



Modes of Resistance in Dalit Feminism: An Insight into Bama's Sangati

By

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Abstract

Dalit literature is a recent form of subaltern literature with its prime focus on the social ostracization and marginalization of the oppressed communities like Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and religious minorities. Dalit literature and dalit activism became rampant in the twentieth century especially in Southern India. In Tamil Nadu a laudable attempt to couple penniyam (feminism) and dalityam (dalit studies) has been recorded by Bama, whose Sangati speaks of the hitherto unheard annals of dalit women. Through Sangati, Bama tries to bounce back the bi-fold oppression of dalit women. Sangati is more of a celebration of dalit female identity. Bama's women are no longer subjugated; they assert their individuality through education and collective action. Their resistance - both passive and active to oppression makes Sangati a piquant depiction of the Dalit cause. The paper titled "Modes of Resistance in Dalit Feminism: An Insight into Bama's Sangati" dissects the stark realities of dalit lives and their commendable attempts to upraise socially.

Key words: *Iran's Import-Export-Shahid Rajae Terminal Container*

The term 'resistance' has extensively been drawn in the context of subaltern studies. Etymologically the word owes its genesis to Latin *resistere* meaning 'to take stand'. The term resistance was first applied in relation to literature in Ghassan Kanafani's work on Palestinian literature. Resistance literature poses a plenty of questions before us. Are all kinds of resistance come under the purview of resistance literature? Is it only related to colonial power structure? An appealing answer would be to define it as a category of creative endeavors which registers strong protest against the oppressors. In this connection it is not perverse to consider dalit literature as one of the recent forms of resistance literature in India. The spurt in dalit literature is to expose issues of exploitation, discrimination, malnutrition and growing death rate of the underprivileged sections of India: the untouchable minorities, the tribals, nomadic tribes and other degraded lives. It came as a move away from the symbolic grand narratives and posed a tremendous challenge to the existing literary conventions.

India is one of the fastest growing countries in the world; yet it is notorious for its rigid caste system. The earliest records of Indian civilization are preserved in Aryan scriptures or what is today known as Hindu Scriptures. The early Indian society was constructed around Varnasrama Dharma, a labour based division of castes in India that inevitably brought racial prejudices. The Brahmins were the topmost in the pecking order. The Sudras were destined to serve the three upper ladders, namely Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaisyas. They remain the 'untouchables' in society. They have been accepted as Scheduled Castes in the Indian constitution after the British use of the phrase. Gandhiji and Ambedkar used two different terms to name them- harijan and Dalit. Their efforts have brought about an upliftment in their social status. They also encouraged education of the Dalits that ultimately lead to a new writing.

Indian Dalit literature began as a concerted movement in the 1960s, though clannish elements were visible as early in the 11th century. It began in Marathi literature and later on infiltrated to Hindi, Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam and Tamil literatures. Dalit writers initiated a realistic, experience based and authentic literature which threatened the upper class hegemony in society and in literature. The anger, sorrow and the indomitable will and hope of Dalit protagonists were offered in a tongue which is often denigrated as vulgar. The writers of different states in India share a collective relationship to a common cause, a common identity and a common political stance.

Historically Dalit literature goes hand in hand with Dalit liberation movement. One of the chief aims of Indian government since independence is to raise the living standards of the Dalits. But, in spite of India's modernization agenda dalits have been deprived of their land, their home and their fundamental rights. In many states tribal lands are being taken over by plantations, dams, social forestry and ecotourism. Rehabilitation centres established by the government resemble German concentration camps where tribals are exploited and are hounded by starvation, malnutrition and sexual exploitation. Southern India has witnessed organized attacks against Dalits through Panchami Land issue, Chengara struggle and Muthanga issue. Dalit caste organizations like 'Dalit Panthers of India' in Maharashtra, 'Dalit Mahasabha' in Andhra Pradesh, 'Dalit Sangharsha Samiti' in Karnataka, and 'Arundhatiyar' in Tamil Nadu were formed in response to mainstream atrocities. They demand for equitable shares in opportunities and reservation. Most of the activists are good writers as well.

Dalit issues are recorded in a variety of genres- autobiographies, novels, poetry and essays. In South India, Mulk Raj Anand with his *Untouchables* pioneered the movement. Mahaswetha Devi, Namdeo Dhasal, Basudev Sunani, Bama, Sharankumar Limbale, Lakshman Gaekwad, Sivakami, Poomani, Om Prakash Valmiki, Marku, Paul Chirakkarode and Arundhati Roy walked after him.

Among them writers like Bama, Sivakami and Poomani explored Subalternity and gender discrimination in their works. Their female protagonists are prone to psychological analyses. Their condition is analogous to the situation of black women in America. They are doubly victimised, as dalits and as women. It is in this context, a recent wave of dalit literature emerged as dalit feminism. Bama is a representative novelist of Dalit feminism.

Bama's *Sangati*, published in 1994 in Tamil is a series of local anecdotes strung through a female narrator. Both *Sangati* and her earlier work *Karukku* exploited autobiographical elements to innovate an experimental form of writing fiction. Whereas *Karukku* is the autobiography of an individual, *Sangati* is the autobiography of a community. Autobiographies or self referential texts have always been powerful instruments for registering the presence of dalits. There are only a few self narratives of dalits in Tamil literature though a spate of autobiographies nourished Marathi literature.

Sangati like *Karukku* is translated into English by Laxmi Holmstrom and is written in a new narrative style and diction. It flouts the traditional concept of a novel. Written in an elliptical structure, it ends where it starts. The word 'sangati' can be literally translated into English as events. The novel is an account of some personal impressions on certain atrocious and blood curdling incidents in a dalit street. Among these incidents there is neither a story nor characterization that is often associated with a novel.

The novel owes its popularity to the contributions it made in the field of both dalit literature and feminist literature. It is written in a dalit-feminist perspective. Dalit feminism is a reactionary movement against academic feminism and the universalism of the experiences of dalit male. "The writings and manifestoes of different Dalit women's groups underlined the fact that the unmarked feminism of the 1970s had, infact, been in theory and praxis a kind of Brahmanical feminism" (Rege

Sharmila 3). Hailed as the first Dalit woman writer in India, Bama seeks to establish a collective female identity for dalit women. The protagonist cum narrator of the novel gradually develops the awareness that they are the lowest rung in the hierarchy and that only through education they can rid of their oppressed consciousness.

In *Sangati* Bama reflects on the impoverished and violent world of dalit women. Her female characters suffer from double discrimination; they are oppressed by the so-called high caste people (which equally affects both male and female Dalits) and by Dalit males. They constitute the majority of labourers, doing hard manual labour and engage in agricultural operations. Women participate in productive works, earn wages and participate in the economic chain. But they are paid much less than their male counterparts. This unequal division of labour becomes a major issue in *Sangati*. The Dalit community is also under the reigning patriarchal system whereby dalit men who themselves are marginalized by the upper class land owners, in turn marginalize dalit women. "It is not the same for women of other castes and communities. Our women cannot bear the torment of upper-caste masters in the fields, and at home they cannot bear the violence of their husbands" (65)

Invidious patriarchal distinctions are initially inculcated in children within the first ten years of their lives. Gender games act as effective tools to achieve this goal. Bama as a young girl understands the crafty nature of gender games they play. Girls are not allowed to play the games of boys. While games like 'kabadi' and 'marbles' are meant for boys, girls play at cooking, getting married and other domestic matters.

Even when we played 'mothers and fathers', we always had to serve the mud 'rice' to the boys first. They used to pull us by the hair and hit us saying, 'What sort of food is this, di, without salt or anything!' In those days we used to accept those

pretence blows, and think it was all good fun. Nowadays, for many of the girls, those have become real blows, and their entire lives are hell. (31)

Elders consider boys as permanent members in a family because they are supposed to take care of their parents. On the other hand, female children are transient members who are to be transplanted to another family and so have no role to play in their families. This causes gender prejudices even in the minds of parents.

Two of the stories that Bama reminds is that of Mariamma and Thayi whose marital disharmonies are revealed in an attempt to stereotype the dalit predicament. They are ill treated and beaten up daily by their husbands. Mariamma is humiliated by her father, assaulted by the landlord and later tormented by her husband. She is a true representative of the entire community of the submissive dalit women. She never resents her tormentors. She is unjustly accused of being intimate with a village boy and summoned to the village meeting. Even though the whole village knows that she is not guilty, nobody had the courage to defend her. The women are prevented from speaking in village meetings and the men do not possess the courage to stand erect before the upper class and question them.

Bama realizes that women occupy a claustrophobic space in the world and are constantly under menace. They are not safe in their home, agricultural fields, in church and even in public spheres. They are constantly under the threat of sexual harassments in the field of work. Family, church and caste-courts are usually male-led. Justice and rules for behavior are different for men and women. While Mariamma pays 200 rupees as fine, Manikkam pays only 100 rupees for an equal offence. Women are also vulnerable to superstitious beliefs. They believe that it is women who are possessed by 'peys'. Bama realizes that such blind beliefs and self acquiescence can be removed only by collective action.

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. Just as we work hard so long as there is strength in our bodies, so too, must we strengthen our hearts and minds in order to survive. (59)

Dalit women resort to variegated tools for survival. While Mariamma accepts what comes to her, Pecchiamma protests by walking on without her husband. Language is one of the effective tools they deploy against their oppressors. The folkloric native language of the dalits itself becomes a language of protest and political challenge. To this Bama added a language of human rights articulated by her liberated protagonist. This new language of political resistance also includes a free use of abusive terms. Women give vent to their feelings by calling their neighbours abusive names or shouting the names of their body parts. This, for them, is an effective defence mechanism to maintain their psychological equilibrium.

Bama's chosen village includes Parayars, Pallars, Koravars and Chakkiliyars. Among these only the parayars have been converted into Christianity. This coerced conversion brought nothing but economic deprivation because they had lost their right to reservation. The popular education scheme promised by the Christian priests becomes a poor substitute for economic self sufficiency. The children could not attend the school since they have to assist their parents in work. Within the subdivisions of dalit community there is caste-hierarchy. In matters of marriage and love women are discriminated. Parayar women do not have the right to marry a man from the Pallar, Koravar or Chakkiliyar community. On the other hand men have the right to marry whoever they like.

Bama also draws a comparison between dalit and non dalit women. According to her the dalit situation is better than that of upper class women who have been forced to live in most vulnerable

conditions. Upper class women find no way to express their pent up emotions. Bama feels proud that their women have economic freedom from their men folk; they work hard in the fields and match box factories and rear up their children. Sometimes widows are allowed remarriage and their culture never alienates a widow from the mainstream. But the upper class women confine their emotions with in the four walls of their mansions. Even the male members of the dalit community have their own defence systems. Since they cannot protest against their landlords they show their strengths at home on their wives and children. Women, as a result, suffer caste oppression in mornings and gender oppression in nights. The narrator's grandmother who is the general commentator of the events in the novel explains their plight:

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 have finished in the fields. If you are born into this world, it is best you were a man. Born as women, what good do we get? We only toil in the fields and in the home until our vaginas shrivel. (6)

Bama identifies instances of early child marriage, poverty, lack of proper health care and sanitation and lack of education as certain barriers impeding women from coming out of their subdued state.

The child narrator in the early chapters grows melancholic and rebellious due to the events happening around her. When she grows into a young woman she stresses on the need for a radical change and calls out for action against the exigencies of her companions. She exhorts them to take pride of their caste and march towards social empowerment. Bama draws attention to their immense capacity for hard labour, their spirit of protest, their culture's absence of dowry and their rich cultural heritage. She talks about the narrator's courageous grandmother who pawned her thali to feed her children, Katturaasa's mother who bore her son by herself while cutting grass and about

Marriamma who came back to work even after she met with an accident. But they have been silenced in the crucial moments of their lives. Their protests are nipped in the very bud. When Bama's protagonist admonishes her grandmother for not protesting, she replies, "From your ancestors' 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?"

The beginning of the novel displays a state of depression and hopelessness of the dalit women; but the latter part reveals the vigour, courage and the resilience of women even in the midst of all misery. They face the problems by their solidarity. They chatter and laugh to forget their sorrows; they celebrate their newly found identity and inner strength. The narrator finally becomes free of the clutches of her limitations. She works and lives by herself. But it is striking to note that she had to hide her caste name out of fear of repercussions. Even when there are more educated and self reliant women among the dalits the cult of violence still continues to trouble their lives.

