



Resisting Erasure: Unpacking Representation of Rebellion in Bama's Sangathi

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ABSTRACT

This literature review provides a critical examination of Bama's influential work, *Sangathi*, a Tamil novel that explores the experiences of Dalit women in India through resistance and rebellion showed by the Dalit women. Untouchability a menace has been a longstanding evil with roots tracing back to centuries which is still seen somewhere in an allusive way and elsewhere in a restrained way. Dalit women are one of the most exploited parts of the society. Dalit women are suffering from multi disadvantages as this paper deals with Dalit issues as narrated by Bama with living examples. Dalit literature expresses the oppressions faced by Dalit women in a caste ridden as well as gender dominated society. Dalit writing is a power structure that records the cultural and social lives of Dalits and principally the writing offers a call for resistance. Bama is a Tamil Christian Dalit writer who writes about the lives of Dalit Women in Tamil Nadu. This paper attempts a look at Bama's novel *Sangathi* representing Dalit women and analyses how resistance and rebellion act to escape the harsh realities of life including dominance of men both mentally and physically. This critical reading of the novel from a Dalit Feminist perspective concentrates on how women are biased in the Paraiya community in their connectedness with different societal frameworks like education, marriages, electoral politics etc. Equally, we understand how this text through its form and theme builds up a resistance and rebellion against the oppressions the Dalit women face in their day-to-day happenings. Through a critical analysis of existing research, the aim of this review is to show the ways in which *Sangathi* represents Dalit women's rebellion. The portrayal of caste-based oppression, patriarchal violence, and resistance will be examined in the review. By evaluating existing research, this literature review aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of caste, class, and gender in the context of experiences of Dalit, and to underscore the significance of *Sangathi* as a sharp lens for indictment of social norms and change.

Keywords: Oppression, dalit women, caste-based discrimination, gender biased

1. INTRODUCTION:

Bama's *Sangathi*, published in 1994, is an impactful representation of the lives of Dalit women in India. My literature review aims to delve into the world of *Sangathi*, exploring experiences of women that Bama portrays vividly. In essence, *Sangathi* is a collection of life narratives that highlight the trials, afflictions and resilience of Dalit women. Through the stories of women like Maariamamma and Maikkanni, Bama provides an insight into the harsh realities of caste-based discrimination, patriarchy, and gender bias that Dalit women face.

The autobiographical element is one of the noteworthy characteristics of *Sangathi*, which adds depth and authenticity to the narratives. Bama's own experiences as a Dalit woman inform the stories, making the novel a powerful exploration to the strength and courage of Dalit women. The literature review will examine the ways in which *Sangathi* disrupts mainstream narratives and representations of Dalit women, reorienting their experiences and identities in a strong and empowering way. The themes of resistance, rebellion, and survival that are reappearing throughout the novel, highlighting the ways in which Dalit women resist and challenge the hierarchical power structures that seek to marginalize them. The review is to contribute to a greater insight to the lives and experiences of Dalit women, as well as the importance of *Sangathi* as a work of Dalit literature and feminist scholarship.

2. OBJECTIVES:

This study adopts an analytical approach with following objectives.

1. To interpret resistance and rebellion as themes of Sangathi.
2. To delve into depiction of experiences of Dalit women in Sangathi.
3. To analytically examine the available literature on Sangathi.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE/ RELATED WORKS:

The review of literature concentrates the recurring themes of resistance and rebellion experienced by Dalit women. Jenefer (2018) highlights the struggles experienced by Dalit women as articulated through Bama's Sangathi. Similarly, Tripathy (2021) explores the subjugation and oppression they endure, underscoring the resilience and strength of Dalit women. Navya (2014) interprets Sangathi as a narrative space where caste and gender intersect to create layers of oppression. In addition, Tomar (2013) discusses the dual marginalization of Dalit women and other discriminatory aspects of womanhood within Tamil Dalit culture.

4. MATERIALS AND METHODS:

A comprehensive reading of the novel was conducted to investigate the specific objectives. A study of scholarly articles related to the primary source Sangathi is made. Google scholar is used for the scholarly reviews and publications. A detailed list of works referred is cited below.

4.1 VOICES FROM THE MARGINS: EXPERIENCES OF SUFFERINGS

Sangathi is shaped within a feminist framework but often overlooks certain dimensions of Dalit women lived realities. The text is structured across twelve chapters; each centered on a female protagonist chosen by Bama. The narrative reflects a generational shift, recounting the lives of three successive groups of women. Spoken in the first person, the account also portrays the narrator as a child questioning her own grandmother, Vellaiyamma Kizhavi (Patti), about the discrimination she experiences.

The various experiences narrated in the novel exhibit the various ways in which women are subject to oppression both genders based, and caste based. Bama describes in Sangathi how the females are deprived of from self-respect, by facing domestic violence and sexual harassment. Bama reiterates examples of Dalit women being beaten, sexually harassed. In the beginning, the novel pictures the oppressive incidents; but as the story moves ahead, we can realize how the art of storytelling itself becomes a way to give vent to the concealed emotions, expressing the multiple mortifications. The gender bias faced by Dalit women right from their childhood till being old is perfectly narrated. Dalit girls are rarely found relishing their childhood. They are treated as lowest, exploited or suppressed both by caste as well as people. A gender biased treatment begins from their infancy. As Bama reminds us in the text of Sangathi: "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've finished in the fields. If you born into this world, it is best you were born a man. Born as women, what good do we get? We only toil in the fields and in the home until our very vaginas shrivel." (Bama, 6). Bama reminds us of the stories characters namely Mariamma and Thayi whose marital strife due to the male dominance speak the bitter truth of the Dalit women. Bama's sufferings on the ground of gender discrimination are clearly stated here as she becomes herself more questioning: "Why can't we be the same as boys? We are not allowed to talk loudly or laugh noisily; even when we sleep, we can't stretch out on our backs nor lie faces down on our bellies. We always must walk with our heads bowed down, gazing at our toes. You tell us all this rubbish and keep us under control. Even when our stomachs are screaming with hunger, we must not eat first. We are allowed to eat only after the men in the family have finished and gone. What, Patti aren't we also human beings?" (Bama, 29) Then Bama gives the gruesome portrayal of the suffering of the subjugated women of Dalit community under the strong clutches of patriarchy both inside and outside at home. As she writes, "From the moment they wake up, they set to work both in their homes and in the fields. at home they are pestered by their husbands and children; in the field there is back-breaking work besides the harassment of the landlord. When they come home in the evening, there is no time even to draw breath. And once they have collected water and firewood, cooked a Kanji and fed their hungry husband and children, even then cannot go to bed in peace and sleep until dawn." (Bama, 22)

4.2 STANDING STRONG: MEASURES TO RESIST SUBJUGATION:

Various measures, based on their capacity, to resist oppression were used by women in the novel. In the stories, the character of Raakkamma responds physical assault with physical resistance followed by inflammatory language. She does not desist bullying her husband. The village school teacher remarks: "What an uncontrollable shrew" (Bama, 2005, p. 62). In response to this, Raakkamma replies: "It is I who am beaten to death every day. If I hadn't shamed him like this, he would surely have split my skull in two, the horrible man" (Bama, 2005. p. 62). Raakkamma's vocal and protest to secure

her physical safety provides hope to rest of the women. Another character Sammuga Kizhavi, holds our interest with her veiled ridicule. She carries a thermos to the field, which sparks laughter among the spectators. It is later stated that she carries rice gruel and not coffee like the upper-caste men and women as Dalit women are not permitted the lavishness of drinking coffee from a thermos, and Sammuga uses mimicry as a harmonious strategy to cope with social injustice. Sharma and Kumar (2020) agree that this is a strategy of resistance (p. 30). Bama uses Pecchiamma as a woman marrying twice whose first husband is still alive to ask questions about divorce for Dalits. Dalit as converted Christians are not allowed the right to divorce. Sevathi regrets her mother's conversion: "It was my mother who went and changed her name from Vellaiamma to Mariamma and converted to Christianity...[H]ad we stayed as Hindus, our women would have had the chance of divorce at least" (Bama, 2005, p. 97). Divorce as a tool of freedom for women, and Bama tactfully lifts the question of granting it to Dalit Christian women. The songs Dalit women sing is mostly about love, togetherness, and celebrating oneself which they sing are mostly an escape from their everyday struggle. They sing in order to keep them happy and alive despite the hardships. They sing loudly the songs especially when the girl reaches to puberty where the women come together in unison to offer respect her ability to create. They sing to mark the progression from girlhood to womanhood, and the grown-up girl is now called "pushpavati," or flowering woman (Bama, 2005, p. 17). Singing songs in the chorus testifies their synchrony and bonding. The song includes their concealed desire to be treated as special: Shake her hair dry and comb it with gold Toss her hair dry and comb it with silver Comb her hair dry with a golden comb and women, all together, raise a Kulavai (ululation). (Bama, 2005, p. 17). Later, Dalit women dream of having a contented marriage and a dignified life. Their songs stress on those basic needs, love, respect, and belonging that is required for their survival, Dalit women by working and singing together show their collective strength, which holds as a shield of protection against the mistreatment of the landowners. Dalit women still possess an indomitable spirit to initiate a "counter-hegemonic discourse" (Yancy, 2000, p. 300).

Bama's narratives are found in both the personal and public domain, caste/class and gender, and to oppose the strategies of oppression: "Then there will come a day when men and women will live as one, with no difference between them; with equal rights. Then injustice, violence, and inequalities will come to an end, and the saying will come true that 'women can make, and women can break'" (Bama, 2005, p. 123). Bama believes that acceptance is possible if the women of her community take the lead to demolish from the clutches of subjugation and create new narratives of unified strengthening. Bama believes that the women of Pariyar community have the power to create awareness of the gender discriminations they face and have a new generation free of gender stereotypes. In the Vedic tradition, women are known as the embodiment of shakti: "...woman as Shakti signifies the highest level of consciousness...the kinetic executrix of her lord..." (Verma, 1990, p. 193)

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

Several studies have shown on Bama, works how caste-based oppression and patriarchy have resulted in dominating the Dalit women but there is need to delve into the power and resistance shown by the Dalit women to save themselves from gender imbalanced society. Which has not gained much attention. Thus, the latest findings help to give importance to power and resistance as shown by Dalit women to escape from the subjugation.

6. CONCLUSION:

Sangathi is a persistent endeavour, to evolve ominous outline related to the class predominance, to a developed arena of women resisting through life experiences. The ultimate positive outcome of this novel has resulted in the rethinking of the critical facets of Dalit women power. Being in the midst of the western literature and writers Bama has evolved her competent life experiences to establish awareness among readers by which it paves a way to the study of women and their power to curb the male dominance Bama's works Sangathi is a thoughtful contribution to explicit the subjugation, resilience as well as reflective individuality by portraying women's solidarity in resistance and rebellion.

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