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Bama's Vision on Caste and Gender Discrimination in Sangati

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Abstract :

This paper analyses about how caste and gender act as tools of double oppression in Dalit community. The sufferings of Dalit Women in two aspects, one is being a women and another one is belongs to the lowest community. Therefore they are double oppressed. Dalit Literature is about the sufferings of “oppressed class”, exploitation or oppression of weaker by stronger is as old as mankind itself. Bama exposes caste and gender problems both inside and outside of the community. Bama criticizes the abuse of Dalit women at home by Dalit men and sexual harassment faced by them outside of their home at the upper caste men. Bama as a Dalit female writer highlightes the various issues and problem faced by Dalit women in the novel *Sangati* such as inequality, injustices, sexual exploitation, lack of employment, illiteracy, ignorance and discrimination. Bama used various incidents of the daily life of their own community so it portrays the typical life of Dalit women.

Keywords : Dalit Literature, Caste Discrimination, Gender Discrimination, Sufferings, oppression.

Bama was an Indian Dalit Feminist, committed teacher and novelist. Her autobiographical novel “*Karukku*” in 1992 which focuses on joys and sorrows experienced by Dalit Christian women in Tamilnadu. She wrote most famous novel “*Sangati*” published in 1994 which was originally written in Tamil then that is translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom. The novel *Sangati* means incidents or events happens in the daily life. Bama's novels are focus on caste and gender discrimination practiced in christianity and Hinduism. Bama portrays how women are suffered from the men in their daily life.

The novel *Sangati* starts with the quote; “if the third is a girl to behold, your courtyard will fill with gold”. Here the narrator is the little girl Bama herself and these words said by the Bama’s grandmother shows the themes of gender discrimination. Bama says that in her family there is no difference between boys and girls at the time of birth but when they were raised, they were more concerns about the boys than a girls. *Sangati* deals with gender bias faced by Dalit women right from their birth. Girl babies are always considered inferior and taken less care.

Here Bama raises the issues of gender discrimination. she quotes the line,

“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” (*Sangati* 7).

The novel is focus on the life of Dalit Women, right from the birth how they are suffered in their daily life. It shows on discrimination for example the boy child is feed longer than the girl child. The rituals of puberty and the sufferings of women is subjugated to the man beating and working in the fields for longer hours for very less pay.

Bama says that for everywhere men are have higher position and women are have second position even they didn’t get their parents love and cares. Like if a boys catch any illness or fever their family members will run around and give proper treatment with a greatest care and love. If it is a girl child they will do half heartedly. Boys will eat as much as what they wish and they run off to play at any time. There is social discrimination like boys play games and girls play the games related to cooking. For the girls they must stay at home and keep working on the households works all the time like cleaning vessels, drawing water, sweeping the house, gathering firewood, washing clothes.

“girls must not play boys games. 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 thaayam. But if they go and play boys games like kabadi or marbles or chellaangucchi, they’ll get roundly abused” (*Sangati* 9).

The gender discrimination has been imposed even in childhood games. Kabadi and marbles are meant for boys to play and girls play only cooking or getting married, minding babies as in real life.

As children the narrator would see her grandmother whom she addresses as “patti” bring anything at home when her patti returned from work, she would always call the grandsons first. “if she brought cucumbers, she scooped out all the seeds with her finger nails, since she had no teeth, and gave them the remaining fruit. 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”. (*Sangati* 7-8). The boys will take full meals in house whereas girls are restricted to take half meal or the left-over. Even the quality of food served to the girls is much poorer.

In the evening time Bama’s grandmother had to collect all the wages and distribute them because their landowners belonged to the upper castes. And their houses were at great distance from our streets. So grandmother walk up and down ten times a day like a dog. Men have no responsibility but the women of this community they have to do labour in the field as well as at home. All the women earn their wages, they work in the field ,in the factory though they did not get equal wages like men. They are paid wages than men for the same work. Here we can see the caste discrimination among the upper caste people and the lower community.

The Grandmother gave advised Bama that women should never go alone to the fields and forests. She tells that “If upper - caste fellows clap eyes on you, you’re finished. They’ll drag you off and rape you, that’s for sure” (*Sangati* 8). Because upper caste men are never treated them as equals they keep their eyes on Dalit women or girls to molest or abuse with a mindset that she doesn’t have a right to ask justice against them. Among the other castes like Pallars, Koravars and Chakkiliyars, only the Parayars have been converted into christianity.

The dispute in the community are solved through panchayat systems led by nattammai. Bama mention one incidents the judgement is that a fine of Rs. 200 was imposed to Mariamma and Rs. 100 to Manikkam. This shows women are under more punishment when compare to men.

Bama observed that only women of Dalit women in particular became possessed by peys. When her grandmother shares her stories of women dancing in a frenzy way or becoming possessed by peys. This dance is only for lower caste women but the upper caste women are not possessed by peys or danced in a frenzy. Towards such injustices Bama saying that, “if a man marries outside his caste, it is nothing. But if a girl marries outside, the honour and pride of the whole community is lost”.

Bama writes that “it is not the same for women of other castes and communities. Our women cannot bear the torment of upper caste masters in the field, and at home they cannot bear the violence of their husbands” (*Sangati* 65). Bama says that in her own community women are not dependent on their husband they are economically self dependent but other community women are fully depends on their husbands.

Dalit girls are hardly enjoying their childhood. They have only little time to play as they have to take care of younger siblings. Bama asks them to treat both boys and girls alike. The education system of Dalit community , Bama gave examples of Pecchamma who belongs to Chakkili community. She studied only up to fifth class. So the girls of that community do not go to school at that much. Here we can see the caste discrimination.

“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 or lie face down on our bellies. We always have to walk with our heads bowed 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, paatti, aren’t we also human beings? (*Sangati* 29)

Dalit girls are hardly enjoyed their childhood just as the Black girls suffer from the very beginning of their life. The restrictions are thrust upon them in the name of tradition, custom and culture.

One day Bama returning home from school, she could hear Thaayi weeping. Bama writes, “Thaayi’s husband was beating her up again and again with the belt from his waist. She didn’t even have a chattai on. Everywhere the strap fell on her light skin, there were bright red weals” (*Sangati* 42).

When the neighbours move to save her, but her husband said that he have rights to beat her wife and kill her because “she is my wife”. So the Dalit community women have been subjected to mental torture and violence at home apart from the oppressions of upper caste.

“There are many children like Maikkanni in our streets who work so hard both inside their home and outside, when they are still so young. I have seen boys eating their fill and playing about. But a girl, even though she can scarcely walk herself, will go around carrying a baby brother or sister; or she’ll carry a water pot” (*Sangati* 76).

Bama says that in her village all the households works like cleaning, cooking, carrying a baby are done by the girls whereas the boys enjoy playing games or hanging out with their friends in the village. The girls in her village are get poor education while compare to boys. The boys are kept free from responsibilities and the girls are over burdened with everyday activities.

“That’s why we are drinking kuuzh night and day. And it’s because we drink this dark-coloured stuff that our children are born coal-black in colour. Just like crows. Look at those upper-caste children, they are all pink and white. Some of them are so fair, they look as if they might bleed if you so much as touched them. And do you know why? It’s because they eat milk and rice” (*Sangati* 114).

The upper caste women are all beautiful compare to Dalit Women. Women are suffer both gender and caste based violence at the hands of the dominant caste men due to their social, economic and political status. The novel present everyday sufferings and struggles faced by women. The condition of poverty and oppression are celebrating very simple daily activities like cooking, feeding and sharing. Bama says that man can humiliate women many times and man can disrespect a woman.

The practices of marriage and divorce in Christian and Hindu family the character Pecchiamma who from Chakkili community. She married twice and she has children from her first marriage and also she has one child from second marriage. But the Christian community women can marry after her husband dies.

Bama is very careful in portraying the picture of a dalit women. Bama shows gender discrimination meted out to them throughout the lives of dalit woman. “*Sangati*” is a work by a women who as a first person has faced all the oppressions, humiliations and pain of the upper castes the hegemony and religious. Girls of the Dalit community lead a very unsecured life which is because of economic the caste, religious and gender issues.

“They don’t even allow us to go the cinema that’s right here. If we go out at all, it’s only to the church, and even for that you have to try really hard” (*Sangati* 13). So the young girls and woman’s feelings and freedom were controlled by the Dalit community. The women were never allowed to go to watch cinema. Men can marry a woman out of the caste but women of their community cannot marry outer castes.

After that Bama raised one question like “why can’t we be the same as boys? We aren’t allowed to talk loudly or laugh noisily”. Because the girls in the Dalit community have no freedom to talk loudly and laugh noisily, woman have some restriction in their community.

“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” (*Sangati* 29). A woman in their community suffered a lot because of their cultural systems. They are mistreated by the society, sometimes women of this community lead a very hard life in a very pitiable condition. Women had to lead a restricted life while men are free to live as they like. The another aspects of women is dalit women are not restricted by widowhood as the upper caste women do and dalit women could remarry and happily lives their life.

In the novel *Sangati* Bama portrayed the oppression of Dalit life, how they are discriminated by the upper caste people, even Bama also discriminated in many places. Finally Bama asks her community to follow a certain things to overcomes all the opstacles and ends the suffering of women. She asks them to treat boys and girls alike and never shows the differences between them as they grow into adults. Then she asks injustices, violence and inequalities will come to end and have equal rights. Bama concluded in the text, she quoted “Women can make and women can break” very hopeful that such a time will come soon. So the Dalit women cannot be suppressed in spite of caste and gender oppression.

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