

The Creative Launcher

URL: <https://www.thecreativelauncher.com>

ISSN: 2455-6580

Vol. 6 & Issue 5, (December, 2021)

Publisher: Perception Publishing

Published on 30th December, 2021

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Bama's *Sangati*: A Traumatic Chain of Gender Discrimination

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2021.6.5.09>

Pages: 72-79

Abstract

Sangati (1994), a novel in translation from Tamil to English, is the second work of Bama (b.1958) also known as Bama Faustina Soosairaj, a Dalit feminist. It is a unique novel without any marked plot or central character, and it seeks to explore the impact of a number of discriminations suffered by Dalit Christian women. This paper is a realistic investigation into the text of the novel to find out the events of gender discrimination resulting into subjugation and marginalization of women especially Dalit women, like Vellaiyamma, Mariamma, Thaiy, Vasuki, Maikkani, Maikkani's mother, Esakki and the narrator herself. All of them are exploited by the male members of their family as well as society and bear the traumatic behaviour at every step of their pathetic lives. In the broad light of day, they are entertained as the home servants and in darkness of night; they are treated as an object of sexual satisfaction. Women have been declared as misbegotten and treated as animals, objects of sexual pleasure, and slaves of men who have their birthrights to exploit, to beat, to burn them alive and so on.

Keywords: Gender discrimination, Dalit woman, Parriaya Community, Anecdote, Casteism, Exploitation

Literature is the analytical representation of society with all its components - caste, religion, customs, traditions, man- woman relationship and so on. From the very beginning, literature, be it in any form, has been written with a patriarchal mind set. A number of religious personalities have misogynistic attitude towards women. Saint Albertus Magnus, Dominican theologian, 13th century, commented “Woman is a misbegotten man and has a faulty and defective nature in comparison to his” (Web) Thomas Aquinas, Doctor of the Church, 13th century held the view, “As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten” (web). John Dod, too, had a derogatory ideology regarding the duties of women as he says, “The second duty of the wife is constant obedience and subjection. (Web)

In India also women’s condition has been very pathetic. Since early age a number of illogical trends such as *Sati Pratha*, *Pradha Pratha*, *Baal Vivah*, *Daasi pratha*, have been imposed on women to exploit and marginalize them under the dominance of men. It is more pathetic to know that they had no right to protest or speak against their subjugators and if speak, nobody pays attention to their miseries. In ‘*Garuda Purana*’ it is strictly ordered for women to “follow the laws of Vedas or else you will wrath in hell” (Web). If a woman belongs to Dalit community, the subjugation is double – by the upper caste men and by the man of her own community. They are misbehaved, exploited, subjugated, raped and beaten till death as Bama shows in her novels. In *Karakku* (1992), her debut and autobiographical novel, she depicts the curse of casticism and gender discrimination in Southern Indian state Tamilnadu, where the people of *Paraiyya* community had converted to Christian for the sake of Education and equality to their children. She explores the misogynistic attitude of the society for Dalit women who, like Bamma, have to drink the poison of casteism and gender inequality at every step of their lives.

The novel *Sangati*, written in 1994 and translated from Tamil to English by Lakshmi Holmstrom, is not the autobiography of an individual rather it is the chronological record of the events of subjugation and exploitation of women for three generations – the generation of Vellaiamma, the grandmother of the narrator, the generation of narrator’s mother and that of the narrator. The novelist rigorously explores the minute details of male hegemony and dominant attitude towards women who are mistreated and exploited so many times in a single day.

The word ‘Sangati’, in Tamil means ‘Events’ as the front cover page of the novel indicates. The novel is divided into twelve chapters dealing with a number of anecdotes replete with the pains, sufferings, miseries, despair, hopes, and subjugation of Dalit women who are treated as games like animals even in 20th century. The author herself declares the purpose of penning down this novel in her acknowledgement as:

My mind is crowded with many anecdotes: stories not only about the sorrows and tears of Dalit women, but also about their lively and rebellious culture...passion to live life with vitality, truth, enjoyment; about their hard labour. I wanted to shout out these stories. (ix)

In the preliminary chapters of the novel, the narrator is a young girl who is shown to have a discussion with her grandmother about the real experiences of the old lady and her contemporary women. Normally the novel seems to have no dominant plot but the stories of exploitations related to the female protagonists like Maariamamma, Maikkani, Thayi, Essaki, Mukkama, Irulaggi, Rakkamma and the narrator, etc. are based on human relationship physical, psychological and social to construct a stronger plot of the novel. The novelist has exposed minutely when and where a female has to face gender discrimination. She has to face discrimination in:

- The home of her own parents
- Playing games
- Earning wages
- Choosing her husband outside her caste
- The home of her husband
- Having extra-marital affair or divorcing her cruel husband
- Community *Panchayat*
- Celebrating festivals etc.

Bama very realistically, throws light on the ways how a Dalit girl child suffers a lot and faces the derogatory process of growing as a woman. Children have to go through the illogical and outdated traditions and customs as per their gender, the basis of discrimination with them. They are tormented, deprived of certain basic needs and even the girls are sold for the sake of money. The narrator recalls her early days and grieves to remember the visit of the Christian churchmen, the representative of the Christian religion, to the people of her community in her village named Perumaalpatti to convert them from Hindu to Christian for getting education and avoid the discriminations, they had to face due to their untouchable caste. The boys start going to school but the girls are not allowed for the same as “They had enough to do at home anyway, carrying the babies around and doing the housework” (7). The girls have to be victim of discrimination even when they are breast-feeding babies. Their mother, a woman herself, starts making a difference between a boy baby and the girl baby. The narrative shows,

If a boy baby cries, he is instantly picked up and given milk. It is not so with the girls. Even with breast-feeding, it is the same story; a boy is breast-fed longer. With girls, they wean them quickly, making them forget the breast. If the boys catch an illness or a fever, they will run around and nurse them with the greatest care. If it's a girl, they'll do it half-heartedly. (7)

The narrator has a long experience of watching her grandmother, Patti as she calls her, and other ladies in her community as to how they pay much attention to the life style of the boys for providing them with proper and timely food and other things they desired but, on the other hand, the girls are given the leftover food and fruits to survive while they have to work from the time they start walking. She remembers the biased behaviour of her grandmother, who always calls the grandsons first,

If she brought cucumbers....and gave them... If she brought mangoes, we would only get the skin, the stones and such; she gave the best pieces of fruits to the boys. Because we had no other way out, we picked up and ate the leftover skins. (7-8).

In patriarchal society the boys are treated as the permanent members of the family to take care of the parents in their old age and to perform the rituals of funeral after death while the girls are transient members or *Paraya Dhan* who will be married to someone today or tomorrow and sent to another family. So they have no important role to play in the family of her own parents. This concept creates prejudice even in the mind of the parents who, for the sake of false traditions and customs, discriminated between their own flesh and blood. Simon de Beauvoir in her book '*The Second Sex*' (1949) rightly makes a comparison between the status of male and female by saying, "She is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the 'subject', he is absolute – she is the other." (16) The girl child has to follow a number of social taboos and etiquettes which compelled her to think of her status in the family and society. Consequently, the girls became isolated, depressed and frustrated and ask a number of questions as the narrator in the novel, asks her grandmother,

Why can't we be the same as boys? We aren't allowed to talk loudly or laugh noisily; even when we sleep we can't stretch out on our backs nor lie face down on our bellies. We always have to walk with our heads bow down, gazing at our toes 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? (Sangati 29)

Simone de Beauvoir, a feminist-author rightly states in her book '*The Second Sex*' (1949), "One is not born a woman rather becomes one." (281). i.e. Woman is not born fully passive, secondary, nonessential, submissive, frightened and compelled rather she is gradually shaped by her situational upbringings. It is not only biology that determines what makes a human a woman - a woman is trained to have a secondary and dependent creature by her parents and others in her surroundings. Tahira.S. Khan, in her book *Beyond Honour: A Historical Materialist Explanation of Honour-Related Violence* rightly writes:

In patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal societies, women have always been attached to the male members of the family. Women could never have class, caste, creed, or language of their own other than that of the men of their family. (2006:137-138)

The discrimination with a girl is started at her birth and does not end even at her death. The writer opines that the male child is always given preferences in each and every field of life – be it feeding, eating, education, playing and marriage. They can eat as much as they need and play what they want and when they please but the girls have to stay at home to work all the time "cleaning vessels, drawing water, sweeping the house, gathering firewood, washing clothes." (7) After completing this, they are not free to play as per their will; rather they are compelled to play only cooking and getting married, *thattaangal* or *thaayam*. But if anyone of them tries to play boys' games like "*kabadi* or marbles or *chellaangucchi*", she is mocked and abused as the narrative witnesses the people saying, "She's just like a donkey, look. Look the way she plays boys' games". (7)

Bama highlights socialist-feminism, by speaking of the grievances of the Paraiya women who are presented as wage earners. They worked very hard in fields, factories and building-sites for their livelihood. But it is shame on male dominated society that they are paid

less than men are for the same work. Moreover, men are free to spend their earned money as they wish while women have to spend it to fulfill the needs of the family throughout their lives.

Life for Dalit girls is not a bed of roses rather it is harder than to commit suicide but Bama makes her characters so strong and courageous that they suffer their exploitation in hope of a shining line in clouds. They have to become labourer even in their homes where their childhood is snatched by their own. They cannot go for playing because it is their undisputed duty to take care of their younger siblings. Maikkanni is one of those children, who have to start working from the day she “learnt to work... Her mother had to go out to work in the fields. It was Maikkanni who looked after all the tasks at home.” (70) The narrator says that the mother of Maikkanni is equal to the narrator in age but she eloped and married when she came of age. Maikkanni was born unlucky because just after her birth, her father developed illicit relationship with another woman and he left to live wither and never took care of his real wife who had to work hard to take care of her seven children, because he came and seduced her to procreate child after child. Whenever her mother delivers a child, Maikkanni has to go for a risky work in a match factory where a large number of Dalit girls, below the age of fourteen, work to earn two times food and when her mother starts working in the fields, she has to take care of the new born baby along with working hard at home. She has lost her golden period of childhood by working in the factory and at home. The write says,

From the time she woke up, she sprinkled the front yard with water and swept it, and then carried on with all the housework: swept the rest of the house, scrubbed the cooking pots, collected water, washed clothes, gathered firewood, went to the shops, and cooked the Kanji. She did it all, one after the other. (70)

Bama depicts the predicament of Dalit woman in such a realistic way that we can have a glimpse of the exploitation and subjugation of the women who faced physical violence like lynching, whipping and canning by the male members of their own family. The male members can do what they want, even go for polygamy to have more than one wives as Maikkanni’s father have, but the woman is not allowed even to marry someone of her own choice. If she tries to do so, she is cut into pieces by her brothers and father for sake of their so called respect in society.

The writer recalls the anecdote of Esakki, the only sister of seven brothers who loved her more than their lives. She was once a happy girl with her parents and brothers but things change as she starts loving a boy of *Vanaan* caste. Her brothers did not tolerate that their sister should earn defame for family by loving another caste person so they, being angry, threatened her not to have a relationship with that person. But she eloped with her lover and settled somewhere in another town. According to male dominant society, it was a big blot of shame on Esakky’s family. So, to recover their lost respect in society, her brothers found her somehow and by pretending to bring her back for the first delivery, they took her home where, “they gagged her, ties her hand and foot, thrust her into a covered cart so that nobody could see her, and drove her away into the jungle.” (53) In the darkness of the night, they became cannibals and villains. Their love for her sister turned into strong hatred to kill her very brutally. The narrator’s grandmother is very horrified to explain the crime of killing Esakki and baby in her stomach. “They... with one sweep of a sword separated her head from her body. They sliced

open her stomach, took out the baby, twisted its neck, and killed it.” (53) This honour-killing happened because she loved someone out of her caste. If she had been a man, nothing would have happened to him rather he would have been free to love and marry according to his will.

Dalit girls are exploited not only by members of their family but also by the men of high caste who are supported indirectly by the head (Naattaami) of the Dalit community. They are not safe at home, in fields and even in factories. Mariamma, a teen ager, was subjected to molestation by Kumaraswami Ayya, an upper-caste landlord in his field where she went to drink water. Somehow she saved herself from being raped and ran away from there. He did not care of the girl’s psychological and mental agony rather he was afraid of his own reputation and he, without any delay, went to Naattaami to make a false claim that he witnessed Mariamma and Mannikam, having some illicit activities in his field. He called for a Panchayat which was also biased not to allow the women to speak in their defense. She had to face humiliation and insult for the mistake she had never committed and accepted. She was so much shocked that she spoke nothing, not even a single word came out of her throat as if she were dead. Her father also beat her and forced her to accept the crime but she did not. The society degrades the existence of girls and dehumanizes them. These insults broke the women psychologically and mentally into pieces and they committed suicide. “Mariamma didn’t sleep a wink that night. She even thought that it might be best to hang her by a rope. She sat and wept all the night long” (27). Within their community, the power rests with men as the caste-courts and churches are male-led. It was the height of discrimination that nobody asked Manikkam who was also alleged to be engaged in the false crime. The Naattaamai ordered Mariamma “to pay a fine of Rs. 200 and Manikkam only a fine of Rs.100.” (26) Even the fine is gender biased. Nobody allowed the women, standing at the back side of the Panchayat to defend her by analyzing the situation and fact. The narrator who is filled with anger says, “If only they had allowed the other women who had gone to collect firewood with her to speak out at the assembly, all the lies and all the truth would have come out.” (28) She was completely made a scapegoat whom the Parriaya people watched silently because they were afraid of losing their labour job in the fields of the upper-class persons.

The exploitation and humiliation of Mariamma does not stop here, rather she has to pay the cost of saving herself from being raped throughout her life. There was nobody to marry such a girl who was declared to be in sexual relationship with someone else. Even the women did not show any mercy and compassion towards her. Mariamma’s father, Samudrakani, was also doubtful of her character and said to Patti, “Is there smoke without fire? Who’s going to marry her now that she’s lost her reputation?” (41), so he decided to marry Mariamma with Manikkam, a drunkard and gambler who is not a human being rather an animal. The writer says, “It will be like raising a parrot and then handing it over to a cat.” (41). After marriage her life became more pitiable and full of blows, kicks and beating everyday without speaking even a single word against subjugation.

Thayi, the most beautiful lady in Paraya community, was also victim of marital disharmony. Every day, her husband beat her mercilessly with a leather belt leaving “red weals” (42) on her complete body. Just because of her beauty, he was doubtful of her character and called her a whore. It is quite pathetic to be beautiful for woman in Dalit community. One

day when he was beating his wife Thaiy mercilessly in the street, a neighbor named Karuthamuthu came out in protest but her husband became more furious and said with authority, “she’s is my wife, I can beat her or kill her if I wish. Go and mind your business.” He started abusing Thaiy in more disgusting way, “You common whore... you mother fucker’s daughter. You can go with ten men” (42). Thus with the help of a number of characters’ anecdotes, the writer is successful enough to depict the predicament of Dalit women who are ill-treated and beaten up and exploited by different men in the society especially by their husbands. Both the husband and wife worked hard in the fields. The husband went straight to the *Chavadi* to have a talk and gossip with others and returned only for having meal but the wife at home had to wash utensils, clean the house, collect water, cook food, feed the husband and children before they sleep, eat only what is left over and go to bed but could not “sleep until dawn. Night after night they must give in to their husbands’ pleasure. Even if a woman’s body is wracked with pain, the husband is bothered only with his own satisfaction.” (59)

After a minute reading and analysis of the novel *Sangati*, it can be concluded that it describes a long chain of traumatic events which witness the marginalization and exploitation of Dalit women in each and every field of life as the novelist herself experienced in reality. Although the novel *Sangati* is filled with the stories of women subjugation, exploitation and domestic violence yet the sense of modernity is also reflected in this novel. Bama, through the depiction of ‘Raakkamma’ and other women, discusses the increasing awareness of women about their power to revolt against domestic violence. Whenever, her husband tries his limit to beat her, she protests and revolts in a language full of expletive with sexual undertones. Bamma seems to make a comparison between the women of her community and those of upper castes. She, through an old woman ‘Sammuga Kizhavi’ ridicules the Upper-caste landlords and their submissive women who are unable to enjoy the simple events of life like working together, eating food, bathing, singing, and celebrating the ritual attaining puberty, vivid description of marriage, singing songs, cooking and sharing food. In rural areas, the Dalit women are self-dependent to earn their livelihood and take care of family even without men like Maikkani and her mother. Bama is much satisfied to discuss the system of widow remarriage and wearing (tali) the sacred thread as a binding symbol which is not found in other communities. Through this novel, Bama visualizes the trauma of gender discrimination with all its inhuman effects and makes a strong appeal for a positive change in different fields of Dalit women’s life including identity, sexual status, and gender equality on work place, educational and religious institutes.

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The Creative Launcher

An International, Open Access, Peer-Reviewed & Refereed Journal in English

Vol. 6 & Issue 5, (December, 2021)

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