notably divorces the female of lower caste from the upper castes for their woes still rejoices to have more freedom of choice against the upper caste women in spite of being dually tormented by both upper castes and their own men. What can help the women is to stand for themselves against the hegemonic and gender tides.

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Bama Faustina Soosairaj better known as Bama is one of the foremost authors in the subaltern literature in India. Apart from a Dalit, she is proud to be recognised for her other entities as: writer, teacher, woman, Christian and Tamil but of all these, it is her Dalit-ism that contours and unifies all other identities in one. Further she wants to be acknowledged as a Dalit feminist for she assumes that the Dalit feminism and non-Dalit feminism to be different from each other for the former is subjugated by both the upper caste discrimination and the men of their own caste while the non-Dalit women are subjected to only their own men. Autobiographies with which the Dalit Literature began verbalising, she accentuates, speak truth that

sketches to the reader a warm impression with the author. In *Karukku*, she draws her anguish being an outcaste ie paraiya. The Tamil and literary societies detested Bama for the language and stripping their atrocities on the lower castes. The blow resulted in deeply hurting the upper castes which were ruthlessly condemned by a female Dalit writer. The language, Bama uses is the language of her common people, evading the language norms and its aesthetics.

Paraiya by caste but converted to Christianity as a mass conversion. It is the only community that converted to Christianity on the offerings of free education to their children only to be repented later being deprived of both neither the

Christian privileges nor the state reservation and continued to be lower caste exposed to be oppressed and humiliated at the mercy of the upper caste masters. Caste system in India is such fatal that it refuses to treat a human a human and extends to debase the person from his/her birth even after death as what Bama anguishes over-

Not only from womb to tomb, but even after one's death caste follows and segregates – even in the graves. Stratification of caste is faced at every level – education, employment, religion, marriage, everywhere. (Jaydeep Sarangi)

India as a nation continues to be caste-ridden as long as the Hinduism overpowers in the nation what has been the basis of caste system. Stratification or merit never reflects in terms of what the person is but what caste the person belongs to. The person low or high in social or professional stature experiences caste-ist reproach in his lifetime whether during education, religious ceremonies or rituals or marriage.

Bama's novels set the caste discrimination and gender issues. She ascribes the Hindu religion and its upper class blind followers for the caste discrimination. Bama clarifies her position about her books as the sketch of both the sorrows and tears of Dalit women and also their energetic and rebellious culture-

...stories not only about the sorrows and tears of Dalit women, but also about their lively and rebellious culture, their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter them, but to swim vigorously against the tide; about the self-confidence and self-respect that enables them to leap over threatening adversities by laughing at and ridiculing them; about their passion to live life with vitality, truth, and enjoyment; about their hard labour. (Bama, Preface)

While talking about the book and her women both, Jaydeep Sarangi and Ram Kumar find an internal strength in her works; she illustrates sufferings and potential in the Dalit women. To mention the affirmative arguments in them are negligible but what they possess is a strong dynamic and rebellious culture, energy to tackle life than let loose it and

more prominently vigour to swim against the odd conditions leading them in gaining self-respect. For this strength, they have truth, hard labour and energy to live.

In *Sangati*, Bama is a young witness of the shadowy culture ostracising the lower castes represented in the first part of the fiction and in second a radical activist against the racial discrimination against the caste and women by the ruling upper castes. Her grandma Paati represents three generations observer of repression and mortifications and duly recalls and analyses number of incidents in different practices of subjugation of her community; from her own age, her daughter's age and the age of Bama.

The streets in the village are segregated by the different communities and marginalised principally *pallar*, *koravar*, *chakkiliyar* and *paraiya* the lower castes in one part of the village and upper castes in the other. They are subjected to the upper castes for their employment and livelihood and obviously exposed to their callous and shameful treatment in number of forms. Voicing against them is to lose their livelihood and even the heads of each community would readily accept the immoral act of the upper caste masters than that of their own community folks adding to their affliction. Furthermore the Dalit women are beyond their consideration for their faults as seen being inconsiderably pushed out of the meeting held in respect of Mariamma, Susamma with sad note represents-

What can you say to these men? There's no way of convincing them of the truth, even when we are sure of it. They never allow us to sit down at the village meetings. They won't even allow us to stand to one side, like this. But it's only to us that they'll brag. Ask them just to stand up to the mudalaali. Not a bit, they'll cover their mouths and their backsides and run scared. (Bama 24)

An upper caste Kumarasami Ayya tried to molest Mariamma finding her alone in his farm but she managed to escape and confided in *Paati* Vellaiamma who only hushed her on the pretext of the disgrace to her and the family both. But the crooked man afraid of his reputation approached

the naattaamai; head of the *paraiya* who bounced back on the girl and a boy. The men folk neither allowed the women in the meeting nor punished the culprit on the contrary the innocent girl and boy were punished. Susaimma brings forth the fact that even their measly human right to express their side was smothered— in a way the result favoured the upper caste crook. It is notable here the women, pushed away being humiliated from the proceeding of meeting, stuck to raise their voice whether heard or unheard for the consideration of adjudication. They are depicted as the real voices of revolution against the unjust tide of suppression by both the upper caste and the men of their caste. It was aradical message to both the male supremacies and the upper caste women who endured as scapegoats.

The forte of revolutionising, they believe, was their instinct which they credited to their routine unlike the upper caste women. They, though, subjugated by all means, had faith in themselves to live life, stood for themselves and at times revolted against the cultural shackles that oppressed them. Paati glorifies the women and their life-

If they stay at home, how are they going to get any food? Even their cows and calves will die of hunger then. And anyway, it wasn't just her; more or less all the women in our street are the same. Even your mother spent all day transplanting in the western fields and then went into labour just as she was grinding the masala for the evening meal.

And that is how you were born. (Bama, 6)

Weren't there men earning the living for the family? There were but the quote itself is substantial here in that regard. The men were irresponsible with regard to shouldering the responsibility of their family instead they relied on their women for living that the women earned by their hard labour at home and farm, and above all to remain at their men's service at night without caring for their daylong exertion and tastes. They negated to blindly accept the male power over the women or as written on their foreheads. They believed in their strength than to accept what others believed them to be.

Sangati is a portrayal of number of such occurrences of women's victimisation. The women

tended to undergo the intemperate violence against them by being abused as animals by their own men under the influence of the upper castes that held their animal better than the lower castes. They were imbibed upon by the men that their lives were rendered only to their men with no self for them. Since girls' childhood whether home, school, college or working place, women were groomed in such a way that they accepted to be subordinate against men, even the old women of the community concerned were at forefront in conveying and imbibing upon the younger girls and women about their subalternity and their deprivation to voice for their rights. These are the assumptions about the Dalit woman, *Sangati* helps us reread the Dalit woman as new woman who has her tongue and she would use it.

Here is what the men held for the women as the figurative illustration which is extremely disdainful-

They mean that women are like cattle that need taming. And it is women themselves who often claim that if we are to be kept in check, then men must put talis round our neck. (Bama 120)

Commenting on the cultural oppression of female, Bama presents the severity of the female problem, men regarded women like cattle and wanted them to be tamed. What was grimmer here to note; women themselves would believe that they must be kept in check by putting *talis*; enslaving them through their lives as if they were the male property. In the Indian cultural and social set up and the Hinduism women were hardly respected and their life flouted irrespective of their social stature they received, what most mattered the male was their hegemony over the female in all practices and authority which obviously was forced upon the female to accept. Bama puts in her words as-

They have written it into our foreheads that we must repress and destroy our own needs and feelings, and run about looking after the men and the rest of the family. And we too have believed all this, and prattle on that 'one's husband is one's manifest God'. (Bama 122)

Such upper caste belief percolated even into the subordinate castes unwarily and perceived as the

right notions of society which nevertheless least related to the women of lower castes in many respects. But unlike the upper caste women who were more subjugated by their religion and men, the lower caste women enjoyed more liberty and dared to voice against their evils and refused to accept their men as the manifest gods.

In the case of Mariamma, the women rose for their right to speech and struggled to defend for Mariammai the assembly of men where they were forbidden. They were filled with anger and pain and badly abused, due to the irrationality of the upper caste; Mariamma had to suffer an offended life. She was charged guilty and punished without caring for her life whether she lived and died. Who should be held responsible for the ruin of her life; the upper men or their own voiceless men? Hence the orthodox defiance-

Whether it is right or wrong, it is better for women not to open their mouths. You just try speaking out about what you believe is right. You'll only get kicked and beaten and trampled on for your pains. And it isn't just here that it happens, you know. It's the same throughout the world. (Bama 29)

The women were rebuked for opening their mouths although they had a truth to say. It was extraneous and challenging for the male hegemony to accept the female interference in the proceeding. They presumed the women to be kicked and beaten for fault or no fault – was the justice they held. In this respect Paati very rightly remarked that women were treated feeble in all respects by rejecting even an opportunity to prove their abilities whether mental or physical one. The physical strength of Dalit women were concerned it differed from the upper castes women, as the Dalit women toiled for the day as the head of the family. Their men barely bothered to extend help to their wives nevertheless the women painstakingly dedicated for their families. Paati though the eldest woman in the paraiya community, served in even the most difficult delivery of children, respected by everyone, could not dare to intervene and tell the truth in the Mariamma case which might have been heard and the result would have been different for Mariamma upheld justice. Paati commented that

the physical strength or any strength was just futile once they were born women – big or small, and a single woman would not confront a group of four or five men due to her frailty against a male.

It is difficult to recall the establishment of discrimination against the lower caste and the women but it is extremely rampant. Since the emergence of the *varna* system in India, vicious caste hegemony shrouded the lower castes. Perhaps due to this impression, Bama's mother told her that there was no difference between boys and girls at birth. Unlike the upper caste, the lower castes and the paraiyas, there was no custom of snatching and grabbing or dowry from the girl's side on the contrary the man gave a *parisam* or bride-price to the girl. It was due to the ritual the groom used to gain respect. In spite of such decent history, the historic nation continues to shamelessly witness the palpable marginalisation on account of the *varna* system.

The male assertion of superiority, they believed, was empowered to them from their ancestors and the women were fragile to change the custom. The women rose to represent the women community as they believed in them and strength and felt empowered on account of a little education they had gained. But the men encountered treating the women incapable to change the ancient tradition of hegemony with the knowledge of a few letters of alphabet. So were the views of an upper caste woman Sammuga Kizhavi for the lower caste and their education-

"Move aside, move aside, you children," she said. "As if the entire paraiya community is going to make progress just because these are going to school!" (Bama 39)

Sammuga Kizhavi was annoyed to shoo away from her way the low caste children playing on the path, the latter dared to continue their play even in the presence of the upper caste people – is an evidence of courage from the education they obtained. The education, Bama claims, changes life of the downtrodden castes, it helps accept challenges and rebel against the injustices.

There are number of incidences women voicing for their rights and rebelling against their men. They respected the practices of hierarchy and

male superiority but they expected due reverence and human rights of equality in return. Bama, at a young age, defied the hierarchy-

So what would be so wrong if we changed that and the women ate first? (Bama 30)

Of the number of crucial dialogues on different issues related to women between Paati and young Bama, on Paati's women should eat only after the men ate in spite of doing all the household chores and at times empty stomach, Bama flouting the ritual said that there was nothing wrong if the women ate first.

Bama is a resilient Dalit feminist and avows to empower the Dalit women with all human rights. She wants every Dalit woman to shoulder the duty to free herself and the women community by waging a war against the injustices caused to them by the men. She heralds herself the Dalit feminist crusade by pioneering her autobiography. She states-

But they are not going to think of all this easily nor by themselves. It is we who must uphold our rights. We must stand up for ourselves and declare that we too are human beings like everyone else. If we believe that someone else is going to come and uplift us, then we are doomed to remain where we are, forever. (Bama, 66)

Bama cautions the Dalit women against the men who would never accede and share their rights; women must unite and agitate for their rights as the equal human beings like everyone else. Further the women should lead themselves than to wait for someone else to come and uplift them or their servitude would continue perpetually.

In an interview with Githa Hariharan, Bama articulates the same opinion about the emancipation of the Dalit women. The state of illiterate women who is perceptibly discernible may not rise to agitate for their rights but the literate and educated should categorically do so. Bama's resolution is most characteristic in this regard-

I comfort myself with the thought that rather than live with a fraudulent smile, it is better to lead a life, weeping real tears. (Githa Hariharan)

For centuries; oppression, cruelty and humiliations encompass to subjugate the lower castes and their

women, with a bare resistance to the dominant classes by both sections. Life has continued with different facets of life. Those opposed to the dominant aggression lived a fair life or majority of the masses have been victimised ever since with a façade. Bama disagrees to nurture a false smile but to rebel against this hostile system and lead to live an upright life.

Moreover Bama dedicates her life for the cause of her people whom she wants to help overcome the age-old suppression. Hand in hand with number of other writers, she assumes it her duty to release her people; on a question for being unmarried, she relates it to the mission like-

The existing family system would not give me the space I needed to do my kind of work. So I chose to stay single. My ambition is to communicate the dreams and aspirations of my people, who have remained on the fringes for centuries in Indian history. (Nirupama Dutt)

While dealing with the hegemony of caste, Bama comments on the family system how it causes hurdle in leading and social reformation duty. She upholds her being unmarried for the cause of her people. Would she have been married she would not have been able to fully devote for the aspirations of her people who look at her as their ideal. If one can bring the substantial change in the life of women then the whole women community together would bring back those old days of gender free society and equality to everyone whether man or woman.

Conclusion

Bama, a social Tamil writer activist, reinforces her aggression against the vicious Indian society predominantly and shamelessly humiliating, oppressing and ostracising the subordinate castes in which the Dalit women are dreadfully crushed. Their basic human rights are suppressed even by their own men under the influence of the upper castes whims and fancies. *Sangati* is an ideal portrayal of the women who can 'educate, unite and agitate' to claim equal rights with the men in general. Only education will prove most constructive and fretful in this battle and to reinstate an upright status for the

Dalit women in the society. Bama evidences this with her own case.

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