



## Dalit Women's Assertion and Consciousness in Bama's *Sangati*

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### **Abstract:**

Gender discrimination represents the advantageous life for men with specific system. Depending on the cultural ideologies, the differences in various fields arise between men and women in the social setup. Considering this issue, Bama as a Dalit Christian woman tries to address women's problems in the particular region of

Tamil Nadu. Many aspects of degradation and inequality of women are discussed in her literary works but “Sangati” is considered as the Bible of the feminist writings.

**Keywords:** Dalit literature, women literature, Dalit women's assertion, Bama, Sangati.

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In the existence of patriarchal structure, many feminist writings throw light on the lives of Indian women. They focus on agony of women in various stages and areas, oppression, loss of identity and targeted life. In this scenario, Bama's literary works stand as distinct which give recognition to voiceless women of the particular community. She occupies the place of a trend setter to show the significance and culture of the Dalit women of her region. Her self-confidence to represent the condition of women is really appreciable. She recognizes the restrictions of Dalit women and considers the freedom of women in all the structure of society.

The writer depicts the forces which try to suppress these women but at the same platform, she goes on observing the strength of Dalit women to change their lives through defiance. “Sangati” is collection of anecdotes to encourage women's folk to have self-confidence. It is considered as the journey of Dalit women to face the challenges of life with revolting attitudes. Moreover, a kind of self-confidence is created with humorous events.

Bama's role in "Karukku" describes the shackles of the Dalit people in the dominant structure of the religious community. She tries to change the conditions and leaves the religious system when she finds it as impossible. As a part of the religious structure, she has witnessed differences at every level of life. In "Sangati" she became the mouthpiece, of women's oppression, defiance, liveliness and attitude towards troubles one life. Rationalist ideologies inspire her to take opponent stand against all oppressed situations. Her perspectives inspire to come out with the historical writings of Dalit community. Along with these, she uses the Dalit colloquial language and presents their culture and customs.

As a writer, she contemplates over the regional, religious, community, human and gender differences. Through series of anecdotes which depict the entire life of paraiya community women. This community autobiographical text includes the realistic stories of struggles and challenges. Experiences of women from childhood to the grave are collected. For the feminist cause, Dalit feminism is stressed to throw light on the subversive conditions of women.

Patriarchy, unequal distribution of power and privileged status for men define the social and political identities for women. Even in these suffocating situations, the author tries to glorify the positive aspects of Dalit women. She introduces her grandmother, Velliamma as an economically empowered woman. She single handedly takes care of her two children and converts to Christianity to provide free education. Presenting her grandmother as the protagonist, she expresses the marginalized conditions of the community women and their perspective to tackle them.

Velliamma attends childbirth and proves as expert in this service but the caste identity marginalizes her to do the same work in the residence of the land lords. Even she works hard in the houses of the upper caste people, they avoid her entrance inside the residence and give the left over and poor quality of food. Economic conditions of women are explained in the various events through grandmother. She 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 the 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."*<sup>1</sup>

Injustice in the distribution of wages between men and women is stated. Hard work is reserved for the Dalit women so that they have to collect grass, firewood and household chores. These observations create questioning attitude towards oppressions on women. Bama comes out with new thoughts to bring relief in the life of the Dalit women.

The childhood of Bama reflects the subversive stage of a girl's life. Preference for boy is more in their community. The girl child is conditioned to eat only after the male siblings, to look after the young children and to engage themselves in the domestic work. A Dalit girl is restricted in the name of dress, menstruation and games. But, the author raises questions regarding practices which are assigned to the Dalit female girl.

The author quotes,

*"The boys won't allow the girls to join in. Girls can play at cooking or getting married; they can play games with stones and shells such as thattaangal or Chastain. But if they go and play boy's games like kabadi or marbles or chellaangucchi, they'll get roundly abused. People will say, 'who does she think she is? She is just like a donkey, look. Look at the way she plays boys' games.'"*<sup>2</sup>

Male domination of the upper caste and the community men has extended over the Dalit female community. Dalit men beat and trouble women outrageously. Thus, sexual harassment and domestic suppressions are recognized in the narration of the author. For instance, Mariamma is the victim in the hands of the landlord. She is insulated in the front of the village panchayat and forced to pay a fine. This humiliation raises the temper of the author and argues regarding the degraded position of females at all walks of life.

Bama shares her experiences in the milieu of religious orders. Radical thoughts are articulated over the female discrimination while narrating series of incidents. Only boys are allowed into the sacristy and to enact in the play during festival days. Priests in the church have expected offerings from these hard working low caste women in the form of parry, maize, millet, pulses, sesame seeds, beans etc.

Wed-lock for the community women is no longer a peaceful life. Mariamma becomes the scapegoat for the accusation made to hide the harassment of the landlord. The light skinned Thaiy gets furious treatment from her cruel husband. So the author's mother expresses,

*"It's as if you become a slave from the very day you are married. That's why all the men scold their wives and keep them well under control."*<sup>3</sup>

Resentment is shown in the words of the author, suggesting those women to come out of that marital sufferings. Apart from this, the Dalit women have to obey the social customs of wedding system. The strong women find ways to safeguard themselves from the troublesome situations. Those who are mentally weak, they behave as though they have possessed by peys(devils).

Bama suggests,

*"We must be strong. We must show by our own resolute lives that we believe ardently in our independence. I told myself that we must never allow our minds to be worn out, damaged, and broken in the belief that this is our fate."*<sup>4</sup>

Unlike Dalit women, upper caste women are not challenging in characters. They spend their entire life inside the four walls of the houses. With their remarkable skills and capabilities, lower caste women work hard and never dependent on the male partners. In this connection, Bama creates awareness among these women to realize their rights and take up measures to uplift themselves.

As the well-wisher, the writer stresses the mental health of the Dalit women. Unending and tedious work from dawn to dusk and unfair

dominating nature of their husbands disturb them. This psychological illness drives them to the frustrating stage, so they comfort themselves in their own way. Their helplessness makes them to involve in fighting, shouting and quarreling. These observations invoke insights in Bama to think over their honor and self-worth. They too deserve satisfaction and happiness in their lives against all atrocities.

The issue of childlabour is discussed with many events. Young female girls also bear the financial burden of the Dalit family. The portrayal of Maikanni, who works in the match factory and inside the house is presented. She fails to enjoy her childhood days and education.

The author quotes,

*"Many of the girls wake up at cock-crow and work in the match factory all days, so they go to sleep immediately after their evening kanji, or even without drinking it."*<sup>5</sup>

Of course, realistically the author narrates what privileges the Dalit women lack in their daily life facing all the difficulties. At the same time, she highlights the positive aspects in the midst of this community. A bride-price is given from the groom's side to the woman. There is no rigid custom to wear taali and widow is not accustomed to shave her head and wear white sari. Even they are free to enter into the second marriage.

The striking character in the novel is Sammugha Kizhavi. She rebels against the oppressive acts of the landlords. She takes bath in the landlord's grand well and pisses in his pot when he beats a Dalit child for touching that same water pot.

The life of Bama is not away from discrimination. This courageous writer finishes her education and searches job. She is encircled with suffocating situations being a Dalit unmarried woman. Humiliation and frustration torture her to lead her life in this world. To eradicate gender differences, she advocates to educate boys and girls alike without any discrimination during their process of development.

Thus, the author appears as the voice of the marginalized psyche of the Dalit Christian women. Bama has depicted the various social imbalances in her community. Apart from that she celebrates the self-confidence of the subsided group.

#### Notes

1. Bama. "Sangati: Events." Trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom. New Delhi: OUP, 2005. p.07.
2. Ibid,p.07.
3. Ibid,p.43.
4. Ibid,p.59.
5. Ibid,p.78.

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1. Bama. "Sangati: Events." Trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom. New Delhi: OUP, 2005.

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