



A Critical Examination Of Bodily Experiences And Resilience Of Dalit Women In Bama's Sangati.

¹Mampi Adhikary, ²Dr. Manisha Titus,

¹Research Scholar, ²Assistant Professor,

¹Department of English,

¹Jamshedpur Women's University, Jamshedpur, India

Abstract: Sangati by Bama addresses the real struggles of the Dalit women of the Pariah community of Tamil Nadu. It voices the experiences of these women facing social, cultural and gender-based oppression. Sangati which means events or news, vividly captures the daily life of the Dalit women highlighting their resilience and strength amidst the hardships they endure. One of the underlining themes of the text is the exploration of female bodily experiences such as menstruation, pregnancy, labor pain, child delivery, maternity care and breast feeding. Although these are common to all women, however, the struggles of these Dalit women are deeply intertwined with societal and caste oppression. This paper will look into Bama's representation of these issues, underlining the manner in which Dalit women navigate their physical and social realities. In addition, the paper will also highlight how these women resist the oppressive societal system by their courage and confidence. Their witty and humorous language help them stand up against the cruelties.

Index Terms – Dalit Feminism, Bama, Sangati, Bodily Experience, Resilience, Female language

I. Introduction

Bama (also known as Bama Faustina Soosairaj) is a well-known Dalit feminist writer from Tamil Nadu, India. She has contributed significantly to Dalit feminist writing. Her most famous work, Karukku (1992) is an autobiographical novel. Bama challenges and expands the realm of feminist discourse. Sangati is a unique narrative originally written in 1994 in Tamil. It is translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom into English. Bama's writings bring out the intersectional viewpoint- as gender and caste as inseparable in their impact on Dalit women's lives. Such perspective was a pioneering stance by Bama in the field of Indian Literature.

II. Menstruation: A Stigmatized Reality

Even though a natural biological process, menstruation is stigmatized and misunderstood in many societies. One of the earliest bodily experiences for women, is not seen as a biological event, but as a social marker. It rather decides a woman's role and significance in the society.

¹A song sung at a girl's coming-of-age, with a chorus of ululation:

On a Friday morning, at earliest dawn

She became a pushpavati, so the elders said-

Her mother was delighted, her father too,

The uncles arrived, all in a row- (Pāmā & Bama, 2009b, p. xx)

Having menstruation or not both are a matter of grave concern for women. Menarche or the period of time when a girl hits puberty and starts menstruating is celebrated by the paraiyah community. On the other hand, if she hasn't started menstruating at the appropriate age it becomes a matter of worry for the family.

"Mariamma is getting quite old, but even now she hasn't developed breasts or anything. People say all sorts of terrible things just because she hasn't come of age." (Pāmā & Bama, 2009b, p. 11)

"What is a woman" She is a womb some say. (Second Sex)

Women's identity is engraved in her responsibility to reproduce. Outside this, the society does not accept her in any other role. She is not even considered a human but as an evil being. The book mentions that menstruating women are easily possessed by spirits. However, with that logic menstruation should be tabooed and be looked down as impure by the same society. Instead that is not the scenario. In Sangati, Bama describes how menstruating women are isolated, confined to a small hut kind of room in the house called kuchulu, when they are menstruating. They are separated from their family, kept out of the household chores, and denied participation in social and religious events. Menstruation which is a part of women's existence and the existence of the whole mankind is looked down as something impure.

"Its women who are polluted every month. It's when they are menstruating, they say pey will get them." (Pāmā & Bama, 2009b, p. 50)

III. Pregnancy: A mixture of joy and suffering

Mostly observed as a happy news, pregnancy for these pariah Dalit women brings suffering. As depicted in the novel, pregnancy is a period of mixed emotions for Dalit women. Although they do express joy at the prospect of giving birth to a new life, however, their pregnancy is marked by extreme physical and emotional trauma as well. Due to their marginalized condition, they are denied necessary prenatal care. In fact, even during their pregnancy they are forced to perform hard physical labour to support their family. Sangati represents the world where Dalit women are left to care for themselves throughout the pregnancy, delivery, and the postpartum period. The caste-based discrimination hinders these women from getting the care they require in these times. The only medical support by the traditional midwives of the villages too operates within the limitations of constraint resources and poverty. The novel portrays the 'sattaiya' as both heroic figures as well as symbols of mockery highlighting the larger failure of the healthcare system.

In addition, Sangati also highlights how in the lack of adequate medical assistance the Dalit women depend on the community-based forms of maternity support. Bama points out to instances where the Dalit women are refused to be assisted by medical staff and are turned away because of their caste. Such discriminations leading to poor access to maternity care results to higher maternal mortality and morbidity among these Dalit women. "Women rarely go to hospitals, but deliver their children at home in a makeshift way. Many women die at childbirth or soon after." (Pāmā & Bama, 2009b, p. 36)

In Sangati, the pregnant Dalit women share their stories of working in the fields, doing household chores, fulfilling their part as caretakers of children and the family. Through many anecdotes in the novel, Bama critiques the impact of caste, gender and class on women's reproductive health.

¹ Pāmā, & Bama. (2009). *Sangati: Events*. Oxford University Press, USA.

For men their work ends in the fields itself. But for these Dalit women they have to work with the men as hard as them and then come home to care for the family. This highlights the larger societal disregard for the life and health of these women. The bodily stress that pregnancy puts on them along with insufficient medical care increase their hardships further. As a result of these, the Dalit women face pregnancy-related complications including miscarriages and stillbirths.

The stories of labor pain and child delivery by the Dalit women are both testaments to their strength and a critique of the difficult conditions in which they deliver. Without necessary medical assistance, depending solely on traditional midwives and community members for help due to lack of access to hospitals, child delivery is life threatening part in the life of these Dalit women.

“Yes, his mother was out one day, cutting grass for their cow. She was pregnant at that time, nearly full term. She went to labour then and there, and delivered the child straight away. She cut off the umbilical cord with the sickle she had taken with her to cut the grass, dug a hole and buried the placenta and then walked home carrying her baby and her bundle of grass.” (Pāmā & Bama, 2009b, p. 6)

Such raw and unfiltered scenes of child delivery in Sangati brings out the acute pain and suffering these women have to endure during labor. However, they do not get time to rest and recover even after the delivery as they are expected to resume their everyday chores soon after giving birth.

Bama questions the so called sacred or celebrated event of giving birth to a child that is often romanticized in literature and culture. For these Dalit women, it is rather an extremely stressful and life-threatening process that they have to face in neglect and unattended. Their experience highlights the manner in which caste and gender distinction manifest in the most intimate areas of their lives.

IV. Breastfeeding: Nurturing in the face of adversity

Sangati depicts breastfeeding as yet another challenge faced by Dalit women in their already struggling life. The Dalit women reveal that even after child delivery they are not provided the time to rest or recover including breastfeeding. Having endured the labor pain, they are expected to resume work almost instantly. Due to their poor financial and social condition, the Dalit women are often malnourished and overworked. Hence, breastfeeding takes a toll on their physical well-being.

Unlike other privileged women for whom breastfeeding becomes a leisurely or satisfying experience of motherhood, it becomes yet another task for these Dalit women. The demands of labor-intensive jobs along with family responsibilities over-burdens them.

However, amidst all these challenges, Sangati reveals the strong commitments of these Dalit women to their responsibilities of motherhood to the extent of sacrificing their own well-being for their offsprings. Bama portrays the act of breastfeeding as a symbol of resilience of these women. In addition, it also critiques the societal structure which force them to carry such burdened roles.

“It is the women who have to struggle with childcare and everything else.” (Pāmā & Bama, 2009b, p. 78)

V. Paraiyah women: The double oppressed

Exploration of the intermingling of caste and gender oppression is one of the important themes that the novel attempts to highlight. The autobiographical accounts and the anecdotes in the book portray how these Dalit women are ill-treated not only due to their gender but also because of their caste. In another way these women are double oppressed by the society as a whole and also within their own communities and inside the family. There are a lot of mentions of the Dalit women being beaten by their fathers, brothers and husbands. Bama talks about an incident she remembers when a pregnant women ran past her being chased by her husband with a stick in his hand, then caught and dragged her on the ground. But the women also showed their resistance and resilience against these abuses by the use of their tongue.

“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.” (Pāmā & Bama, 2009b, p. 67)

The condition of Dalit women was same outside the family. While working the fields they had to rescue themselves from the attempts of molestation by the upper-caste men. The Dalit women could not dare to report these to anyone else because of the fear of being accused themselves and be punished. The women who shouted at their highest pitch while being beaten up by their husbands where mute at the sexual exploitations by the upper-caste men.

Bama’s view: “It is we who must uphold our rights. We must stand up for ourselves and declare that we too are human beings like everyone else. If we believe that someone else is going to come and uplift us, then we are doomed to remain where we are, forever.” (Pāmā & Bama, 2009b, p. 66)

VI. Labor Exploitation and physical toil

In Sangati, Bama draws attention to the physical labor the Dalit women are subjugated to. They work as domestic helps, toil as agricultural laborers, and execute other strenuous tasks right from very young age. Such type of works causes them extreme physical exhaustion. Nevertheless, they are compelled to do it owing to their poor financial condition as well as societal expectations.

“After a few days (of coming home from the hospital), she (Mariamma) set out again to find work. Her younger sister Annanna too was ready to go with her. So, the two of them found work in the fields, weeding or harvesting. When they couldn’t get any of this seasonal work, they went into the hills and woods, gathered firewood, sold their bundles, and earned enough for their daily kanji.” (Pāmā & Bama, 2009b, p. 9)

VII. Psychological Impact

Sangati also brings out the psychological toll on the Dalit women’s lives as a result of the continuous gendered and caste discrimination. Bama highlights such mental traumas for example by the mention of ‘peys’ or evil spirits who possess the weaker gender, the women. These spirits are nothing but coping strategies or in some way manifestations of repressed psychological disturbances.

VIII. Resilience through words

Through Sangati, Bama celebrates the Dalit women not for emulating the traditional Tamil feminine values of ‘Acham(fear), Nanam(shyness), Madam (innocence) and Paiyirppu (modesty) but for their bravery, fearlessness, ‘independence’ and ‘self-respect’. (Pāmā & Bama, 2009b, p. xix)

Bama through the text highlights Dalit women’s resilience as an important survival strategy. Their words are strong declaration of resistance, power and self-affirmation. Despite regular oppression, the Dalit women in the novel claim their recognition and withstand the forces playing against them. Their language frequently coated with wit, humor, and denial are both a form of protest as well as a means of survival.

“And Rakakkamma was giving it back to him word for word. Even before his hand could fall on her, she screamed and shrieked, ‘Ayyayyo, he’s killing me. Vile man, you’ll die, you’ll be carried out as a corpse, you low-life, you bastard, you this you that...’” (Pāmā & Bama, 2009b, p. 61)

The incisive/caustic remarks by these Dalit women push back against the brutality and dehumanization they face. They temporarily change the power dynamics by their humor of words and reduce the burden of their struggle momentarily.

“If I hadn’t shame him like this, he would surely have split my skull in two, the horrible man” (Pāmā & Bama, 2009b, p. 62)

Besides, expressive storytelling and shared narratives play crucial role in Sangati. By sharing their tales of perseverance and survival, these stories help each generation seek courage in hardship. The anecdotes also help to enhance their community by fostering mutual respect and camaraderie.

Bama says in the novel, “According to my mother, if you have courage in your heart, you can live fearlessly.” (Pāmā & Bama, 2009b, p. 58)

The Dalit women freely call out all forms of injustices they face. They discuss discrimination based on caste, gendered violence, and sexual exploitation in clear and unapologetic words. They defy the society which often wants to silence women’s voices.

In casual talks, the characters in the novel, support each other and motivate young girls and women to resist abuse and demand respect. Elder women impart words of wisdom to the younger generation in the forms of proverbs, and anecdotes, guiding them embracing the importance of resilience and self-respect.

Patti (a Dalit women) says, “What do we know about justice? From your ancestors’ times it has been agreed that what the men say is right.” (Pāmā & Bama, 2009b). She cites examples of other Dalit women like ‘wife of Tiruvalluvar’ and ‘Anantamma of West Street’.

Bama transcend from the formal language traditionally used in Indian literature and incorporates dialect and colloquial Tamil. She attempts to convey the distinct voice of the Dalit women. This choice in itself demonstrates the act of resilience and some way declares that Dalit women experiences ought to be heard in their authentic form.

IX. Conclusion

In Sangati, resilience is not just physical. The Dalit women use words as instruments for self- empowerment, forging unity, and fighting injustices. Bama’s work showcases how language can be a profound act of defiance with each syllable embodying the spirit of survival.

Bama examines Dalit women’s bodily experiences focusing on aspects of their nutrition, physical well-being, safety, sexuality and ideas of modesty. Through her work, Bama urges the readers to rethink the acts of gender and caste oppression and recognize the unique struggles of these Dalit women.

Sangati paints a powerful and insightful portrait of Dalit women experiences, shedding light on the intersectional oppression of caste and gender. Bama’s narrative challenges mainstream feminist paradigms as well as Dalit ideologies. The biographical accounts contain stories of women who have been originally marginalized. The resilience among these women is firmly established in their communal bonds, traditions and restoration of their identities.

The stories as depicted in Sangati, acts as both literary and sociological ground, appealing for a deeper understanding of the lives of Dalit women. They serve as a request to call to action for a more just and equitable society.

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