



Erasure to Assertion: Dalit Women in Bama's Sangati

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Abstract

It's a matter of great regret to note that women even in this century play second fiddle to men. The condition of

marginalized women in this context is quite inexplicable. Many writers have tried to focus their attention on this unfortunate section of the society. A number of authors have emerged over the recent years to represent them as they are so as to elevate their condition and way of life but no such spectacular improvement is marked in the society so far. Bama through her novel *Sangati* has made her voice more articulate over the deplorable plight of the Dalits in general and the subjugated people of Tamil Nadu in particular. The paper will also try to show the three fold discriminations that these marginalized in their day to day life. Here, Bama has not just portrayed these characters as victims, rather, they have come forward to assert their existence and have put up strong protest whenever they are humiliated and discriminated. Their voice becomes more distinct, serious and acute when they raise concern over the unjust issues they face in life. The author has given a concrete picture of the life of these female characters who maintain their life as worse as their generations of ancestors put together.

Keywords

Dalit, Margins, Erasure, Discrimination, Gender, Subjugation, Assertion.

India is supposed to be the most stratified of all known societies in human history. Indian society is unique as it is based on caste system. The system is unique in the sense that it is conceived of a separating force that divides people high and low on the basis of caste. The system has been backed and legitimized by many factors in general and religious sanctions in particular. As a result casteism persists though it has been challenged in every walk of life. It exists with its myriad variations of confusions and contradictions, rites and rituals, doubts and dogmas.

In the Vedic age, there were Varna scheme of four orders and there was no mention of the untouchables. The varnas were distributed in accordance with duty (job). The last order was constituted with some groups namely the nishada, chandala, paulkasa and ayogava who were at the bottom of the hierarchy but were not treated as untouchables. In the later Vedic age, after the passing of generations together, these people are very slowly and systematically marginalized to the caste gradation and are identified as asprushyas, the untouchables.

Indian caste system had ancient origins. During this period the caste rules and restrictions were made for the Shudras, the untouchables. The laws were designed by the High caste Hindus. The basic feature of this caste rule was to subjugate these people and restrict them from the access of any knowledge and status. This planned scheme proved very successful and became an effective weapon of domination and exploitation. Consequent upon the scheme, a large part of the society remained ignorant and deprived. This section of the society was further deteriorated by increasing division, sub-division and disunion among them.

The untouchables, known today as Dalits, numbering more than 220 millions of Indian population, have been systematically neglected and ostracized from the society over the ages. Differently labeled as Shudras, Ati-shudras, Chandalas, Panchamas, Antyajas, Harijans, and the Scheduled Castes in different periods in Indian history, the Dalits still suffer from the stigma of untouchability in the so called civilized postmodern age of 21st century. Even though some stringent rules have been made to check these rustic, crude and irrational caste laws but in vain. The Dalits continue to live in the deplorable condition.

The untouchables were not recognized as an entity in the society in the past. No attempt was made to recognize them in the society and elevate their status. Politically they were powerless and economically needy. They led a life of complete

deprivation for many centuries. Lord Goutama Buddha, the incarnate of God, was the earliest reformer who reacted to such caste system and preached for its eradication. 19th century witnessed the birth of some social movements which worked for the liberation of these people. Arya Samaj of Swami Dayananda Saraswati was one of them which actively participated in the movement. Mahatma Gandhi made it a national issue and took this movement throughout the country. Namo Shudras Movement founded by Sri Chaitanya also worked for the Dalits in West Bengal. Bhima Bhoi, being a Dalit himself, was seriously victimized and protested against the Brahminical society in Odisha. He stood with his own fellowmen and wrote against the system in the form of poetry. The basic objective of these reformation movements are the abolition of untouchability, eradication of exploitation and restoring equal status with the upper castes. These movements contributed to the emergence of Dalit writers. Earlier they remained voiceless. But these social movements provided them a major breakthrough to raise their voice.

Dalit literature is the literature of protest. It got spread in different parts of the country. In Tamilnadu, Bama, a Dalit fiction writer of high importance, has written for the cause of the Dalits against discrimination on the grounds of caste, genre and religion. In Karukku, her autobiography, she has exposed the politics of caste system and religious conversion. Her fiction Sangati, an autobiography of her community, has attacked the three fold marginalization of the Dalits in the context of caste, religion and gender.

Like men, the Dalit women are also victimized by the upper caste people. They are abused both at home and outside and mostly at the work place. The women lead a very insecure life for fear of rape and molestation. Bama has cited so many instances of such gruesome violence inflicted on these women. Patti is too much concerned with the safety of the women. She makes the women alert while going out to collect firewood.

She warns them not to go to certain parts of the area to drag the lascivious eyes of the upper caste people. She sets the example of Mariamma. Mariamma, once upon a time, on her way back home from forest was molested by Kumarasami. Fortunately she could manage to save her from this imminent danger. When she revealed this incident to her friends, they warned her not to make it public in order to save her from further blame and harassment. Nobody will believe her or take her words into account. It is because she is a Dalit woman. So she decides to keep quiet. They warn her:

"It is best if you shut up about this. If you even try to tell people what actually happened, you'll find that, it is you who will get the blame; it's you who will be called a whore ... Are people going to believe their words or ours". (Bama 20)

But the story of her trouble does not end here. Kumarasami apprehends that his act might spread as news. He makes a plan to come out of this situation. He adopts the method that attack is the best form of self-defense. He complains to the village head of the Paraiya community that Mariamma has behaved him in a dirty and immoral way. The village head takes exception to this unbecoming incident. He fines Mariamma of Rs 200 and forces her to pay. On the other hand, Kumarasami, due to a high caste man, pays only Rs 100 and thereby evades imminent danger and shame and remains in an advantageous position. Mariamma's sufferings gets doubled.

In this context we can agree with Padma Velaskar when he says that in a caste based society both Dalit men and women look alike and suffer alike.

The Dalits have converted to Christianity with the prospect of equality before God. The church is supposed to be against of the caste practice. But the notion is proved wrong. Rather it complicates their problem. The Church confines them and

restricts their freedom. Nowhere are they free from discrimination.

The plight of the Dalit converted Christians becomes more grievous in the church. The novel shows to a great extent how the church and its hegemony play on the Dalit converted. Bama justifies this when the narrator speaks:

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. (Bama 23)

Bama takes note of it seriously. She points out that even before God the Dalits are marginalized. They are the servants of both high class and high caste people. She registers strong protest when she questions: "Why, don't these people need God's blessings too?" (Bama 25)

The text questions the role of conversion from the prospective of Dalits. The basic objective, for which they got converted, did not serve the purpose. They left Hindu society because it was caste ridden. After conversion they did not get any respite of discrimination in Christianity. Change of religion is not a solution. No religion can wipe out the stigma of caste brand. It is as if they carry the brand where ever they go. Bama reacts:

"Why on earth Parayas became Christians, I don't know, but because they did so at that time; now it works out that they get no concessions from the government whatsoever" (Bama: 5).

The predicament of Dalit women is multiplied in the case of conversion. She repents: "Had we stayed as Hindus, our women would have had the chance of divorce at least. But in everything else, we're all in the same position" (Bama: 97).

In *Sangati*, Bama shows the quantum of torture these women have suffered. Even there is gender disparity among the high caste people. The women of lower caste are mercilessly treated. As if they have no individuality and dignity. Their only duty is to serve without any question. Their suffering is synonymous with their life. In case of Dalit women their situation is indescribable and inexplicable. An Italian saying: "a woman like a horse, whether good or bad, requires thrashing." Chinese advice to the husbands is that: "Listen to the counsel of your wife, but act against it." The Spaniards say: "We shall save ourselves from wicked women and should never be captivated by any that have good looks" (Arora 14). In India, the status of women is not different. They are subjugated in many ways: "There is a great discrepancy between the idealized concept of woman in Indian myths and scriptures and her actual situation in life. On the surface she enjoys a very high status and is known as Devi (Goddess), Lakshmi...or Shakthi..., but, in real life, she is harassed, oppressed and tortured in various ways" (16).

This novel explores the exploitation of Dalit women in a great way. She knows the vulnerability of Paraiya women. She creates the characters who can resist the upper castes. While talking on women, Bama comments in an interview:

All women in the world are second class citizens. For Dalit women, the problem is grave. Their Dalit identity gives them a different set of problems. They experience a total lack of social status; they are not even considered dignified human beings. My stories are based on these aspects of Dalit literature...Dalit women have to put up with a

triple oppression, based on class, caste and gender. They die in order to live. ((Limbale 116)

The economic inequality affects Dalit women. Here the women are labor class people working in agriculture and construction fields. Their wage is less than the men. The men earn more and spend leisurely but the women though get less but shoulder all the responsibility of the family. At the same time they become the victims of violence by father, brothers, husbands and mostly the upper caste men. Patti says:

We have to labor in the fields as hard as men do, and then on top of that, struggle to bear and raise our children. As for the men, their work ends when they have finished in the fields. If you are born into this world, it is best you were born a man. Born as women what good we get? We only toil in the fields and in the home until our vagina shrivels. (Bama 64)

Even gender discrimination does not spare new born babies. Even a mother, being a woman, indulges in partiality in taking care of the infants. It happens so due to the psychological construct of the patriarchy. Bama shows:

If a baby boy 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 breast-fed longer. With the girls, they wean them quietly, making them forget the breast". (Bama 69)

The novel provides terrible pictures of oppression, torture and harassment of Dalit women. They work like bonded laborers and animals. They keep themselves busy in hard work both outside and inside. Bama gives a precarious account of miserable life of the Dalit women:

From the moment they wake up, they set to work both in their homes and in the fields. At home they are pestered by their husbands and children; in the fields 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 breath. And once they have collected water and firewood, cooked a kanji and fed their hungry husband and their children, even then cannot go to bed in peace and sleep until dawn. (Bama 22)

It is both a matter of pity and surprise to state that the marginals marginalize their own subordinates and their own people. Bama has pointed out gender discrimination within Dalit community. It is because the society was patriarchal. In other words, in the Dalit society the men victimize the women. In their family, the women were not allowed to eat first. Bama points out:

...even when our stomachs are screaming with hunger, we mustn't eat first. We are allowed to eat only after the men in the family have finished and gone. What, Patti, aren't we also human beings? (Bama, 29)

The Dalit women register the voice of protest in their day to day marital life. They use typical obscene language to hit the male members. Bama shows the feminine protest in the marital conflict between Paakiaraj and his wife Raakkamma. Paakiaraj has assaulted his wife seriously and to which the wife reacts:

Raakkamma got up after kick and wailed out aloud. She shouted obscenities; she scooped out the earth and flung it about. 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 a woman's farts! Instead of drinking toddy

every day, why don't you drink your son's urine? Why don't you drink my monthly blood? And she lifted up her sari in front of the entire crowd gathered there. That was when Paakiaraj walked off, still shouting. (Bama 120)

Sangati shows to the world that the women will no longer be vulnerable to their male mates. Now time has changed. In the age of women empowerment, they enjoy utmost independence and social security. They are now fighting for their right and dignity. A critic has remarked:

As a consequence, Dalit female characters end the journey of deep darkness and behold dreams of sunrise. In the uncivilized world, they accept the civilized path. They fight for truth and for themselves. They revolt to protect their self-respect. They do not brood over the injustices perpetrated on them, nor do they just rave against it, but take up arms and prepare to fight. The revolt of Dalit women is not person-centered but society-centered. The fight for values of these women, who refuse to sit in the shadow of evil persons to avoid starvation, is important. The courage to fight, resoluteness, and rebelliousness are the very essence of their life. (Lanjewar 193)

Thematically, *Sangati* can be divided into two parts. The first part reflects the oppression and sufferings of these women. The second one explores indomitable resistance and fighting spirit against the caste hierarchy, patriarchy and religious disparity. The Dalit women have developed courage, resilience and audacity in the midst of their deplorable condition and have faced life boldly.

Caste oppression, gender subjugation and religious exploitation are all interlined together and pose a threat to the normal and natural life of the Dalits in general and the Dalit

women in particular. So the text provides an account of the life of misery and sufferings of these Dalit people and an attempt has been made to make these people conscious and articulate against these age-old systems. Bama provides a message and at the same time thinks that it is high time not to be gender biased and discriminate accordingly. The novel through and through explores the rebellious nature of the Dalit Paraiya women. Bama herself stands for the cause of emancipation of the whole Paraiya community. Her fighting spirit is evident when she says: "Women can make and women can break". (123)

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