

## BAMA'S PERSPECTIVE ON GENDER AND CASTE DISCRIMINATION IN *SANGATI*

By

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### Abstract

*This paper examines the ways in which gender and caste serve as instruments of double oppression within the Dalit community. Being a woman and belonging to the lowest community are two facets of Dalit women's difficulties. They are thus subject to double oppression. Dalit literary works focus on the the oppression of the weaker by the stronger, or the sufferings of the "oppressed class," are as old as mankind. Caste and gender issues are brought to light by Bama, both within and outside the community. Bama critiques the sexual harassment that upper-caste men subject Dalit women to outside of their homes and the cruelty that Dalit males inflict on them at home. As a Dalit woman author, Bama draws attention to the different problems and challenges that Dalit women encounter in her book Sangati, including discrimination, illiteracy, sexual exploitation, inequality, and injustices. In order to depict the ordinary existence of Dalit women, Bama used a variety of incidents from their own community's everyday life.*

**Keywords:** *dalit literature, caste discrimination, gender discrimination, sufferings, oppression.*

### Introduction

Bama was a dedicated teacher, novelist, and Indian Dalit feminist. In 1992, she published her personal novel "Karukku," which focuses on the happiness and grief that Dalit Christian women in Tamilnadu endure. Her most well-known book, "Sangati," was translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom after it was first written in Tamil in 1994. In the novel Sangati, incidents or everyday occurrences are referred to. The themes of Bama's works center on the caste and gender oppression that are prevalent in Hinduism and Christianity. Bama depicts the everyday suffering that women endure at the hands of men.

The novel Sangati starts with the quote; "if the third is a girl to behold, your courtyard

will fill with gold"(1). The little girl Bama serves as the narrator in this story, and the topics of gender discrimination are illustrated through the grandmother's remarks. According to Bama, there is no difference between boys and girls in her family at birth, but as they grew older, the boys caused them more worry than the girls. Sangati addresses the gender prejudice Dalit women experience from the moment of their birth. Girls are always viewed as less valuable and given less attention. Here, Bama addresses the subject of prejudice against women, "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" (7).

The story focuses on the lives of Dalit women, highlighting their struggles from birth and throughout their daily existence. For instance, prejudice is evident when a boy child receives longer feedings than a girl infant. The male who beats and works longer hours in the fields for very little compensation subjugates the women's pain and the rites of puberty. According to Bama, women are always placed second to men in society, even if they did not receive their parents' affection and attention. For example, if a kid gets a fever or an illness, his family will rush to treat him properly and with the utmost love and care. If the child is a female, they won't give it their all. Boys eat as much as they want and leave the house to play whenever they feel like it. Discrimination occurs in society when boys and girls play different games, such as those that involve cooking. For the girls, this means that they have to stay at home and labour nonstop on household chores like sweeping the house, gathering firewood, washing clothes, and cleaning utensils. "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" (9). Even kid's video games include gender discrimination in them.

When the narrator was a child, she used to witness her grandmother, who she calls "patti," carry things home from work. She also remembers that patti would always call the grandsons first. Since she lacked teeth, if

she brought cucumbers, she used her fingernails to remove all the seeds before giving them the remaining fruit. She offered the boys the best bits of fruit, so if she brought mangoes, we would only get the peel, stones, and other parts. We picked up and ate the remaining skins because there was nowhere else for us to go. While girls are only allowed to eat half of a meal or the leftovers, guys are allowed to eat meals in full at home. Even the food that is supplied to the females is of far worse quality.

Their landlords were upper caste members, thus Bama's grandma had to gather and distribute all of the pay in the evening. Furthermore, their homes were rather far from our streets.

Grandmother, then, moves like a dog, pacing up and down ten times a day. Men in this village have no responsibilities, but women are required to work both at home and in the field. Despite not receiving the same pay as males, all women work in the fields and factories and earn their salary. For the same work, they get paid less than males. This illustrates the prejudice based on caste between the lower and upper classes.

Bama was warned by her grandmother not to venture into the fields and woodlands by herself. 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" (8). Because upper-caste males are never treated equally, they are always on the lookout for Dalit women or girls to harass or mistreat, believing that she has no right to file a complaint against them. Just the Parayars have become Christians among the

other castes, such as the Pallars, Koravars, and Chakkiliyars. The panchayat systems, headed by the nattammai, are used to resolve disputes within the community. Bama mentions one event in which Mariamma and Manikkam were fined Rs. 200 and Rs. 100, respectively. This demonstrates that women receive harsher penalties than men.

Bama noted that only women, specifically Dalit people, were taken over by peys. when her grandma tells tales of women who were possessed by peys or who danced erratically.

The women of the upper caste are not possessed by peys or danced in a frenzy; this dance is only for those of the lower caste. In response to these abuses, Bama stated 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" (45).

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" (65). According to Bama, some women in her community are completely reliant on their husbands, but in her own village, women are economically self-sufficient.

Dalit girls are not having much fun growing up. They have to look after their younger siblings, so they don't get much time to play. Bama requests that they handle boys and girls equally. Bama cited Pecchiamma, a member of the Chakkili caste, as an example

of the Dalit community's educational system. She only completed her fifth-grade education. As a result, not many of the females in the town attend school. Discrimination based on caste is evident here.

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? (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" (42). Her husband claimed he had the right to kill and abuse her wife because "she is my wife" when the neighbors moved to save her of addition to the persecution of the upper caste, women of the Dalit community have experienced physical and mental torment in their homes. "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" (76).

According to Bama, the boys in her tribe choose to play games or hang out with their buddies, while the girls handle all home chores like cooking, cleaning, and childrearing. Compared to boys, girls in her village receive inadequate schooling. The girls are overburdened with daily tasks, while the lads are kept free from obligations.

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. (114)

When compared to Dalit women, all upper-caste women are stunning. Because of their social, economic, and political standing, women experience violence based on both gender and caste at the hands of males in the ruling caste. The tale depicts the daily hardships and obstacles that women encounter. The state of tyranny and poverty celebrates extremely basic everyday actions like eating, cooking, and sharing. Bama asserts that men have the capacity to repeatedly degrade and humiliate women.

The Chakkili community's Pecchiamma, a Christian character, discusses marriage and divorce customs in Hindu and Christian families. She has two marriages under her belt; she has children from the first and one from the second. But in the Christian society, a woman's spouse can be married after his passing. Bama takes great care when presenting the image of a dalit woman. Bama demonstrates the gender oppression that has been inflicted upon Dalit women throughout their life. The author of "Sangati" is a woman who, as a first-person account, has experienced all of the injustices, humiliations, and suffering inflicted by the hegemony and religion of the higher castes. Because of caste, religion, and gender difficulties, girls in the Dalit community have extremely precarious lives. "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" (13). Thus, the Dalit community governed the women's and young girls' independence and emotions.

The women were never permitted to visit movie theaters. Men are allowed to wed outside of their caste, while women are not allowed to wed outside of their community. Following that, Bama asked a question similar to "why can't we be the same as boys? We aren't allowed to talk loudly or laugh noisily" (83). Women of the Dalit community are subject to certain restrictions since the girls are not allowed to laugh or talk loudly. 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” (29). Because of their cultural systems, a woman in their community endured great suffering.

Women in this neighborhood often endure mistreatment from society and live extremely difficult lives in deplorable conditions. Men are allowed to live as they like, but women were forced to live limited lives. Another feature of women is that Dalit women are not bound by widowhood, unlike their upper caste counterparts; they are free to remarry and lead fulfilling lives.

The oppression of Dalits and their discrimination by upper caste members are depicted in the novel *Sangati Bama*. In fact, Bama herself experienced discrimination on

numerous occasions. In the end, Bama requests that her community adhere to a set of rules in order to overcome all obstacles and put an end to women's suffering. As kids become adults, she wants them to treat boys and girls equally and never point out their differences.

### Conclusion

She continues by requesting that there be an end to injustices, violence, and inequality as well as equal rights. Bama ended the lines “Women can make and women can break” (126) incredibly optimistic that this day will arrive shortly. Therefore, caste and gender discrimination cannot stop Dalit women from being suppressed.

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