

# Self- Denial to Self-Assertion - A Study of Dalit Woman Identity in Bama's *Sangati*

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**Abstract:** *The paper attempts to analyze Bama's Sangati and tries to find out how Bama asserts the identity of Dalit women through her narrative. The study focusses on Sangati as a literary expression of resistance and protest and how the writer portrays the journey of the Dalit women from the hardships faced from the denial of the self to the assertion of their identity.*

**Keywords:** Self- Denial, Self- Assertion, Dalit Woman Identity, etc.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Dalit literature is an expression of the Dalit consciousness and the realization of the rights and justice of the Dalits. Most of their writings are their own experiences, struggles and sufferings, in forms of literature like poems, autobiographies, short stories, novels, street plays etc. Alok Mukherjee states, "There is in it ignorance, sexism, violence, internal rivalry and conflict, competition for survival, drunkenness and death" (13). In the words of M. F. Jilthe, "The voiceless found a voice here; the world less found a world here". (qtd. in Deivasigamani 18) Dalit women, also gradually began to produce literature which portrayed the sufferings and humiliation they had faced. They have tried to express their consciousness through their literary expressions.

The Dalit feminists believe that sisterhood which is typical to any feminist movement is yet to hail the Dalit woman as an equal sister. Women who belong to the upper castes have not considered Dalit women as equals. Dalit women have been treated worse than the way men have been treated. Dalit feminism can thus be described as a "discourse of discontent" and "a political difference" from the main stream Indian feminism. Dalit feminism not only questions Indian feminism's hegemony which privileges mainstream Indian women, but also the hegemony of all Dalit men. It recalls the joint and multiple oppressions of caste and gender faced by the Dalit women. Dalit feminism celebrates the 'difference' of Dalit woman from the privileged upper caste women and celebrates their identity, strength, labour, and resilience.

Women, all over the world and especially in the Third World countries have had to face so many difficulties and for Dalit women it has been a tough task. The Dalit women are subjected to two types of subjugation: of their gender as well as of their caste. A Dalit woman is a Dalit amongst the Dalits. Dalit women writers, show the courage to voice the atrocities against them. The time has come for them to pinpoint their identity in the literary map. Their consciousness has begun to raise their protest and resistance to the many oppressions they have faced.

There are many such Dalit women who have shown the courage to write about their marginalization and they have come out with literary works in the forms of books which have been to a great extent autobiographies, that depict the sufferings they have faced. The prominent among them are Shantabai Kamble, Urmila Pawar, P. Sivakami, Baby Kamble, Gogu Shyamala, Vijila Chirippad, Bama etc. Being a Tamil Dalit Christian woman, Bama is able to express the pathetic situation of the women of her community. Bama also known as Bama Fausting Soosairaj is a Tamil Dalit feminist and novelist who rose to fame with her autobiographical novel *Karukku* (1992) which chronicles the joys and sorrows experienced by the Dalit Christian women in Tamil Nadu. She subsequently wrote two more novels, *Sangati* (1994) and *Vanmam* (2002) along with two collections of short stories, *Kusumbukkaran* (1996) and *Oru Tattvum Erumaiyum* (2003). The paper attempts to analyse Bama's *Sangati* which tries to interrogate the marginalization and humiliation experienced by the Dalit women inside and outside their home stead and community. The struggles and oppressions which the Dalit women have had to undergo are far worse than those experienced by the women of the mainstream society. Dalit women have had to face double or triple marginalization. Bama, interrogating the male dictates and norms, tries to spread awareness among the Dalit sisterhood about their rights and justice.

*Sangati* explores the ‘why?’ and ‘how?’ of the rules and regulations of patriarchy. A probe into the denial of the self leads to a confident assertion of the self; *Sangati* thus becomes an assertion of the identity and the will of the Dalit women; Bama, throughout her work, reminds the Dalit women of their worth and honour. The paper analyses the way in which Dalit women are denied their selves and identity by the patriarchal society. It also probes into the way the author- narrator Bama tries to instil courage, enthusiasm, self-will, hope and encouragement in the Dalit women. She makes them aware of the need to rise up and raise their voice of protest. The study is relevant as even today the marginalization of Dalit women continues to exist in the society. Women’s rights’ movements, the State and the patriarchal society even now have excluded the Dalit sisterhood. Their voices of protest and resistance are yet to be listened to by the authorities. Bama’s *Sangati* is a powerful weapon of resistance against the mainstream society.

*Sangati* means events, and this book is filled with those stories not only about the sorrows and tears of Dalit women, but also about their courage, eagerness, self-confidence, and self-respect which help them to overcome all the adversities they face from the society. The events and the stories that the narrator have listened to from her childhood days are enough to understand the hegemonic dominance that suppressed the Dalit women. Dalit communities are oppressed groups in whole and the suppression and sufferings of women inside that community are terrible. Bama writes:

My mind is crowded with many anecdotes: stories not only about the sorrows and tears of Dalit women, but also about their lively and rebellious culture, their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter them, but to swim vigorously against the tide; about the self-confidence and self-respect that enables them to leap over threatening adversities by laughing at and ridiculing them; about their passion to live life with vitality, truth, and enjoyment; about their hard labour. I wanted to shout out these stories. I was eager that through them, everyone should know about us and our lives. *Sangati* grew out of the hope that the Dalit women who read it will rise up with fervour and walk towards victory.... (xii)

In the Preface to *Sangati* Bama writes “Oppressed, ruled, and still being ruled by patriarchy, government, caste, and religion, Dalit women are forced to break all the strictures of society to live” (vii). *Sangati* portrays the lives of those Dalit women who have been oppressed, humiliated and marginalized by those who wield power in their hands. *Sangati* also portrays those women who out of the denial of rights and justice and the resulting frustration, rise up with their wings to question the oppressive powers around them. There are many powerful Dalit women who have had the courage to break the rules of authority and to make themselves heard. They “changed their difficult, problem-filled lives and quickly stanch their tears. Through this they found the courage to revolt”. (vii)

The writer asks questions which are really significant in the patriarchal society, “Why women were pushed aside always and everywhere? Aren’t we also human beings?” (28-29). Bama has dedicated this book to her mother and grandmother and to many Dalit women she has known and from whom she has learned both hope and courage. *Sangati* moves from the story of individual struggle to the story of a community of ‘paraiya’ women. It can be considered as the autobiography of a community.

The story of *Sangati* moves forward in the perspective of a girl, a perspective she has acquired through her grandmother's stories, which are but real events that have happened in the lives of the Dalit women. Bama's grandmother, Velliyammakizhavi has been patriarchally conditioned and has brought up the girl children in the household in a similar way. “She [grandmother] cared for her grandsons much more than she cared for us” (7) Bama frowns the way patriarchy has worked against the Dalit women. Even from his boyhood days, the men had the power to control. “When they are infants in arms, they never let boy babies’ cry. If a boy baby cries, he is instantly picked up and given milk. It is not so with girls” (7). A girl is not allowed to play the games of boys and in games, the boys exert their authority over the girls. These so-called innocent games are reflections of the behavioural patterns they see in their own houses. “Boys are given more respect. They will eat as much as they wish and run off to play. As for the girls, they must stay at home and keep on working all the time, cleaning vessels, drawing water, sweeping the house, gathering firewood, washing clothes, and so on” (7). This reminds us of Simon de Beauvoir’s words that one is not born, rather made a woman.

A Dalit woman has to undergo extreme suffering under a patriarchally ordained society. They face domestic violence, caste violence, political violence, economic violence, social violence, religious violence and so on. Throughout the entire narrative, the writer portrays many incidents which depict the sufferings of the Dalit women. Bama realistically delineates the psychological as well as the physical trauma the Dalit women undergo. The sexual assaults which they face from

within and outside their community, domestic violence, the denial of political and economic freedom etc. are exposed in the course of the story.

Violence in its extreme form that a Dalit woman suffers is the denial of her bodily rights. A Dalit woman has no power over her body. She is considered as the possession of the male members of the society. The narrator questions the denial of bodily rights, "Why, Amma, why must she stay with that fellow and suffer so much? Why can't she leave him and go away by herself?" (43) Her mother replies that it is not so easy to get away, once you get married. "Once you have put your head in the mortar, can you escape from the pestle?" (44). The abuses the Dalit women face make them very vulnerable. Their individuality is denied and are given only utilitarian value. Throughout the book, Bama explores a Dalit woman's relationship to her body. As Lakshmi Holmstrom said in the Introduction to *Sangati*, "She [Bama] writes of the violent treatment of women by fathers, husbands, and brothers ...where sometimes women fight back" (xvii).

The hegemonic authority imposed over a female body can be seen in the absurd rituals which the patriarchal society enforces upon its female members. When a girl attains puberty, her body is treated as polluted and the girl is kept away from others for a brief span of time. When Mariamma reaches maturity, she is confined to 'kuchulu', a small hut inside the house, for sixteen days. She is restricted within the confines of the four walls for a few days. Manacchi is possessed by pey when she goes out to cut grass during the dusk. According to the superstitious beliefs constructed by the patriarchal society, peys are attracted by the smell of menstrual blood and Manacchi had her period on that day. The girls have to keep their body within the confines of the four walls, while they are in menstrual blood. The society has made such a myth of pey to make the female bodies stay at home. The pey on Manacchi is scared off the body by a Kodangi man.

...she [the possessed girl] was still dancing, the soothsayer dragged her by the hair, and then, suddenly, twisted his hand around a thick lock from the top of her head and wrenched it off. It seems people who are possessed never feel any pain however much they are pulled or beaten. (49)

Manacchi understands what has happened only after she returns to her own senses. Bama questions this in *Sangati*, "Why does the pey only possess women, Patti? It never seems to go for the men, even when they are on their own" (50). An elderly woman answered that pey affects only woman because woman's body is polluted every month. The narrator's question seems to be significant when taken into consideration the meaningless customs and rituals meant only for women. This shows the denial of a woman's right over her body. The narrator asserts that there are in fact no peys at all. "The ones who do not have the mental strength are totally oppressed; they succumb to mental ill- health and act as if they are possessed by peys." (59)

Mariamma also had to face the village trial as she has been falsely accused for being intimate with a village boy Manikkam. Kumarasami, the land owner has tried to abuse Mariamma and when she has escaped from him, he made a fake story of Mariamma being intimate with Manikkam. Many of the women who have witnessed the actual incident wanted to speak up but the boundaries set by society do not allow them to speak out. Dalit women struggle a lot to get rid of sexual abuse from upper castes and from their own community. The women only were blamed, if any of them dared to voice against the violence by upper castes as well as by the men of their own community. Mariamma's incident shows the double marginalization experienced by the Dalit women. "Do you women have any sense at all? What are you muttering about here, when we men are talking seriously? Go home all of you." (21) In the case of penalty too, the boy and the girl had two rules. Mariamma was asked to pay a penalty of Two Hundred and Manikkam a fine of Hundred.

Later Mariamma is forced to marry Manikkam just because her name is abused with him. Mariamma's life becomes extremely painful. Because of some upper caste man's foolishness, Mariamma was made the scapegoat and her whole life was destroyed. People would not consider whether the accusation was true or not, nor they allowed the woman to speak out. They will marry her off to any fellow and wash their hands off her. They never care for her whether she lives or dies. The narrator says, "I was disgusted by it. I wanted to get hold of all those who had brought her to this state, bite them, chew them up and spit them out." (42) The story of sufferings makes one to think that one should never be born as a woman.

There is an instance of another woman named Thaaayi who too lost her identity and selfhood by marriage. Thaaayi was the most beautiful woman in that entire area; she dressed well, smoothed her hair and had looks like a 'Nayakkan' woman. But after her marriage, not a day went by without her being beaten up. She was forced to marry a man she did not like. Her husband dragged her along the street and flogged her like an animal with a stick or with his belt. The husband beat her without 'chattai' (blouse) on her. When Karuthamuthu questioned him for beating Thaaayi he retorted, "Who are you

to speak for this munde? She's my wife, I can beat her or kill her if I wish. You go and mind your own business" (43). The women are beaten to death and they never protest just because the men have tied a 'tali' around her neck and the men own the right to possess the body of woman. The woman did not have any ownership over her body. A woman becomes a slave from the very next day she is married. The men scold their wives and keep them well under control. Men not only possess the body but also tried to put down her pride. Thaaayi's husband cut her hair and hung it in the doorpost. He wanted everyone to ask her about her hair and spit on her face, so that he can put her pride down.

Along with the narration of the hardships faced by the Dalit women and interrogating the social evils, the narrator, throughout, pleads for an assertion of their selves. She gives instances to enliven the hope of the suppressed spirits of the Dalit women. There are occasions when women try to assert their identity and to get up from all their sufferings. There is the instance of Pechiamma, ending her brutal marital relationship and re-marries. There are also instances of women gaining education, right to vote etc. At the end of the narrative, the writer asks the society to give freedom for the girls as boys have and asks women to stand up for their rights.

We must give up the belief that a married life of complete service to a man is our only fate. We must change this attitude that if married life turns out to be a perpetual hell, we must grit our teeth and endure it for a lifetime.

We must bring up our girls to think in these new ways from an early age. We should educate boys and girls alike, showing no difference between them as they grow into adults. We should give our girls the freedom we give our boys (123).

The narrator has a firm belief that if the society is ready to treat boys and girls as equal, then girls also will reveal their strength. Then there will be no more violence, injustice and inequalities. The novel ends with a note of optimism. "Women can make and women can break." (123) There is a tone of self-assertion. The narrations of self-denial and search for the self and identity conclude with an ultimate assertion of identity and self.

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