

Resistance, assertion of identity and pride of the subaltern women in sangati

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Abstract

This paper intends to explore the ways in which Bama's "Sangati" portrays the subaltern women who resist oppression and assert their identity as dalits against the patriarchal and caste tyrannical society. It talks about the lopsided norms of the society, and vividly explains the caste system in India, position of dalit women as the subaltern and representation in dalit writing.

Keywords: dalit, caste, hinduism, people

Introduction

India, a country identified for its remarkable resources and culture has been well known for a caste system in practice for several decades or centuries that find its origin from Hindu scriptures since ancient times. Segregation of castes or "jatis" had been carried out based on their occupation which was and is believed to be the reward of their deeds in their previous birth. The Indian caste system consists of four primary castes namely, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Shudra who were priests, warriors/nobility, farmers/traders/artisans and tenant farmers/servants respectively. There were another group of people called the "untouchables" who were excluded from this four-fold caste or varna system due to the impure and polluted nature of their occupation. In the 1930s they called themselves "Dalit", which means "oppressed", and suffered intense exclusion and oppression in society [1]. Though this segregation is based on the Hindu principle of pollution and purity, it is also pointed out that the caste system is related to the Indian society and not Hinduism alone, since such a system is prevalent among Indian Christians and Muslims as well.

Dalits who were placed outside the varna system had the lowest social status. They worked in what were seen as menial or polluting jobs. India's treatment of dalits has been described by some authors as "India's hidden apartheid" wherein they suffer from social segregation and restrictions, in addition to extreme poverty [2]. They were denied temple entry and water from the common source since the upper castes considered any kind of association with the dalits as impure. Even a dalit's shadow was believed to pollute them.

Due to this, most villages remained segregated by caste and dalits endured social isolation, humiliation and discrimination based exclusively on their birth status. Therefore dalits became the subaltern, who belonged to regions and groups outside the hegemonic power structure and were referred to as the marginalized groups who were denied agency by their social status. To cite Spivak, Subaltern is "not just a classy word for oppressed... in postcolonial terms everything that has limited or no access..." [3]. In addition to such oppression is the disturbing fact that social discrimination continues to exist even within the dalit community for women.

The seventies and the eighties witnessed writings influenced by Marxist ideology that included experimental narrative

structure and positing of debates regarding ethical and social issues that influenced Tamil culture [4]. Literary criticism on dalit literature in Tamil has been focusing on issues such as dalit identity and self-articulation and questions notions that perceive dalit women as mute sufferers and romanticized submissive beings. It addresses exploitation of dalit woman's body and shows how the family as an institution is structured within the patriarchal oppressive system that is blatantly unjust to women.

In the article, "Tamil Dalit Literature: an overview", B. Mangalam gives a detailed account of dalit literature and on Bama's contribution to it [5]. The author urges the literary critics to start a critical exercise with justice so that they can properly evaluate the vibrant, multi-faceted, articulate and radically innovative dalit creative writings in Tamil which have been witnessed in recent years.

Dalit women are oppressed by the upper caste and dalit men as well and are potential victims of patriarchy and caste hegemony. Some feminists like Chakravarty observe that they face triple oppression: as subject to caste oppression at the hands of the upper caste, as laborers subject to oppression by upper and middle castes (landowners), as women who experience patriarchal oppression at the hands of all men including men of their own caste. (Chakravarty 142). The critic also feels that only when Dalits record their real life experiences in an autobiographical or fictional mode, Dalit literature would be able to create its own space in Tamil literary world.

She observes that Bama's contribution to Dalit literature is significant as Bama makes a striking departure from the norm and uses colloquial speech in her writing. In Sangati, the use of confessional and conversational mode of narration gives a unique identity and recognition to dalits. Bama's writing celebrates dalit women's lives, their wit, humor, resilience and creativity.

They are shown as hardworking, courageous women who have the ability to manage the household work and fend for their families as well and are set in contrast to their men folk who are often caught up by the police and whose contribution to their families is meager or nil. The bonding within the dalit community and the solidarity among dalits in the cheri (Dalit community) are emphasized. Sangati renders a positive picture about dalit women and simultaneously portrays the pressures of work at home, in the fields or work place, the exploiting nature

of men and ways in which they encounter such issues.

Dalit writing can be perceived as political writing, a strategy of resistance to social oppression and assertion of identity which has gained influence through the help of dalit publishing houses and translations [6]. Bama through her writing aims at influencing her target group and motivates dalits to establish their lives constructively. This is achieved by laying a lot of emphasis on empowerment of dalits through education. Therefore, Sangati can be called as cultural biography of a community and a powerful feminist narrative [7].

As mentioned earlier, dalit women not only encounter oppression caused by caste discrimination but also prove their strength, value and equality by opposing and resisting the patriarchal system. In a society that holds "one justice for men and quite another for women", that never allows women to sit at the village meetings, there are some women who would stand up for justice and boldly voice their opinions. The more they are suppressed, the more they tend to burst out. The attempts of patriarchy to completely silence women fail at such instances.

In the essay "The Argumentative Indian", Amartya Sen says, "women's traditional role in debates and discussions has certainly been less pronounced than that of men in India" [8]. This is evident in Sangati when Mariamma is falsely accused. Yet amid men and few women who blindly believe the words of their Mudalali and condemn Mariamma, a woman named Kaliaamma boldly confronts the injustice done to her saying, "This is really unjust. Look at the cheek of the mudalali. He came here as fast as he could and told his fibs" and mocks her community as cowards who "will cover their mouths and their backsides and run scared."

Bama, confronts her paatti, when necessary and fearlessly blames the elders who have been biased on the upbringings of girls and boys. She says, "It's you folk who are always putting us down." Bama's writing celebrates dalit women's subversive strategies to overcome their oppression. While most women become submissive to their alcoholic, violent husbands in order to escape physical violence, Bama shows some who wrestle with them. The latter indulge in devising their means of survival and resistance to escape exploitation. Raakkamna in Sangati becomes another striking example of how women resist physical harassment when beaten and humiliated beyond tolerance. She decides to stop her husband's tyranny in a way which women usually don't. She throws obscenities and lifts up her saree in front of the entire crowd gathered on the street stating that, "If I hadn't shamed him like this, he would surely have split my skull in to two, the horrible man." When the man shows the strength of his muscle, the woman chooses to reveal the sharpness of her tongue" and her act is justified since it is realized that it was her only means of escape.

Due to the growing awareness of people and changes in law that aims at empowering dalits, society has been witnessing a drastic improvement in the conditions of dalits recently. Education has certainly awakened the dalit Women and empowered them. Their awareness offers them the courage to resist and enables them to benefit from the provisions of law. The impact of such empowerment is vividly depicted through the narrator in Sangati who is unable to digest the cruelty meted out to a girl who loves a boy of another caste, advises them to lodge a police complaint. "What if you went to the police station, just as you are with all your bruises, and made a complaint?" She not only thinks that "this girl must marry that boy "but also guides them to marry with the Priest's permission.

Bravery and assertion is not only found among the younger generation in Sangati but also among the old. Sammuga Kizhavi who is proud by nature deliberately bathes in the well of a landlord in spite of the restriction. When caught red-handed, she says, "Ayya, the water in your well is not at all good. It's all salty...he couldn't even approach her because she was standing half naked." Enraged by his complaint to the Naattaamai, she contaminates his drinking water pot with her urine.

It becomes clear that such an outrage occurs when people are oppressed. Women always actively contested such violence. They fought back, complained loud and hard and did not experience the shame and isolation that so often characterize domestic violence in the upper caste. Therefore it is evident that dalit Women do not always remain passive nor do they perceive themselves as people destined for such a treatment. They are conscious of their worth, caliber and are proud of their identity. Bama eventually brings out the fact that there are some aspects in dalit culture that are sensible and modern [9]. In contrast to the upper caste women, dalits enjoy a more fortunate life style. They are not confined within the code of behavior for womanhood as dictated to the upper caste women by patriarchy. For example, marriage is not a very expensive affair since bridegroom shares the expenses. The caste system under which the so called upper caste come, have put forth different rules and norms for the women and men. They are bound to offer dowry and meet the demands of the bridegroom. "They borrow right and left, lose out here and there and get a girl married" and for this reason they grieve when a female child is born. The widows lose all their happiness, and are asked to give up all their desires and are made lifeless.

The dalits have no such troubles and some communities even have the right to remarry or end their marriage. Women rarely wear the mangalsutra, so when the husband dies she is not expected to remove it like the upper caste or keep away from flowers and kumkum. Such freedom certainly places the dalit Women above the upper caste women. The freedom to choose fills them with pride and gives them a remarkably enviable position. They set themselves against the upper caste women and find they are far more free and privileged in life despite certain similar areas of suffering. Through the assertion of their pride and privilege, which arises out of such comparison, they show their revolt against the notion that dalits, especially women are under absolute slavery.

Unlike the upper caste Women they have, the freedom to work and stay economically independent to a considerable extent as it seems that, "at least our women work hard and earn their own money and have a few coins in their hands. They don't hold out their palms to their husbands for every litter expense, like those others"

Dalit Women confidently exhibit and assert their physical and emotional strength which is undoubtedly higher than the upper caste women. They don't "shrink like cobras" all the time, but question why they should endure torment under patriarchy and caste system, when they have their own strengths and capabilities. Thus, they strongly believe that they deserve equality and respect and resist oppression in all possible ways. In spite of the hectic work schedule which dalit women follow every day, they enjoy life to a great extent and are aware that such freedom is denied to the upper caste who never get all the fun. Though, the upper caste women are considered as superior, wealthy and powerful, they live under absolute subordination

and confinement, whereas, dalit women have a brighter way of perceiving life and a deeper meaning to their living, which is closer to nature. In Sangati the subaltern or the dalits do not regard themselves as inferior to their upper caste. In fact, they have their own solidarity and feel proud of their position and Bama chooses to highlight these aspects in the novel.

The subaltern women in Sangati do not hesitate even to criticize the religious leaders and point to the fact that what they preach and practice contradict each other. Through Sangati, Bama as a representative of the dalit women shows her resistance by saying, "I often get angry enough to shout it out aloud. I am a pararchi; yes I am a pararchi. And I don't like to hide my identity and pretend I belong to a different caste ... Are we so despicable?" She directly addresses the other subaltern women saying "we must not live like people who choose to be blind though they can see. If we ourselves, do not change our condition, then who will come and change it for us?"

Dalits who are treated as commodities, have been encouraged to shout out their selfhood, their 'I' when they rise up. "Dalit solidarity must discover its oneness with dalits...all dalits must challenge the existing world systems which have mismanaged the earth community to the brink of disaster" Shah, Ghanshyam, (23) ^[10]. "There is an appeal in their writings to become conscious of rights and demands...they want them to realize the duplicity and hollowness of the ruling ideas of hegemonic classes ^[11]. Sangati which shows instances that promotes the same, impacts peoples' minds and their attitude towards life. Bama's own life serves as a powerful tool to encourage and revive the dalits. Rebellion has always been an inevitable part of dalits and their efforts towards change have been optimistic too. Sangati incorporates various aspects that surround dalit women and uses the same as instances that prove their strengths and capabilities which emerge from realization of self-worth and pride.

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