

Exclusion and Marginalization of Dalit Women: Girl Child in Dalit Homes Seen as a Curse in Bama Faustina's Writing Sangati.

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ABSTRACT

Dalit Childhood has been discussed with all its multifarious dimensions in the Indian writings in English Translations. Childhood writing is often told from either the perspective of the child or that of an adult reflecting on their childhood. In this context, the name of the recent Indian Dalit writer Bama Faustina Soosairaj is the most important one who is an emerging twentieth century Dalit fiction writer and social activist. The present paper seeks to portray Bama's rebellious spirit and emerging voice of Dalits in general and Dalit childhood writings in particular through an analysis of her novel Sangati (2002), where she talks about the equal rights and privileges of women in general and Dalit girls in particular based on class, gender, caste, and other issues. Exclusion and marginalization of Dalit women begins at home. The Dalit Community, like most Indian communities, favours the male child. The girl child is not welcome and becomes an easy object of discrimination. Hence this paper explores the conditions of the marginalized Dalit girl child who attempts to get liberty, equality, fraternity, and justice and finally, to lead their life with honour and dignity.

Key-words: Exclusion, Marginalization, Curse, Oppression, Domestic violence, Discrimination, Equality and Justice.

Tamil Dalit Literature is an interesting area of study for the research scholar. All Dalit writings through translation are gaining wide prominence. *'Dalit'* has now been widely used in place of *'untouchable'* over the years. And Bama's novels are informed by a sense of gender relations that suggest being a woman in a largely patriarchal society is another form of being lower caste. As Meena Kandasamy says, *"You don't have to be a Dalit—by being a woman the caste is in you."* Dalit women should have the right to be seen as a subject. They should care for their social position and attempt to seek their value in society. The poor life of these dalit women, their requirements and pain never find any mention in the mainstream history books.

Bama attempts to give them a voice, believing that their voices should be heard. Arjun Dangle states:

"Ambedkar shaped the tradition of revolutionary thinking of almost a generation of Dalits who can today hold their heads high. Thanks to him for the literary manifestation of this social awareness in Dalit literature." (Dangle, 238).

Bama tries to speak and adapts such strategies of rebellion in her writings. In her fiction multiple women voices narrate the day-to-day happenings in their lives. As a conscious writer, she is not without motto. The motto behind her writing is to evoke a reaction from the reader by instilling profound thoughts in their minds to be contemplated. She wants to draw serious attention to their misery and suffering and bring about transformation. Thus, Bama seems to give a clarion call to the women in her fiction to awaken them to their worth in the society.

Exclusion and marginalization of Dalit women begins at home. The Dalit Community, like most Indian communities, favours the male child. The girl child is not welcome and becomes an easy object of discrimination. In her work *Sangati*, Bama explores that in the Dalit families, the male child is celebrated while the girl child is a *'beast of a burden'*. Since the time of their birth, a girl child is seen as a curse. In most Dalit homes, a Dalit girl is destined to work at the very tender age. She is a potential source of cheap, unpaid labour. She acts as a helping hand to her mother who works at the farm outside and leaves the domestic responsibilities on her daughter's tiny shoulder. Her daily duties include fetching firewood, cooking, feeding the younger siblings, taking care of them or even the elder brothers, toiling at the farm in the afternoons during sowing/harvesting time, working at factories and handing over the small income to a drunken father or a bullying brother. This is the common picture of a girl child aged between four and fourteen in most Dalit homes. Girl children were beaten at home and outside. They earned but could not make use of their earnings for themselves. They seldom enjoyed childhood for they had to behave like grown-ups from a very early age. Bama is a Dalit feminist who has made her literature as a powerful record of atrocities committed against dalits in general and dalit girl child in particular. Her books reveal her to be a writer with an urge to create a new society in which equality, justice and love prevail. Bama makes an appeal for change and self-empowerment through education and collective action. Such literature is a means to voice for human rights, social justice and equality for all. In *Sangati*, Bama urges Dalit women to organize themselves and fight for their rights.

"Why should we suppress our talents? We work as much as the men do. In fact, much more, I should say. Ask these men to take over our chores for one day. They would run away in no time... We have to assert our rights. We have to stand up for our esteem. If we wait for others to come and give us a helping hand, then you better stand prepared to rot for a lifetime."(76)

Bama also raises so many questions such as *'Are the women Dolls to play and threw out afterwards?'* Thus, her work is rooted in reality; that is the reality of her Dalit self in her past life. She wants to revolt against the misdeeds of the patriarchy and therefore she criticizes the silence of Dalits in her works. She faced and experienced all kinds of problems being both as a woman and as a Dalit. So, she always wants to help the Dalit women to be aware about their rights and to fight for them and thus her works mainly urge her readers to act. Bama is not a shy writer. She always fights against the caste system and also social norms made by patriarchy. And thus, she becomes an emerging spirit and angry representative of the Dalits in the contemporary society.

Woman is not born fully passive, secondary, nonessential, submissive, frightened and compelled rather she is gradually shaped by her situational upbringings. *"One is not born a woman rather becomes one"* (Beauvoir, 281) A Dalit girl becomes an object of discrimination the moment she is born, especially if she is dark complexioned. In *Sangati*, the narrator recalls,

"The fact that I was dark skinned unlike my elder siblings was a source of disappointment to everyone at home". (8)

She further recalls how a male infant is carefully attended while a girl child is left unattended for long hours. Even in matters of weaning, the male child enjoys breast feeding for a longer period compared to his female counterpart. While a girl child stays at home and does her daily chores: *"Fetching water, firewood, mopping and washing, doing the dishes and numerous never-ending tasks, boys are allowed to eat their fill and play outside"*. (6) She steps out of the house only when she takes her younger sibling in her arms out for play. Thus, her stepping out is too work-related. She is destined to work at the tender age on account of her gender. Similarly, the games that children play are codified on gender lines. As the narrator recalls in *Sangati*, *"Boys do not let girls play their games. Girls could only play at cooking a meal, play at being married off" or even play at getting beaten up by husbands!* (6)

In *Karukku* too, the narrator gives us a detail of the games played by children in a Paraiyar colony. The boys act as Naickers (upper caste landlords) and the girls play as Pannaiyaals (farmhands). The boys would pretend to keep shop while the girls would 'buy' grocery from them; the boys would pose as priests; the girls would submit as sisters; the

boys would act as drunken husbands returning home and the girls as wailing wives receiving the blows. Thus, even at games, the Dalit girls are placed in a subordinate position.

A Dalit girl has to fend for herself and to earn for the sake of the family. She is forced to unhygienic places in search of food. In *Karukku*, the narrator recalls how the children roam about in the streets, in the fields or go fishing in rain filled pools. They dig up earthworms or catch small fishes which they roast over a fire kindled out of trash and rags. They are always under the threat of being caught by the upper caste guard lurking around the pond. The terrible Guard would not only snatch away their catch, but also smash their fishing rods. But the boys would enjoy much more than the girls. They are allowed to play and swim in the pond, ride on buffaloes' backs or hunt water snakes.

Sangati discusses in detail the circumscribed lot of the dalit women, overburdened with work. In her representation of Dalit women, Bama presents Dalit women primarily as workers who join the work force right from girlhood and toil through adolescence, womanhood, middle age and old age almost until their last breath. In much of Dalit writing, Dalit women are represented primarily as cheap workers, toiling from dawn to dusk. Bama's works, be it *Karukku* or *Sangati*, the writer documents a series of women workers who cannot but work in order to survive and feed their children during the entire period of their waking hours. They work not to supplement their husband's or son's income as middle-class women are supposed to do. Rather they share the responsibility, in fact, are overloaded with a lion's share of it. Many Dalit women are the only earning members of the family. Thus, Dalit women are workers in a fundamental rather than peripheral way in the writings of Bama.

Bama's writings are a representation of sexual subjugation of the Dalit women, *Sangati* is about domestic violence which is a very distinctive and complex type of violence against the Dalit women. Girls, from the time of their birth, are discriminated just by their sex—a girl is neglected at infancy in favour of the boy. Though Dalit women participate in productive works, and working as much as men do but still they are paid much less than the men. Even they are also constantly under the threat of sexual harassments in the work place and in their community, their families, churches and caste-courts—all are male-led. They also face gender discrimination such as a girl in her childhood play at cooking or getting married and other domestic matter. Tahira. S. Khan in her book "Beyond Honour: A Historical Materialist Explanation of Honour-Related Violence" rightly says:

"In patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal societies, women have always been attached to the male members of the family. Women could never have class, caste, creed, or language of their own other than that of the men of their family." (2006: 137-138)

The life of a Dalit girl was tormenting but the life of a grown-up Dalit woman was worse and they suffer the most than the men in the same caste. Another kind of violence is sexual violence. Here, the Untouchable turns into touchable for the sexual gratification of the higher-caste people when it fits their selfish deeds and lusty demands. Dalit woman is a constant subject for torture and maltreatment both within and outside the domestic sphere. And there is also seen that if the woman is not a sex worker, then the lover always abandons her after a period of sexual use and abuse and thus the sexual subjugation seems to be the destiny of most dalit women. Thus, being a Dalit female, she has to face sexual violence, oppression, gender discrimination and so on in the patriarchal society.

The book does not carry any plot in the normal sense, but it is a series of anecdotes. Bama herself says: *"My mind is crowded with many anecdotes; stories not about the sorrows and tears of dalit women, but also about their lively and rebellious culture, passion about life with vitality, truth, enjoyment and about their hard labour. I wanted to shout out these stories."* (*Sangati*, 9) An inquiry into the state of Dalit women in a Dalit community could be best undertaken by examining specific lives of two girls, belonging to different age groups. We shall study the lives of some of the women represented in *Sangati* – Maikanni (11 years), Mariamma (16 years). Maikanni is a representative Dalit Character who is moulded and constricted by her gender. In *Sangati* Bama presents the case-history of Maikanni who enters the vicious circle of work, violence and injustice that engulf the lives of Dalit women both at home and outside. Maikanni is an eleven-year-old who is so undernourished that she looks like a seven-year-old. Her mother has been deserted by her father for a concubine soon after Maikanni's birth but he nevertheless returns home every

now and then. Hence the tale of her seven siblings is rooted in her father's callous violence towards his wife and his children.

We can locate the source of her oppression as essentially rooted in her gender. Her brothers do not lend her a helping hand either at home or at the factory. Her father's desertion affects Maikanni the most. She is deprived of schooling, games and a care-free childhood. As she has to leave for the match-factory before sunrise, she suffers from constipation and stomach disorders. Her earnings range from Rs. 40-50 per week. Every Saturday, her father visits to collect her wages. On one particular Saturday, she is tempted to buy an ice candy for one rupee and gets severely beaten up by her father. She, thus, has no rights over her earnings. She also gets man handled by the bullies at the factory. The boys do not allow her to sit near the window at the bus, often beating her up and kicking her about. The supervisor at the factory also beats her for any minor lapse. On one particular occasion, he severely beats her up as she relieves herself in the open (as the custom in her Cheri) instead of using the factory toilet.

Mariamamma is a sixteen-year-old girl who faces constant teasing from the men in her community as she does not get her menstrual cycle even in her sixteenth year. Her father won a concubine for himself. Here, again, we perceive how Dalit women receive no protection from the family. Rather, they need to be protected from the family. The violence from within the family complements the violence at the hands of the community elders at large.

While returning from work with a head load of firewood, Mariamma is molested by a high-caste landlord. When she protests and runs away, leaving her bundle behind, the landlord approaches the Paraya panchayat and lodges a complaint that Mariamma and her cousin, Manickam were found in a compromising position at his field. The men conclude that the Modalali (landlord) must be right and that Mariamma should accept her crime or else she would be heavily fined. Women are violently silenced at this Dalit panchayat. The panchayat briefs Mariamma's father to procure her apology or face a hefty punishment. The father promptly slaps her hard repeatedly right before the panchayat, ordering her to concede guilt. The protagonist's grandmother says: *"From our 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 have learnt a few letters of the alphabet?"* (118)

Bama also focuses on the sufferings of Dalit women in two aspects: First, being a woman they were oppressed by the men belonging to one's own community in the patriarchal society. Second, being dalits, women were oppressed by the upper caste men and women. Whether it was the moving tale of eleven-year-old Maikanni, whose wages earned at the match factory are usurped by her drunken father, or the frail Mariamma who was unjustly punished by the panchayat over spurious charges and married off to a gambling vagabond by her alcoholic father, the sufferers were the dalit women. Thus, being a female [gender], she is exploited by the male members in the same caste and on the other hand, being a Dalit [caste], she is exploited by the men of the upper class. The woman is *"...The inessential who never goes back to being essential—the absolute other, without reciprocity"* (Beauvoir, 159). Therefore, women in general are already viewed as *"other"* and the Dalit women exist as *"Others within others"*. So, it might be said that the position of the Dalit women in the society is as *"a Dalit amongst the Dalits"*.

Thus, Bama's writing portrays the exclusion and marginalization of Dalit women, especially Dalit girl child at social, political, economic and cultural level in India. At the same time, her writing celebrates Dalit women's life, resilience and creativity. Bama wants to create a 'new' kind of 'woman' whose ultimate responsibility is to give a voice to a voiceless woman in the society. And this new woman is also concerned about emotional, spiritual, political, biological and ecological desiderata of women community and the entire society. And for Bama, this new woman is not the suffering wife, weeping widow, or sacrificing mother or caring sister. In this regard Limbale Argues: *"Dalit conscious is an important seed for Dalit literature. It is separate and distinct from the consciousness of other writers. Dalit literature is remarked as unique because of this consciousness."* (198) Thus, Bama becomes the mouthpiece for exposing the right of every woman to protest and revolt against all those forces in the society which conspire to obstruct the development of their personality and she arouses the consciousness in women's mind in a vital way and

also magically touched all the disputable issues in the contemporary society. Through her all kinds of works and activities, Bama gives women a call to get united and raises their voice against all kinds of discrimination, oppression, slavery and exploitation. Bama stresses in her interview: “My activism does not leap beyond the pages of my book. For me mainly writing was to liberate Dalits, the women and children” (Nair)

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