

Original Paper

Segregating Social Strategies and the Sequestered Women in

Bama's Sangati

Dr. Sakunthala A. I.^{1*}

¹ Associate Professor of English, MPMMSN Trusts College, Shoranur, Kerala, India

* Dr. Sakunthala A. I., Associate Professor of English, MPMMSN Trusts College, Shoranur, Kerala, India

Received: January 28, 2020 Accepted: February 4, 2020 Online Published: November 21, 2020

doi:10.22158/sll.v4n4p149

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sll.v4n4p149>

Abstract

The evils of racial supremacy, patriarchy, feudalism, imperialism, colonialism, castism, class contrasts are legally dispensed with unquestionable authority to perpetuate inequality through institutionalized sanctions. The ubiquity of male dominance and its burgeoning evils paradoxically became the causes of the recession. The recent centuries have given rise to resistance literature that break all barriers and shatter all shackles. Dalit literature, like Black literature, was born from the deep rooted dignity of the "others" to assert themselves, and is characterized by a new level of pride, militancy, creativity and the eagerness to use writing as a weapon to expose and to strike back.

Keywords

stratified society, ubiquity of male dominance, abysmal divide, resistance literature

In every stratified society, the map of hierarchy is drawn with the general demarcation of human beings as peasants, workers or capitalists. The economic boundaries are further sub divided on the basis of caste, gender, status, race and class. There thus arises an abysmal divide between the "us" of the central and the "other" of the peripheral occupants of a social system. The white, the male, the racial superiors (self-imposed), the affluent and the upper castes excluded themselves as social superiors and exalted their status as infallible and legitimate masters of the "others". Grand narratives have mostly been created by such social superiors (leaving aside some religious, rare and inspired writers like Tulsi das, Kabir, Valmiki) due to their easy access to economic and intellectual resources. The recent centuries have given rise to resistance literature that break all barriers and shatter all shackles. Dalit literature, like Black literature, was born from the deep rooted dignity of the "others" to assert themselves, and is characterized by a new level of pride, militancy, creativity and the eagerness to use writing as a weapon

to expose and to strike back.

Bama, a Tamil writer, has tried to capture the voice of the “others” in her novel “*Sangati*”. Written in the language actually used by the Dalit community, the novel treats the entire variety and monotonous similarity of women oppression. An analysis of the history of any society will show that the second rate citizenship given to women is wide spread, universal and inveterate. “There seems to be a systematic social apparatus which takes up female as raw material and fashion domesticated women as products”. The evils of racial supremacy, patriarchy, feudalism, imperialism, colonialism, castism, class contrasts are legally dispensed with unquestionable authority to perpetuate inequality through institutionalized sanctions. The ubiquity of male dominance and its burgeoning evils paradoxically became the causes of the recession. Resistance to phallocratic order of the world became wide spread and the present day world is fully aware of the rise of feminism. Slow to awaken to the process of reversals are the subalterns of Perumalpatti whose story is narrated in *Sangati*.

The cover page of the book announces, “*Sangati* is primarily about a community’s identity”.

It further elaborates, “The Dalit women, once she steps outside her small town community, enters a caste-ridden and hierarchical society, which constantly asks questions about caste identity. She must then ask herself questions about who she is, and where she belongs”.

In the macro universe of social interactions, the women of *Sangati* face double trials—one as women, the second as untouchables. This double discrimination perennially haunts them even in the micro universe of their own family and community. Writhing under the trampling feet of men (husband, father, brother, son or the male authority of family, society, church) and the crushing hands of caste discriminations which distribute unequal and unjust laws to them, the women of Perumalpatti strike “to seek” and “not to yield”.

The narrator is a young girl who matures physically, mentally and psychologically. Apart from her story, there runs parallel stories which voice the collective consciousness of the women of the entire community. The narrator’s grand mother Vellaiamma acts as the central character who links up the events that are narrated. In an economically backward community, Vellaiamma is the only person available to attend to the child birth of many women of the Paraiya community. Though she is an expert in her work, the upper castes “never sent to her because she was a paraichi”.

In Vellaiamma’s generation, the lower caste women were prohibited from wearing a blouse. The caste identity of the women is strengthened by their stereotypical dress code established by the upper castes. The colonial feature of religious conversion was eagerly accepted by many of the paraiya community as an opportunity to escape the excruciating stings of discrimination. Yet, the inexhaustible funds of woes never diminished due to the fact that these people were abandoned by the government; neither was their dignity restored in a Christian church, where they still were looked down as the scum of the society.

Poverty and discrimination lashed out the severest of its attack more on women than on men. The

women were exploited also as sex objects to be toyed with or abused by the male members of both the upper and lower caste communities. The responsibility of the family maintenance, child bearing, rearing, cooking, washing, gathering material for fuel and fire wood, grazing the goats and so on fell on the hapless women, while the men wielded power over them. The husbands mostly spent the money on themselves and tortured the wives to take hold of their hard yearned money. Through violent beatings, physical assaults and verbal abuses, the women were intimidated to obey the men, whether willing or unwilling.

The conditioning of their psyche is so deep that even the women accept and perpetuate male superiority as the most legal and established code of behavior. If a male child cried, he was immediately attended to, while a girl child was permitted to cry unconsolated. The male child enjoyed the care and nourishment, while the girl child was trained as a helping hand or a domestic labourer. The girls managed the cooking; the rearing of the siblings, the collection of ration, water and other such accessories, as if only the male child was the rightful offspring and the girl was an undesired burden. The girls are the most victimized and the constantly tortured. The perils and dangers of self-preservation are also greater for a girl because they have to guard themselves from other men. "Once when we were gathering firewood, she (Vellaiamma) told me, "women should never come on their own to these parts. If upper caste fellows cast eyes on you, you're finished. They will drag you off and rape you".

Mute suffering or ignominious humiliation was the only option available for a woman if she was exploited by the upper caste men. Being born low and woman, they could never lodge complaints against the victimizer. The Panchayat members were mostly upper caste men and so justice was denied to the lower castes and also false accusations were heaped on to them. The lower caste women were labeled as "immoral" and the upper caste males enjoyed the freedom to exploit, to judge and punish because women could not prove the instances of molestation.

Kumaraswamy Ayya is the best example of one such upper caste men, who attempts at trapping Mariyamma in his snare of sexual exploitation. When his thwarted attempts were threatened exposure, he quickly reverses the story and lodges a complaint in the Panchayat accusing Manikkam and Mariyamma as indulging in illegitimate intimacy. Inextricably trapped in the snare of the powerful man, the girl is unable to prove her innocence and Kumaraswamy's wicked intentions. The Panchayat is biased and judges blindly bringing humiliation and bad name to an innocent girl. Manikkam, who is a boy, escapes without either fine or humiliation, while the girl endures the adverse effects of the entire process. The women suffer dual inferiorizations of caste and gender in the society and their agony remains unalleviated at homes as well. The men of the lower castes are free to spend their money and time in card games, drunkenness and adventures of polygamy. Through frugal spending and half-starvations, the women have to spare money to fulfill the social obligations of celebrating the customary functions of coming of age, marriage or funeral rites.

Bama tries to analyse the causes of such exemplary behavior of the male members of her society. Lack

of education or exposure to higher civilized manners, coupled with the dehumanizing slavish status accorded to these men had toughened them by draining away all fountains of gentility from them. The bards of caste had chastised them into obedience so much so that they rebound with multiple force to retaliate; since they cower like wounded animals before their social superiors, their women whose masters they are, face the entire brunt of their hurt pride and male ego. The haunting paranoia of denied dignity takes a paradoxical twist to propel the men for role-reversals. The tormented become the tormenters in sadistic self-assertion, and they gladly shove their women to a still lower rung of the social hierarchy.

Pushed to the very edge of the social periphery, the Dalit women are compelled to fend for themselves. Bama narrates various incidents where the women attempt to rebuild their lives by offering resistance, defiance and retaliation. They some times indulge in sarcasm and ridicule and measures of self-assertion. Unlike their upper caste counterparts, the Dalit women are represented without a sense of sophisticated aesthetic refinements in their use of language. "For in order to survive they have always had to be watchers, to become familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection".

The Dalit women hurl abuses, curses and obscene usages without any superficial sense of shame. There is no display of the angelic virtue of meekness when a Dalit woman is infuriated. The society has at least spared them from the obligation of becoming the epitomes of beauty and virtue. If the husbands and family members expect them to be the angels of the house, they defy non-chalantly by their impolite and uncouth verbal abuses. Their economic non-independence on the male members had set them at liberty, whereas the upper caste women are still intimidated by their lack of economic self-sufficiency. The stereotypical representations of female voice as sweet, melodious, soft and soul-stirring music of the spheres are subverted by Bama's women. The female voice in *Sangati* is sometimes extremely aggressive, harsh and unfeminine in character. "This language work would (thus) attempt to thwart any manipulation of discourse... Its function would thus be to cast phallocentrism, phallocratism, loose from its moorings in order to return the masculine to its own language, leaving open the possibility of a different language". The Dalit women in *Sangati* thus dare to reverse the social conventions by restructuring the gender code in their wielding of the language as a tool of defiance. The loud screams and quarrels resound with the echo of challenge raised to question male authority.

The impact of the social devices to suppress the women became counter productive. While the society attempts at encouraging, legitimizing and transmitting conventions, the Dalit women attempt to discourage, interrogate and curtail traditional forces. They ridicule the attitude of those men who acted as though sexuality in women is not an individual option but an unavoidable obligation. Though they are unable to change the immutably suppressive caste/gender divide, they at least attempt to problematize the issue by offering resistance. Poliphony and heteroglossia reinforce the verbal tool with multiple sharp edges to dissect the cancerous cells of social complacency that has so far neglected

the lot of the Dalit women.

In the hands of an outsider, the depiction of dalit female experience would have evoked sympathy or condescension. Bama's voice restores dignity, pride and power to the narrative tone, because it is the voice of the other from within the territory of the marginalized. The aesthetically unqualifying terms and usages widen the ambience of assertion and appeal.

The marginalized scum of the society is not a regional feature of Perumalpatti alone. In every slum, scattered around the great Indian sub-continent, there live the unendurably deprived and victimized creatures. So *Sangati* is not a mere regional history of one community. With the use of multivocal narration, Bama has transcended the earlier confining limitations which the form of autobiography imposed on her in her previous novel. Avoiding the fancy feeding myths or the mysterious flights of imaginative fantasy, Bama measures Perumalpatti with a yard of realistic representation. She portrays the vicissitudes of poverty, ill health, oppression, inequality, injustice, discrimination, superstitions, exploitations, abuses as well as oral folk lore of songs, local functions, feasts and marriages. Though sliding through the slime, the women display the spectacular endurance and vibrant zest for life. Bama paints the various moods like the tantalizing fury, the fatalistic surrender as well as the practical suggestions for women empowerment. Her glimpses wander beyond the past of unquestionable surrender, and the present of retaliation to envision a future of mutual acceptance. She wishes for an identity that is not crushed by the constant conflicts of self-assertion and social rejection.

In an age of accelerating cultural collisions and global consciousness, will such frozen primitiveness remain unthawed? She commands with compelling authority to rethink and to deconstruct or reconstruct the existing social injustice. Bama's art is not special but specific; not grand but meticulous; not empathizing but evocative; not imaginative but interpretive; not the ideal of what ought to be, but the practical of what can be. Bama thus purposefully attempts to record the plight of Dalit women who suffer dual discrimination and multiple oppressions.

References

- Bama, Sangati (Events)*. (2005). LakshmiHolmstron (Trans.). NewDelhi: UnversityPress. Cover page.
- Bama, Cover page*. (n.d.).
- Bama*. (n.d.). p. 3.
- Bama*. (n.d.). p. 8.
- Rivkin, J., & Ryan, M. (Eds.). (2002). *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (p. 534). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Rivkin*. (n.d.). p. 573.
- Rivkin*. (n.d.). p. 630.