

Voice of the Oppressed: A Study of Bama's *Sangati* from a Dalit Feminist Perspective

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In *Sangati*, many strong Dalit women who had the courage to break the shackles of authority, to propel themselves upwards, to roar (their defiance) changed their difficult, problem-filled lives and quickly stanching their tears. *Sangati* is a look at a part of the lives of those Dalit women who dared to make fun of the class in power that oppressed them. And through this, they found the courage to revolt (Bama, Preface, *Sangati* vii).

Although India is greatly known for its rich and glorious social, cultural and spiritual traditions, the Hindu society has unfortunately remained a fragmented one from time immemorial due to the deep-rooted caste system. Several saints and social reformers since the Medieval period have taken great pains to abolish the malicious caste system in India but in vain. Despite the fact that Hindu spirituality preaches the message of equality among all living beings the Hindu society has certainly failed to practise the principle of universal brotherhood and egalitarianism. As a result, the traditional Hindu society has been divided into four major hierarchical caste systems: such as Brahmins (the priestly castes), Kshatriyas (the warrior castes), Vaishyas (the trading castes), Shudras (the servile castes). Apart from this four-fold caste structure there is a separate category of *ati-Shudras* (the fifth Varna). The *ati-Shudras* are now called Dalits. These Dalits occupy the lowest position in the Hindu social order. Even the holy scriptures of Hinduism such as the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Samhitas*, the *Puranas* and the epics like the *Ramanayana* and the *Mahabharata* not only support the caste-oriented social structure but also justify the slavery and serfdom of the Dalits. Manu, the codifier of Hinduism, in his book, *Manu Smriti*, framed the rigid rules and regulations to be observed by the Hindus for the perpetuation of the caste system in India. Since the Vedic period the caste system has been a socio-cultural menace of the Hindu society in India.

The term 'Dalit' is derived from the Sanskrit root 'dal' which means split, torn asunder, broken to pieces, ground, scattered, suppressed, crushed and destroyed. The current usage of the word can be traced to the 19th century when Mahatma Jotirao Phule, a renowned Marathi social reformer and revolutionary, used it to describe the outcastes as age-long victims of the caste-system. Dalits include the historically discriminated people of the lowest castes such as Mahars, Mangs, Mallas, Chambhars, Parayars and Pulayars. They have been contemptuously identified in different ages as Dasa, Dasyu, Rakshasas, Asura, Avarna, Nisada, Panchama, Mlechha, Svapaca, Chandala, Achuta, Untouchables, Harijans, Scheduled Castes etc. They have been socially segregated, economically exploited, culturally ostracized, politically dominated and traditionally condemned to menial work in society. Being regarded as traditionally and ritually impure the Dalits have been associated with occupations such as cleaning streets, latrines and sewages, tanning leather, removing the bodies of dead animals and butchering. Since they have been doing filthy and abominable work they have been treated as untouchables by the upper caste people. Dalits had been undergoing the worst experiences of injustice and cruelty and had been leading

dehumanized and degraded lives as a result of caste-based tendencies. Their presence was normally banned from the localities of upper caste people. They were forbidden to enter the temple to worship God and to draw water from the common wells. Great saints and philosophers such as Valmiki, Ved Vyas, Sauni, Ram Harshan, Thiruvalluvar, Kabir, Tukaram, Namdev, and Chokhamela belonged to low castes. But the Hindu society has been treating the Dalits worse than animals. The untouchables have been systematically taught that they have no history, no literature and no civilization.

Though the practice of untouchability was formally abolished by the Constitution of India in 1950 Dalits are still subjected to social, economical and political discrimination. In the 1960s some vibrant young Dalit intellectuals started a Dalit progressive movement called Little Magazine in order to revolt against the traditional caste-oriented social order. They drew inspiration from Black literature and Black Panther Movement in America. Their protest against caste discrimination and established social structure found expression in the form of a new literature called Dalit literature.

Dalit literature, a post-Independence literary phenomenon, has established itself as an integral part of Indian literature. It gained a tremendous significance in India as a literature of protest, resistance and marginality after 1960 in India. Dalit literature has acquired both national and international prominence with more and more Dalit literary works from different Indian languages getting translated into English. Dalit literature is basically written with a Dalit vision and ideology, and it has been very much influenced by Marxism, the American Black Movement and Buddhism. It portrays the pain, agony, distress, anguish, sorrow and the suffering which the oppressed and marginalized sections of people have been undergoing at the hands of the upper caste people for several centuries. Being written from the Dalit point of view Dalit literature has the fundamental aim of not only liberating Dalits from social slavery and economic exploitation but also creating a new and separate identity for Dalits. Like Afro-American literature which raises its voice of protest against social injustice and racial discrimination perpetrated on blacks by the whites in America, Dalit literature is about Dalits' revolt against social and political domination by the upper castes, Dalits' search for identity, self-pride and their assertion of human rights, Dalits' personal and collective sufferings, their hopes and aspirations to form a new society based on the values of liberty, equality and fraternity. As a collective voice of the oppressed and marginalized communities Dalit literature first appeared as a new kind of literature in Marathi language and subsequently in Hindi, Kannada, Telugu, Punjabi and Tamil languages. It intends to awaken Dalit consciousness and exhorts Dalits to fight for equality, freedom, social justice and human dignity. With its unique ideology and perception Dalit literature first appeared in the form of self-narratives such as poems, short stories and autobiographies. Though other forms of literature like novels and non-fictional works were written later by prominent Dalit writers Dalit autobiographies have become prominent and have attracted the attention of readers all over the world.

Dalit literature is an experience-based literature. It questions the critical theories of the Eastern and Western literatures, the established role models, the upper caste ideology, the formulated aesthetics of traditional literatures and the established laws

of canonical literature. The writers of Dalit literature do not give importance to the use of similes, metaphors and symbols in their writings. They avoid ornamental language but make use of the language of outcastes and the untouchables. They do not believe in the Hindu concept of Karma and the theory of rebirth but portray the hard reality of life. Authenticity and genuineness have become the hallmark of Dalit literature. According to M. Kannan and Francis Gros:

Dalit writing has tended to consist of testimonies rather than works of imagination, chronicles rather than artistically conceived texts, lived experiences rather than poetic experimentation, and finally, a call for action rather than the conversion of life into art (qtd by Lakshmi Holmstrom in Introduction, *Sangati* xxi).

In the words of Darshana Trivedi:

Dalit literature is a journey from main stream literature to marginal literature, from grand narrative to little narrative, from individual identity to group identity, from ideal to real, from vertical literature to spiral literature, from self-justification to self-affirmation. This is the celebration of difference (7).

Even though men and women in Dalit communities face social, political, religious and traditional restrictions and are treated as outcastes by the upper caste people Dalit women suffer more due to irrational discrimination within their own communities. In fact, a Dalit woman is treated as a Dalit among Dalits. Dalit women not only face caste, gender and class oppression in the hands of higher caste men but they also experience violence and discrimination in the hands of Dalit men. In Dalit communities men are obviously dominant and they illtreat women at homes. Dalit women have been socially oppressed, politically sidelined, economically exploited and domestically isolated. Like the women of upper castes Dalit women want to enjoy the human rights such as the right to lead a peaceful life with adequate comforts, the right to enjoy freedom from cruelty, inhuman treatment and bondage, the right to privacy and the right to marry anyone without any restriction. Yet these rights have been systematically denied to them both by the upper caste people and Dalit men. Dalit women are often threatened by rape and public shame as part of collective violence by the men of higher castes. But unfortunately sexual assault and rape of dalit girls and women also occur within their own communities. In order to compensate for the lack of strength and power to fight against social injustice in the caste-oriented society Dalit men continue to suppress the lawful rights of Dalit women. Dalit women experience the intense social exclusion, and structural and domestic violence. Since Dalit women belong to the lowest category in the caste hierarchy they become socially, economically and politically vulnerable.

The age-long unethical economical, social and religious discrimination of Dalit women led to the emergence of Dalit feminism which came into being in the 1990s with the aim of protesting against all kinds of social injustice and social inequalities. Various literary forms are used by Dalit women writers and intellectuals to fight for the rights of Dalit women and find solutions to their specific problems as Dalits and as women. Though upper caste feminists have been fighting for equality between men and women and oppose vehemently the evils of the patriarchal system and the inhuman treatment meted out to women in general they have failed to analyse and

find solutions to the problems faced by Dalit women. The system of patriarchy is very much determined by the caste identity of individuals. The practice of crude patriarchal system found in Dalit communities has become a significant component of Dalit feminist discourse. The essence of Dalit feminism is the eradication of all kinds of violence, intolerance, inhuman treatment and irrational discrimination practised against Dalit women in Indian society. Known for its unique political ideology and cultural identity Dalit feminism does not identify itself with the ideologies of upper caste feminist movements or the male Dalit movement. Dalit feminists question the hegemony of upper caste Indian feminism which fails to discuss the peculiar problems of the marginalized subaltern women. Similarly Dalit feminists do not accept the principles of the male Dalit movement because they think that male Dalits do not believe in the intellectual capacity and acumen of Dalit women. Dalit feminists show how Dalit women suffer a lot due to caste oppression and class-based oppression at the hands of upper caste men and patriarchal oppression at the hands of men including men of their own castes. While bringing to light all kinds of oppressions and inequalities perpetrated against Dalit women Dalit feminism celebrates the resilience, zest for life, the steadfastness and the courage of Dalit women. Dalit women writers like Mahasweta Devi, Bama, Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar have begun to articulate and record their unique experiences of hurt and humiliation in their works in order to bring awareness among Dalits to fight for their rights.

Dalit writing has bloomed in recent years with Bama at the forefront. As the most acclaimed and celebrated contemporary Dalit woman writer in Tamil, Bama has given Dalit writing a unique place in contemporary literature. Widely known for her contribution to Dalit literary activism Bama has made Dalit aesthetics a significant one in the literary circles of India. She happens to be one of the first Dalit women writers to be widely recognized and translated.

Faustina Mary Fatima Rani is the original name of Bama. Since the name Faustina is a Latin word and the name Fatima can be considered a Muslim name Bama wanted to have a different sort of name. In Tamil the name 'Fatima' is pronounced as 'Bathima'. She, therefore, took the first and the last syllables of 'Fatima' and made the name of Bama. Bama was born in 1958 in a Roman Catholic Dalit family at Puthupatti near Madurai in Tamil Nadu. The ancestors of Bama were from the Hindu Dalit community and they worked as agricultural labourers for caste Hindu landlords. After her graduation Bama served as a nun in a religious congregation for seven years. Having seen the carefree life of the nuns, the caste discrimination in the convents and the hypocritical nature of the church Bama left the convent. She is at present working as a teacher in Uthiramerur in Tamil Nadu. Since her childhood days Bama has been witnessing the hardships and insurmountable difficulties faced by Dalits especially Paraiyars due to castism in India. She has found that even after conversion to Christianity Dalits are socially segregated and discriminated in the church. As one who is perceptive to the present social and political situations in India Bama describes in her books her experiences as a Dalit woman and the experiences of other Dalits too. Her books got global recognition when they were translated into English and other European languages.

Bama's first book *Karukku* (1992) is an autobiographical novel which describes her childhood experiences. As the first Tamil autobiographical novel on the Christian Dalit community *Karukku* reveals how Dalits are socially discriminated, culturally isolated, economically exploited and religiously oppressed. The Crossword Award for the English translation of *Karukku* (2001) brought international recognition to Bama. Bama's second book, *Sangati*, originally published in Tamil in 1994 and translated into English in 2005, is an episodic autobiographical novel. It reveals how Dalit women are victimized due to caste and gender oppression. While analyzing the complexities involved in the oppression of Dalit women both within their own communities and outside them Bama also records how Dalit women suffer a lot due to perennial poverty. If *Karukku* deals with the tension between the self of a Dalit woman and the upper caste society, *Sangati* depicts events which illustrate the identity of the Paraiya community. *Vanmam* (2002), Bama's third novel, deals with the illogical hatred and animosity between two Dalit communities namely Pallars and Paraiyars. Bama has also published two collections of short stories: *Kusumbukkaran* (1996) and *Oru Tattvum Erumaiyum* (2003). While appreciating the creative ability of Bama in the context of the rapid growth of Dalit writing Lakshmi Holmstrom says:

Bama is among the few who bridge autobiography, fiction, polemics, and also a call for action. She has done so deliberately and boldly moving easily between these different elements and bringing together with a vivid and lively, inventive style. It is by the integrity of the whole and its power to move us that we must judge her work (Introduction, *Sangati* xxi-xxii).

Sangati (Events) depicts through anecdotes, individual stories and memories the events that took place in the lives of women in the Paraiya community. The term 'Sangati' in Tamil means news, events and happenings. The book is known for its stunning language, impressive ethnographical details and striking native idiom. Unlike *Karukku* which has a plot or story of a particular woman *Sangati* has an episodic plot which reveals how Dalit women of different generations are victimized due to caste and gender oppression. The episodes presented in the text are interconnected by the narrative voice of the author. Like a conventional novel *Sangati* has a clear-cut thematic structure and pattern which illustrates how Dalit women of three different generations face physical violence, sexual assault, exploitation both at homes and outside and the threat of rape by upper caste men. The narration of events, episodes and the experiences are punctuated with the authorial comments and criticism of society which has been built on the ruthless social and political systems of oppression, domination, exclusion and marginalization. Bama's critical comments and probing questions which appear between different events and episodes reveal her progressive ideologies and youthful Dalit idealism. The episodes, individual stories and memories of personal experiences are narrated in the first person and they are supplemented and counterpointed by the generalizing comments of Bama's grandmother, Vellaiyamma Kizhavi, and other women and later by the narrator's reflections. The role of Bama's grandmother is significant because it is she who provides the historical perspective of various events in the text. Like the narrative patterns found in ethnographical studies, the narrative voices in *Sangati* tend to construct the unique social and cultural history of Paraiyar community. While talking about her intention

to come out with a book on caste and gender discrimination against Dalit women Bama states in her Acknowledgement:

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, 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. I wanted to shout out these stories. I was eager that through them, everyone should know about us and our lives. *Sangati* grew out of the hope that the Dalit women who read it will rise up with fervour and walk towards victory as they begin their struggle as pioneers of a new society (*Sangati* ix).

The novel, *Sangati*, is set in the native village of the author. Apart from the upper caste communities, the Dalit communities which are living in the village are Paraiyar, Pallar, Koravar and Chakkiliyar. Among these Dalit communities the Paraiyars have embraced Christianity because the Christian priests promised that their children would get free education if they joined their faith. Bama sadly remarks that conversion has not brought any social or economical redemption to Dalits. The attempt of the priests to educate Dalit children also proved a failure because the children had to drop out of schools in order to supplement the family income.

Vellaiyamma Kizhavi was Bama's grandmother. She was an efficient midwife. Most of the people in the village knew her very well. She never wore her blouse because in her times lower-caste women were not allowed to wear them. Though she attended every childbirth in the village the upper-caste people "never sent for her because she was a paraichi" (3). Without her husband she struggled single-handedly to care for her two children.

Women in the Dalit communities have to go out to work hard in order to look after their families. Even while pregnant or about to deliver babies most of the women in Dalit communities go for work in the fields. Unlike men whose work comes to an end in the fields women have to toil hard both in the fields and in their homes. Bama's grandmother says:

We have to labour in the fields as hard as men do and then on top of that, struggle to bear and raise our children. As for men, their work ends when they've finished in the fields. If you are born into this world, it is best you were born a man. Born as women, what good do we get? We only toil in the fields and in the home until our vaginas shrivel (7).

Dalit women are victims not only of social and economic oppression but also domestic oppression of different kinds. They are treated as slaves even in their homes. They are subjected to terrible physical violence and senseless abuse by their husbands. In Dalit communities men dominate and oppress women. The patriarchal system in the low caste communities is very powerful and cruel. Wife-beating is quite common in the houses of Dalits. Even after doing a lot of hard work from morning till evening in the fields and cooking supper for the members of their families the women have to yield to the lustful needs of their husbands. If they do not satisfy their husbands in sex they will be severely beaten up. The grandmother told Bama how the latter's Perimma

(mother's elder sister) was mercilessly killed by her husband because she was unable to satisfy her husband sexually almost every night. She further observes:

Because the man was crazy with lust. Because he wanted her every single day. How could she agree to his frenzy after she worked all hours of the day and night, inside the house and out? He is an animal, that fellow. When she refused, he practically broke her in half. Once in my very presence he hit her with rice-pounder (10).

Poverty has made the marginalised slaves to the upper caste people. Lack of education, ignorance of laws, economic disparity and unjust social system have always kept them at the lowest level in the society. Most of the Dalits lead a life of utter poverty and a good many of them do not get even two meals a day. This is in contrast to the kind of luxurious life led by European nuns in the hospital in the nearby place. She learns from her grandmother that even the pigs which they kept were fortunate enough to have sumptuous tasty food everyday. Bama's grandmother says:

I'm telling you about what I saw with my own eyes...When we saw the pigs, we could hardly move this way or that. They've got so huge and fat, it's unbelievable. You think these are just ordinary pigs, do you? It seems they are all foreign. And do you think they wander about eating shit like our pigs do? No, these are reared on wheat and milk powder and biscuits. Then why won't they be white and not coal-black like ours? (13).

Bama shows in her novel how men in the village meetings of Dalit communities dominate women and how even truth is suppressed in such meetings. Women are not allowed even to speak and their voice is curtailed. When Mariamma went innocently to get some water which was running in the field of Kumarasami Ayya the latter seized her hand and tried to seduce her. Terribly frightened Mariamma ran away from that place quickly. Being afraid that his reputation might be in ruins the landowner hurried and complained to the Paraiya community leader that he had seen Mariamma and Manickam together behaving in a dirty way. In the community court Mariamma and Manickam were questioned. Both tried to tell the truth but it was not accepted. At last Mariamma was forced to fall down before others and ask for forgiveness. She was asked to pay a fine also. Mariamma felt terribly hurt because she was humiliated in front of the entire village. She was not only publicly shamed but she was treated as if she was a prostitute. The leader of the Dalit caste court finally said: "It is you female chicks who ought to be humble and modest. A man may do a hundred things and still get away with it. You girls should consider what you are left with, in your bellies" (26). Though the community court vociferously reacted to the complaint of the sexual misbehaviour of women it never discussed the immoral nature and illicit relationships of men with other women.

Bama reveals in her novel that even in the marginalised and downtrodden communities gender discrimination is widely prevalent. Though Bama's grandmother was a well-known midwife and overseer of women workers in the village she blindly accepted the unjust norms of the traditional social set-up which has been known for its caste and gender oppression. She said to Bama "From your ancestor's times it has been agreed that what the men say is right. Don't you go dreaming that everything is going to change just because you've learnt a few letters of the alphabet" (28-29). She is of the opinion that women should never express their opinions openly. She further

observes: "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. Women are not given that kind of respect" (29). But Bama did not accept the views of her grandmother. She even protested against the views of her grandmother by telling her: "Why can't we be treated 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 bowed down gazing at our toes. You tell us all this rubbish and keep us under your control. 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 (grandmother), aren't we also human beings?" (29). Not only Bama's grandmother but other women in Bama's community also hold the view that boys are superior to girls in every way in society. Their prejudice against women is revealed when Muukkamma, a neighbour of Bama, said to another woman, Lourdu: "If it were a girl at least, you could leave her to cry. But how can you come away, leaving your son bawling by himself" (31). Bama immediately asked her "So you can't leave a boy baby to cry, but you can leave a girl to scream on her own, can you?" (31).

If gender discrimination found at home is bad it is much worse at church. Girls are strictly prohibited to enter the sacristy and take part in the church rituals or celebrations. They are not allowed even to cast the role of women in the church plays. During festival times only men sang and beat the rhythm though there were women who could sing really beautifully. While commenting on the pathetic condition of women both in society and at church Bama observes:

The position of women is both pitiful and humiliating, really. In the fields they have to escape from upper-caste men's molestations. At church they must lick the priest's shoes and be his slaves while he threatens them with tales of God, Heaven and Hell. Even when they go to their own homes, before they have had a chance to cook some kanji or lie down and rest a while, they have to submit themselves to their husbands' torment (35).

Bama was deeply pained and frustrated when she saw that women did not have any compassion for other women. She writes in her book how Mariamma was abused in public by women of her community for no fault of hers. People especially women would always make insinuating remarks about her having been questioned and punished by the village community court. Because the father and others thought that Mariamma had lost her reputation she was married compulsorily to Manikkam, a drunkard and worthless fellow. After her marriage Mariamma received blows and beatings regularly. When Bama recalled the ill-fated life of Mariamma her heart was filled with pain and anger. She writes: "Because of some upper caste man's foolishness, she was made the scapegoat, and her whole life was destroyed. If a woman is slandered, that's always her fate. People won't consider whether the accusation is true or not, nor will they allow the woman to speak out. They'll marry her off to any disreputable fellow and wash their hands off it. I wanted to get hold of all those who had brought her to this state, bite them, chew them up, and spit them out" (42).

Women in the Paraiyar community do not have any freedom in the selection of men when marriages are arranged for them. Parents never seek the consent of their daughters when they look for bridegrooms. Very often women are married to men without their willingness. Such marriages often end up in total fiasco. Like Mariamma who was married to Manikkam without her consent and willingness, Thaayi, a neighbour of Bama, was forced to marry a man whom she did not like. From the time of her marriage her husband "used to drag her along the street and flog her like an animal, with a stick or with his belt" (42). Moreover, the husband himself had cut off the hair of his wife and hung it from the doorpost in order to humiliate her publicly. On seeing the mortal agony of Thaayi, Bama became anxious and asked her mother whether there was any possibility of going away from him. Her mother who had often seen the unimaginable sufferings of women in the families of Dalit communities told Bama: "It's not so easy to get away, once you are married. Once you've put your head in the mortar, can you escape from the pestle? No, she must continue to suffer until her head rests on the earth at last" (44). Thinking about the pathetic and dreadful conditions of most of the married women of the Paraiya community in her village Bama experienced a variety of emotions in her heart such as "anger, excitement, fury, pride, resentment, hatred (44).

Bama shows in the novel how superstitious beliefs play a vital role in the lives of her people. She as a young girl learnt from her grandmother the stories of the possessed women in her community. Very often the possessed women were subjected to severe beating and physical torture by the soothsayer. On seeing the physical movements or gestures made by the possessed, young women got frightened and became scared. As a young woman Bama too seemed to believe in the stories of possession narrated by her grandmother and others. But when she grew older she found out that only women especially Dalit women became possessed. She realized that stories were circulated deliberately by people to take away the freedom of young women and control their movements. While analysing the reasons for women acting as possessed Bama says:

From the moment they (women) 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....Women are overwhelmed and crushed by their own disgust, boredom, and exhaustion, because of all this. The stronger ones somehow manage to survive all this. The ones who don't have the mental strength are totally oppressed; they succumb to mental ill-health and act as if they are possessed by peys [devils] (59).

As a perceptive woman writer Bama says how Dalit women have to endure not only the torment of upper-caste masters in the fields but they have also to bear the violence of their husbands at home. Apart from doing all the chores at home after a day's hard work the women "have to deal with the pestering of children and the anger and unfair domination of their husbands" (68). Fights and quarrels between husbands and wives in Dalit families would start when the women demand the salary of their husbands. The men usually spend all their earnings by drinking as much as they like and eating in coffee-stands and food-stalls. The women, on the other hand, struggle a lot to run the family with their wages only. When they ask for money the men abuse

them in a vile and vulgar way. Though most of the women “put up with all that violence and suffer a life of hellish torment” (67) some of them who are unable to bear the beatings and other acts of physical torture scream and shout at their husbands loudly. They even shame their husbands with obscene words in public. They do it as a kind of defense mechanism in order to escape from the beatings and other physical torments of their husbands. Bama observes: “If he shows his strength of muscle, she reveals the sharpness of her tongue. Because she can’t hit him back, she curses him roundly. What else can she do?” (67). As one who is quite aware of what is happening in society and especially in Dalit community Bama says that Dalit men have the habit of drinking and beating their wives severely because they have to be submissive to the upper caste landlords in the fields. The landlords treat them like dogs and make them do all sorts of errands for them. The Dalit men cannot exercise their male pride or show off their male authority when they deal with their landlords. That is why, Bama says, “All that suppressed anger was vented when they came home and beat up their wives to a pulp” (65). While talking about the male domination in Dalit communities Bama observes: “A woman’s body, mind, feelings, words and deeds, and her entire life are all under his control and domination” (68).

As a feminist Bama holds the view that if a woman cannot stand a man who is basically a brute and merciless she should be free to go away from him and marry anyone she likes. She is terribly pained to know that in Christianity marriages can not be easily dissolved. The Christian canon law never allows people to go for second marriages if the husbands or wives of the first marriages are alive. But in Hindu communities especially Pallars and Chakkilies such things are quite possible. Bama resentfully asks: “But God created us so that we can be happy and free. I am sure that God doesn’t want us to be living like slaves to the day we die, without any rights or status, just because of a cord around the neck” (95). She very pathetically observes: “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” (97).

Bama shows in her novel how women are discriminated against men when inter-caste marriages take place in her community. Because they are male they can marry the girls they like. But in the case of a woman, she can only marry a man within the Paraiya community and she should not marry a man of a different caste. If a Paraiya girl is found to be in love with a boy of another caste she will be severely beaten up by her brothers and father. She will be subjected to grave physical and mental torture. While talking about the gender discrimination involved in inter caste marriage Bama says:

In our streets there are men who have married girls from other castes and other villages and who live together happily. People who can accept such marriages get really angry and upset when it is the girl who married a man of different caste. If the men do it, it’s fine. But if a girl does it, it’s terrible. I don’t see how this can be just (109).

Though the Church in principle accepts inter - caste marriages the parish priests themselves act as stumbling blocks to them. The priests will humiliate and hold up the girl to ridicule. The girl will be treated like dog before he gives her a letter of consent for her marriage in a different parish. If the Paraiya girl despite the protests of the family

marries a boy of a different caste both the girl and the boy should lead an isolated life. Moreover, the families of both the girl and the boy will remain hostile towards one another for a long time.

Bama says that in her community the word 'widow' is never used. There is no discrimination against widows in her village. Women whose husbands have died can marry again. Remarriages are allowed in her community, whereas such things are not normally possible in upper caste communities. Bama recounts that though women in Dalit communities work hard from dawn to dusk they still know how to enjoy life. They sang all the time when they were working in the fields. They would tease one another through songs and words which they made up for the occasion. Bama says "The women always sang songs and laughed like this, while weeding, transplanting, rice, cutting the crops at harvest time, or doing anything else. They always teased each other through their songs" (77).

The stories of Maikkanni, Muukkama, Irulaayi, Pecchiamma and Sanmuga Kizhavi reveal that though these women belong to the subaltern community they dare to act with courage and pride. In order to live with honour, self-respect and dignity they took some bold steps and crucial decisions in their lives. Bama admires the little girl Maikkanni who supports her mother and her family by working in a match box factory. Bama also appreciates Pecchiamma for her extraordinary courage to put an end to her marriage by walking out on her husband. Bama's portrayal of the character of the old woman Sanmuga Kizhavi shines in the novel. Sanmuga Kizhavi is a very bold and mischievous woman. She dared to revolt against the atrocities perpetrated on Dalit women by upper - caste men. She has found ways of ridiculing the upper-caste landlords by playing tricks with them. Bama feels that her community needs more women like Sanmuga Kizhavi to subdue upper-caste people.

Bama recapitulates at the fag end of the novel that she had to face many difficulties while trying to earn a livelihood because she is a Dalit and, moreover, she is a Dalit woman. She has come out of her small Dalit village community and settled down in a caste-ridden and hierarchical society which often questions her caste status. Though she is educated and economically independent her status of being a Dalit and unmarried has posed difficulties for Bama in her everyday life. She says: "I have to struggle so hard because I am a woman. And exactly like that, my people are constantly punished for the simple fact of having been born dalits. Is it our fault that we are dalits?" (121).

Bama as a feminist urges Dalit women to be strong and resolute and not to allow their minds to be worn out and impaired. As a woman with great visions and aspirations Bama strongly believes that education alone alleviates poverty in the Dalit communities. She advises Dalit women not to believe in fate. Raising her voice against supersititious beliefs and practices found in the lives of her community people Bama exhorts women especially Dalit women to strengthen their hearts and minds in order to survive and live with honour, dignity and independence. She observes that "Even the ocean will support us, if we only dare" (67). Bama is not a passive ideologue. As a vibrant intellectual and resolute Dalit feminist Bama encourages Dalit women to think intelligently and act dynamically. She says "Nowadays women can take up all sorts

of responsibilities....But now, generation by generation we must start thinking for ourselves, taking decisions, and daring to act. Don't we sharpen and renew a rusted sickle? Just like that, we must sharpen our minds and learn to live with self-respect" (104). As a great visionary Bama appeals to Dalit women to acquire knowledge about different forces in the society and to create a gender-just, non-castiest and equitable society. On the whole, Bama's *Sangati* not only portrays the social and cultural history of the Paraiyar community in Tamil Nadu but also heralds the dawn of an era of social justice.

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