

DILEMMA OF DALIT WOMEN IN *SANGATI*

In the preceding chapter an attempt was made to conduct a critical study of Bama's first autobiography, *Karukku*. On the basis of our study of the book, predicament of Christian Dalits was underscored in the conclusion of the chapter. In the present chapter an attempt would be made to study the evolution of Dalit gender as a separate identity that demands its own freedom and respect.

Feminism in India can be defined as a set of movements, aiming at defining, establishing, and defending equal political, economic, social rights and equal opportunities for Indian women. Like other feminist counterparts, feminists in India seek gender equality: the right to work for equal wages, the right to equal access to health and education, and equal political rights. Indian feminists, since time immemorial, have fought against the patriarchal issues such as inheritance laws and the practice of widow immolation known as 'Sati'. Though Indian feminism has made progress yet even in the modern times women face the issue of discrimination.

Madhu Kishwar differentiates between Western feminism and Indian feminism. Western feminism, according to him, played a liberating role for women dealing with their own struggles against oppression which did not allow them to participate in many aspects of social, economic and political life of their society. Indian feminism is Western imported and it failed in studying the sociological problems that flow from sex and gender dominance. It failed in studying women in terms of caste and in this sense it can be called 'exclusive' feminism. Kishwar opines that both Western and

Indian feminists fought for their entry into educational institutions and employment. In this respect, Dalit women and Tribal women are excluded even from voting and other fundamental rights. (qtd. in Nagaiah 119)

The *Manu-Smriti*, which is known as the “Law of Manu” defines women as: “By a girl, a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house. In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons, women must never be independent” (qtd in Goure). For the upper caste woman, her family is her world and she argues for self- respect and individuality. However in the case of Dalit woman much before her family, her community is her family, because a Dalit woman is treated as ‘other’, which is the result of age long alienation and Brahmanical values of society. Since time immemorial the Dalit community has been subjected to endless abuse and mistreatment. However, we ignore a fact amidst this oppression that there exists another category of ‘dalits’ amongst dalits. This includes the category of women and that of the Dalit caste those who receive a dual abuse and cruelty: one from the society and the other from their fathers, husbands and even from their brothers. Dalit women constitute and comprised about sixteen percent of India’s total population and eight percent of the total population and most of them feel disillusioned and alienated. Professor Gopal Guru in “The Brahmin and Empirical Shudra” said, “This exclusion of Dalit women from the mainstream women’s movement is not such a bad thing after all: it has caused them to start building their own praxis, identity and agency” (qtd. in Stephen 3).

The experiences of humiliation, deprivation, and isolation by virtue of gender, caste and class of Dalit women, call down for attempt to breakdown the fixed differences between the upper caste and lower caste and men and women, especially in Dalit context. In the Indian context, class,

caste and patriarchy are the three hierarchal instruments which are important for the understanding of caste Hindu, Shudra and Dalit women. Caste oppression, class exploitation and gender subordination are all interlinked. Caste uses gender to construct caste status, power relations and cultural differences and thereby oppresses lower caste women. Thus, three interlocking systems of caste, class and patriarchy create a multidimensionality, simultaneity and intensity of oppression, which is destructive to the experiences of Dalit women.

The voices of the Dalit women have been suppressed and silenced. Therefore, there arises a need to give voice to their experiences and also to build their own theory. Dalit women feel that they have been denied the right to articulate their own visions of emancipation. Their energies have been co-opted to work out the visions of dominant others, by not enabling them to articulate them or towards achieving them (47).

Therefore, in order to view them from a separate perspective there was a need to have a Dalit feminist theory and to define it through the experiences of Dalit female language. So a new word is coined as “Dalit Womanism” in order to understand the life of Dalit woman in a proper manner. This will bring about a situation when Dalit Womanism will depend upon individual experiences of women, their lives and consciousness. (Tomar 2)

Unfortunately, Indian literature and Indian English literature seem to have misinterpreted Dalit women. Dalit women are generally portrayed as victims of the exploitation by the higher caste men. In the writings of Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao, Dalit women are either molested or raped by the upper caste men. However, male writers ignored a fact that the Dalit women can also fight against oppression to maintain dignity. In these literatures Dalit women have been misrepresented and always depicted as a victim, but never fighting back. Prasad opines:

The female characters in Dalit Literature are dynamic and not static. Dalit writers do not look upon widows, prostitutes, deprived women, as Dalit, the exploited, with compassion alone; but they make them towards radiance. In the stories and novels of Annabhau, Shankar Rao Kharat, Baburao Bagul and others, though the nature of the struggle of woman in the beginning is individual, later it becomes class conflict... As a consequence of this, Dalit female characters end the journey of deep darkness and behold dreams of sunrise They fight for truth and for themselves. They revolt to protect their self respect The revolt of Dalit women is not person-centred but society-centred That is why Dalit writers do not portray Dalit women as hollow identities, overflowing with love as embodiments of sacrifice. (46)

Patriarchy is a major issue that has been repeatedly discussed in Dalit feminist discourses. Dalit feminist discourses not only question the mainstream Indian Feminism's hegemony, but also demand the Dalit men to speak for them. Dalit writers like Bama, Gunasekhran, Daya Pawar, Urmila Pawar and many more have recorded their experiences of humiliation and exploitation, with a strong desire to challenge the age old practices and create their own identities.

Bama Faustina is the most distinguished Dalit feminist writer in Tamil. Her autobiographical novel *Karukku* achieved a specific identity. However, her other novel *Sangati*, explores the idea of transformation of rejection into resistance. In *Karukku* she emphasis the relation between the self and the community, but her *Sangati* is only about the community's identity. *Sangati* brings on surface the point how Paraiya women are oppressed, how women are presented as wage earners and who suffer from the burden of their families, and however on the other hand men enjoy their lives lavishly. Women are also vulnerable to sexual exploitation and molestation.

The status of Dalits, especially Dalit women in the present Indian context gets highlighted in the

report of the National Commission of Human Rights of India which reports:

. . . more than 62000 human rights violations are recorded annually. On average, two Dalits are assaulted every hour, three Dalit women and children are raped, two Dalits are murdered and at least two Dalits are tortured or burned every year. (qtd.in Yaspal 32)

Sangati has the signs of all elements of conscious Dalit literature. Bama uses in it a language unfamiliar to the main stream upper caste society. She discards the chaste Tamil expression and employs the oral folk language familiar to her society. She breaks the rules of written grammar and spelling throughout her work, elides words and joins them differently, demanding a new and different pattern of reading in Tamil. Her language is a language of her community and this can pose a challenge to the reader who is not familiar with the nuances of the Dalit language.

The title *Sangati* is true to the narrative technique of the book. It covers various events and notions of several Dalit women. Bama records the struggles, tribulations, frustrations as well as triumphs, joys and survival of Dalit women. The narrator of these events is a young girl in the early chapters who grows pensive due to several events happening around her. As she grows into a young woman she stresses on the need for change and calls out for action against the atrocities happening to girls and women in her community. Bama talks about gender discrimination meted out to Dalit women throughout their lives. The girls are discriminated even during their infancy Bama says, “If a boy baby cries, he is instantly picked up and given milk. It is not so with the girl. Even with breast-feeding, it is the same story; a boy is breastfed longer. With girls, they wean (them) quietly, making

them forget the breast” (*Sangati* 7). Everywhere women are considered as second rate citizens and men as first rate. Boys are given more respect, they are free to play, roam around whenever they feel like, however the girls are restricted to the four walls of the house, so that they can learn household work. In all, *Sangati* paints a painful picture of the condition of Dalit women in the society dominated by people with money and power and also by men.

The book *Sangati* is enclosed with the author’s experience of working within an oppressed society. Several stories of interconnected anecdotes, news, and events are narrated in the book by the author. These narrations contain more than thirty five characters, most of whom are female and deals with several generations of women. The conversations between these generations point out to the changing perspectives as well as to the gains and losses over the years. In *Sangati*, Bama subverts main stream legends and asks relevant questions pertaining to her culture. The story of Thiruvallvar, the great Tamil poet’s wife, named Vasuki, perceived as the epitome of chastity and devotion to her husband, is mentioned to illustrate the subordinate position of women in marriage. The story related to Vasuki stands as a reminder that wives eat their food after their husbands have eaten even when Thiruvallvar lived. Bama offers an alternate folk song about Ananthma of West street who was beaten up for eating crab curry before serving her husband.

The position of women in *Sangati* is both pitiable and humiliating. In the fields they have to escape from the upper caste man’s molestation. At Church they have to lick the priest shoes and serve as his slaves while the Priest threatens them with the tales of God, Heaven and Hell. Even if the Dalits have converted, the existing practices in Christianity did not change. Bama describes in *Sangati* how the Church and its hegemony and class discrimination play on these converts. She illustrates this through the character’s speech that:

Sothipillai shouted angrily, 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 have finished and then march in grandly and sit down before anyone else. I have 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. (*Sangati* 119)

In this way, the novelist underlines the dilemma of Dalit women in *Sangati*. The atrocities of women mentioned herein, in fact, are committed on rural women of any lower class status yet, by and large, the novelist portrays the general conditions of Dalit converts in *Sangati*. Bama discusses the narratives of many women from the Dalit community and through them she puts forth identity of rural Dalit women. The women stand by each other to help each other when there is injustice meted out to them, not only in the society but also in the family circles. Bama does not shy away describing violent domestic and street quarrels. In *Sangati*, we hear the voices of many women some in pain, some in anger, some in frustration and some out of courage.

Sometimes the language of her characters has sexual undertones and through this Bama suggests that it is the sharp tongue of women that can protect them against her oppressors. That is why they speak in crude words and tones. Dalit women have to serve their husbands to their pleasure. They are overwhelmed and crushed by their own disgust, boredom and exhaustion because of all this. The stronger women manage to survive this all; the mentally weak are totally oppressed. The Dalit women never get a proper night's peace and even after working hard all day "they had to please their husbands whenever they demanded it so they never get any rest" (*Sangati* 67). Neither their bodies nor their minds felt rested when they woke up, "The women never get a night's peace and quiet after

working hard all day. They had to pleasure their husbands whenever they demanded it so they never got any rest. Neither their bodies nor their minds felt rested when they woke up” (67). However, in case of Paakkiraj and his wife Raakkamma we see resistance even though the latter uses offensive language. Bama uses the language of a Dalit which challenges the reader. The language is the language of resistance and also of struggle. Paakkiraj abuses his wife publicly, he says, “Keep all your arrogance in your parents’ house in Kuppacchipatti. Don’t try all that here or I’ll crush you to pieces with a single stamp. Remember that! Then he dragged her by her hair, pushed her down, and kicked her lower belly” (61). His wife in a fit of anger abused him in the most obscene language, questioning his masculinity. She shouted all sorts of shit, “How dare you kick me, you low life? Your hand will get leprosy! How dare you pull my hair? Disgusting man, only fit to drink woman’s farts! Instead of drinking toddy everyday, why don’t you drink your son’s urine? Why don’t you drink my monthly blood? And she lifted her sari in front of the entire crowd gathered there” (61). Though Raakkamma had acted in the most unexpected way, but this was the only way to escape the beatings of her husband. This resistance shows the real picture, of how the Dalit women suffer throughout their lives. The Paraiya women have made the effort to make their life peaceful. Here Bama highlights the rebellious character, who acts smartly against all the exploitation and suffering. Bama draws a contrast between the upper class women and dalit women. She says that, “the position of the upper caste women is far worse than that of dalit women” (*Sangati* 65). The dalit women raise their voices, abuses and makes effort to save her. But the upper caste women cannot even do that because they are dependent on their husbands for their living. The upper caste women give superficial impression that they never amongst themselves nor with their husbands. They blame dalit woman for fights and quarrels. But the dalit woman says that, they work in the field and run their entire family, but an upper caste woman stays within the four walls.

Amidst of this exploitation at the hands of their husbands, the narrator tells us about a very interesting custom, where women feel empowered. The narrator tells us that during marriage time it is the bride groom who has to pay the wedding price and not the bride; “the groom gains respect accordingly” (89). *Sangati*, as the name implies, is a mixture of humour and pathos. The book is full of mixed incidents though at every place we talk about the humiliation of women, we also see her rebellious image and also come to know about the different marriage customs. So, we can say that the book is a mixture of different feelings. Women in *Sangati* are shown as hardworking, courageous who work ceaselessly outside and inside the home and also they can manage the home without their husbands as well.

Bama underlines the question of women’s right to franchise but says that the Dalit women are not considered on a par with other castes in so far as their voting rights are concerned. During the days of elections various parties asked them to vote on such and such symbol. But the Dalit women do not care; hardly are they aware of what value their votes carry; they believe that nothing on this Earth can change their situation. Patti says: ‘In any case, everything these parties say is just eyewash’ (102). Patti and the narrator were sitting together and Patti said:

“Nowadays even the landlords have changed their style. They used to belong to all sorts of different parties. Now, it seems one of them, a Naidu, that is, has started a new party, and they’ve all joined him, so it isn’t the party that’s important; it’s the caste that comes first . . . And they separate us in the name of party, God, priest and they play games with us. And we are like grinning puppets in their hands”. (102)

Although the narrator hears all this but she believes that woman today can take up all responsibilities. She feels that all women must start thinking for their own selves, should take

decisions and must act in a smart way.

The terrible violence and abuse of women by their fathers, husbands and even by brothers is the recurrent theme. The novel presents Dalit women as wage earners who struggle all day to earn wages; still they are not given any respect. Indeed they are exploited and are considered as 'other', the condition is both pitiful and humiliating. But on top of that the novel contains theme of growth, decline, culture and enthusiasm of Dalit woman. Even though one witnesses the sufferings of Dalit women, yet at the same time we see the rebelliousness in Dalit women. Bama ends the novel with a hope of better future saying, "Women can make and women can break" (123).

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