



Sensing the Unheeded Cries of Men in Bama's *Sangati*

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Abstract

Literature, being an influential medium of communication transfers feelings, emotions and the strong viewpoint of a writer to society and reliably aligns human life. It progresses the everyday essential abilities that life requires which may regularly contain great and terrible encounters. Dalit Literature in India usually portrays men and women characters as poignant and pathetic creatures that are peeved and dominated by upper caste men and women. Concerning the affliction of women, Dalit writers represent women as sympathetic characters who are tortured by society. At the same time, the agony of Dalit men in Dalit Literature has less focus and is not considered by the critics. For instance, Velutha in "The God of Small Things" and Kochuraman in "Kocharethi" who experienced different sorts of perennial problems in their lives because of their caste is being left unnoticed by focusing on women's issues. Bama, a promising Dalit writer is seen as a representative of all the Dalits, especially in Tamilnadu. Her language is informal and also colloquial in style through which she brings out the plights of the people belonging to the Dalit community Her "Sangati" talks about unheard archives of men and women of Dalit people. Through this work, Bama attempts to bob back the bifold persecution of Dalit women. Not only from the feministic point of view, but Bama also concentrates on the male victimization that leads the character to attain traumatization. Men's agony is usually hidden in this community as they are portrayed as the characters that show their emotional rage and affect with humiliation. The researcher tries to prove that it is not only the women who suffer in the Dalit community but also the men whose agony and cries are hidden and unheeded.

Keywords: Bama, *Sangati*, Upper-caste Dominance, Traumatization, Emotional Rage.

Introduction

India is one of the world's fastest expanding countries in the world, but it is also known for its severe caste system. Dalit Literature examines the socioeconomic conditions that surround Dalits in India, as well as their relationships with Dalits and non-Dalits. It looks at how the Dalit community fought for equality and liberty. Due to vigorous Dalit movements as well as thrashing on upper caste society through Dalit literature by writers and also by the implementation of beneficial projects by the Government, an affirmative approach towards equality is seen in the social life of the Dalit communities nowadays. This is a favourable



method for downtrodden people who quest for identity and social equality through their writings.

Dalit dilemma in India reads like an entire data sheet of tragedies. According to a 2010 report by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) on the prevention of Atrocities against Scheduled Castes, a crime is committed against a Dalit every 18 minutes. Every day, on average, two Dalits are murdered and two Dalit houses are burnt.

According to the NHRC statistics put together by K.B. Saxena, a former additional chief secretary of Bihar, 37 percent Dalits live below the poverty line, 54 percent are undernourished, 1000 children born in a Dalit household die before their first birthday, 12 percent die before their fifth birthday and 45 percent remain illiterate. The data also shows that Dalits are prevented from entering the police station in 28 percent of Indian villages and they are denied access to water sources in 48 percent of Indian villages because untouchability remains a stark reality even though it is abolished in 1955. (Ajit)

Review of literature

“Dalit literature is marked by revolt and negativism since it is closely associated with the hopes for freedom by a group of people, who as untouchables, are victims of social, economic and cultural inequality” says Arjun Dangle, a Marathi Dalit Writer where he portrays that both Dalit men and women thirst to get freedom from the upper caste men and to get rid of their dominance and to retain their equality, identity like how men in *Sangati* craves to attain their freedom from upper-class people.

S.K.Paul in his work ‘Dalitism: Its growth and evolution’ points out how the Egalitarian institutions failed in his work “The experiences of Dalit woman in a variety of social institutions like the village, the family, the education system, the church and clergy. The caste system has been so deeply ingrained in the Indian psyche that institutions that ought to promote egalitarianism or awareness end up propagating the same distinctions. The stories of individuals such as these function as voices of entire communities of people who have undergone similar experiences of discrimination.” (66-7). In Bama’s *Sangati*, Bama’s husband is the only male who wishes his daughter to go for higher studies, because he very well knows the importance of education in every Dalit girl’s life. Men in *Sangati* hesitate to educate their daughter because they very well know that Dalit girls are not allowed to study after a certain period and they are with a mindset that when a Dalit girl grows, becomes educated and get married, there are many chances for them to get tormented and tortured by her husband and husband’s family. So to avoid such a pathetic state in their daughter’s future, the Dalit men in *Sangati* do not allow their daughters to get more education.

In May 2019 BBC records that, a group of upper-caste men at a wedding allegedly beat up a 21-year-old Dalit resident, named Jitendra, so badly that he dies nine days later because he sat on a chair in the upper-caste men’s presence and eats in the very same table where the upper caste men sit and eat. Likewise, there are still upper caste men who feel a shame to sit beside Dalit men. In *Sangati*, some men are not allowed to stand straight in front



of Dalit men and should bend themselves while standing and are not allowed to talk back even if the mistake is not theirs. Dalit men are helpless and at many times they feel inferior and are not ready to raise their point, losing their hope for identity completely.

The Outset of Dalit Literature

The term Dalit Literature is first coined in 1958, at a Dalit conference held in Bombay. However, as an identity marker, the term Dalit comes into prominence in 1967, when a group of young Marathi writers-activists formed an organization called Dalit-Panthers. The growing corpus of Dalit texts, poems, novels and autobiographies, however, seeks to rectify this phenomenon by examining the nuances of Dalit culture. Dalit Literature is one of the most important literary movements to emerge in the post-independence India. Research Scholar, Kavitha.K defines Dalit in her work 'Dalit Literature in India' as, "The term 'Dalit' literally means "oppressed" and is used to refer to the untouchable casteless sects of India. Dalit also called outcaste, is a self-designation for a group of people traditionally regarded as "untouchables". Dalits are a mixed population of numerous caste groups all over India, South Asia and all over the world. There are many different names proposed for defining this group of people like 'Ashprosh', 'Harijans', 'Dalits', etc." (Kavitha 239). Along with Bama, whose novel *Karukku* portrayed Dalit life in the authentic language of the people, Imayam, whose *Koveru Kazhuthaikal* narrated the story of puthirai vannar (dhobies working for Dalits), K.A. Gunasekaran, a writer and a singer, former IAS officer P. Sivakami, Azhakiya Periavan, and many other writers, Dalit leaders such as Dr K. Krishnasamy, Thol Thirumavalavan and Athiaman have found a place in the collection in Tamil Dalit Literature.

Sangati - an identity for Dalits

Bama's *Sangati* is an important contribution to Dalit writings in India. It delves into the lives of Dalit men and women of Tamilnadu who face two-fold oppression due to caste and gender discrimination. Bama uses many narratives together to explore the social inequities, disproportions and proclivities suffered by men and women of the Dalit community. The novel is originally written in Tamil by Bama and there is no doubt that Lakshmi Holmstrom's translation in English connects the very same emotions and feelings which Bama reflected in this work. Professor Dr. Vignesh in his article, 'Bama's Sangati as a unique Dalit Feminist Narration from subjugation to celebration' states, "Through *Sangati*, Bama tries to bounce back the oppression of Dalit women. *Sangati* is more of a celebration of female identity." (Vignesh 92). There are obvious themes in this novel like victimization of women, upper caste men's domination of the Dalits, poverty, lack of education etc.

The secret agony and the unheeded cries of men in Sangati

Men in the novel face multitudinous amount of affliction and persecution which leads them to get traumatized in the society. But those miseries and agonies are not exposed to the public. Financial income in Dalit community is very degenerated and extraordinarily low when compared to other communities. Bama's grandfather leaves his family and works in Sri Lanka as he is the breadwinner of his family. Bama, the narrator in the work expresses her grandfather's plight:



It so happened that a Kangani, an agent from a tea estate in Sri Lanka, arrived just at that time to recruit a whole group of workers from our village. It was with them that Thaatha went away. But once he left, he was gone forever. He never came back. All the others who went with him returned within four or five months. They said they were treated like dogs over there. They said even life in our village was better than that. (Bama 4)

Bama's grandfather leaves his family to Sri Lanka to support his family financially. This situation is common in the Dalit community when it comes to the occupation of Dalit men. Dalit men accept low wages from their masters and are ready to do heavy work. The tea estate owners in Sri Lanka treat Dalit men like animals in such a way, that the men working there die because of mental stress and the torture imposed upon them by the owners. Some men return within four to five months because they are not able to bear the both physically and mentally which results in unemployment. Unemployment is a curse to the Dalit community. This automatically leads to poverty in a Dalit family. Dalit men in their workplace are unable to raise their voices against their masters who provide them work heavily but are not given proper wages because they are afraid of losing their jobs. This situation makes them dumb in their workplace. This is the main reason why men hide their emotions and agonies to the outside world.

Bama's father wants Bama to study in school and to reach out the world. Children of the Dalit communities usually stop going to school once they complete their fifth standard and they start earning money like getting daily wages from upper caste people just to serve and help their families with food and shelter. Bama's mother expresses the desire and mindset of Bama's father: "Her father won't allow her to stop off now. He wants her to study at least to the Tenth. He says, we didn't learn anything, and so we go to ruin. He says, let them at least get on in the world." (Bama 9). Bama's father, being a Dalit man is not allowed to get proper education and so he wants his daughter to get educated and he wishes that his daughter explore the world. He ruins his own life by not getting education and he is not allowed to go to school because of his caste. There he may not voice out his desire to go to school where his pain is hidden in society.

Dalit men are terrified of upper caste men. The first reason is they know the fact that once if they voice out against them, they would be fired out at work. Another reason why these men are afraid of upper caste men is because upper caste men abuse Dalit girls sexually. So, most of the men those who have daughters at home always are afraid to send their daughters outside because they know that their daughters would be trapped by the upper caste men. Bama expresses:

My Ayya won't take me anywhere, Paati. If at all, it's my elder brother who will do that. If I ask Ayya, he says young girls mustn't wander about here and there. . .If we go out at all, it's only to the church, and even for that you have to try really hard. All the same, if you look at it one way, what these men say makes sense too. Can we go



about as freely as they do, after all? Some wicked fellow or other is waiting to rape us. (Bama 13-14)

The Weakness and the Plight of Dalit Men

This is how Bama's father make sense through his words. He is afraid of sending his daughter Bama outside the house because he knows very well that some wicked fellows may trap and rape his daughter. This franticness is very common among Dalit men. They very well know about the evilness of upper caste men in abusing girls of their community sexually but are impotent and inefficacious in mounting up their voice against them because they are dependent on upper caste men for money. Bama further writes, "And our men are afraid that if anything indecent happens to one of us, it might end in a riot." (Bama 105) The men of Dalit community very well knew that if any kind of indecency happens to their community women with the upper caste men, then the problem is for them. Either they lose their job or gets shame in front of public. So, the Dalit men never allow their daughters or sisters to go to theatres or parks. As they are dependent on their landlords, they cannot develop any kind of enmity with the upper caste men. Thus, the upper caste domination is the reason why they hide their distress and anguish within themselves and it remains as a secret outside to the society. It clearly shows the vulnerability of Dalit men in the Indian society⁶⁶.

. A man cannot bear the pain of shame and even it is extremely cruel to be ashamed in front of public. It is very common for Dalit men who are disrespected by upper caste people and their children. Male victimization becomes stereotypical in the Dalit community. They get punishments and upper caste men blame them even though they commit no mistake. Naataamai of that Pudhupatti village blames Manikkam, a teenage man who is accused of behaving indecently with his aunt's daughter, Mariamma. The fact is both Mariamma and Manikkam just make jokes and laugh together and an upper caste man notices their laughter and complaints as if the boy misbehaves with the women. But it is he whomisbehaves with Mariamma and he is afraid because he thinks that he would lose his reputation once the news comes up and so to escape from this, he blindly blames Mariamma and Manikkam. The shame which Manikkam and Mariamma's father face is very contemptible and dishonorable. The senior Naataamai enquires Manikkam:

Ele, Manikkam, what do u have to say for yourself, le?" Manikkam folded his arms as he stood there, and spoke humbly. "What the mudalaali said never happened. That girl came away with her firewood bundle quite some time before I did. We spoke a few words in fun when we were in the woods. And that was when everyone was there together. I only joked with her because she is my athai's daughter. I never even saw her along the way, on my way back. (Bama 22-23)

Manikkam is not a victim at all who had a casual talk with his aunt's daughter but the head of the village blames him and he is accused of harassing her. He needs to fold his hands in front of them which is mandatory for a Dalit man in front of upper caste men. He cannot open up the truth because he does not get the opportunity to speak. Even if he opens up, nobody is willing to accept and nobody actually wants to know about the truth. The blame



falls on Dalit men though they are not the victims. So, here also their voice against the culprit is corrupted and the real identity of Dalit men is hidden.

The traumatization of Dalit men

Alongside the scourge of untouchability, the Dalits do not have the right to possess any sort of property. They eat the foulest food, including extras which are discarded by the higher caste people. The men are not permitted to draw water from the normal well and are banned from the right to schooling and information. They perform humble positions for higher standings. They are not permitted to utilize the basic cemetery. Indeed, even they are not permitted to live in the primary town which is possessed by the upper rank. They are denied of proprietorship rights to land and property, prompting the absence of admittance to all wellsprings of monetary portability. Consequently, Dalit men are exposed to both social rejection and financial segregation throughout the long term. In one way, men's circumstance proceeds even today in many parts of the country.

In Dalit community, Poverty is an inexorable issue. Definitions of poverty vary based on social, cultural and political systems. Understanding poverty from poor people's perspectives reveal that poverty is a multidimensional social phenomenon. Poverty is one of the most significant social determinants of health and mental health, intersecting with all other determinants, including local and community conditions, race and access to neighbourhood factors and the built environment. The poverty which affects mental health is wide-ranging and reaches across the generation. The evidence is strong for a casual relationship between poverty and traumatization. However, the characters in the novel apply to exemplify that poverty would affect mental health and develop problems that in turn prevent individuals and families from leaving poverty, creating a vicious, intergenerational cycle of poverty and poor health. Geographically concentrated poverty often in urban areas is particularly toxic to psychiatric well-being and so this is how Dalit men also gets affected with trauma of poverty in their life. Poverty impacts both the physical and mental strength of Dalit men. They become baffled because of their landlord's destitution and disgrace, which prompts traumatization. They cannot impart their sentiments and feelings to anybody outside of their family, so they segregate themselves and show fury to their family to disregard their dissatisfaction in their workplace. Traumatization makes an individual to become very upset in a way that often leads to serious emotional problems. Dalit men react emotionally when they are beaten up by their masters in their workplace and they are humiliated everywhere. Bama writes, "Even though they are male, because they are Dalits, they have to be like Dogs with their tails rolled up when they are in the fields, and dealing with their landlords. There is no way they can show their strength in those circumstances." (Bama 65)

Hence, Dalit men lose their identity as a male and also lose their dignity as their landlords treat them as dogs in their workplace. Bama exclaims that because the men are Dalits they naturally have to be like a dog in front of their landlords. Those landlords never allow Dalit men to show or deliver their strength to the landlords because they know very well that Dalit men are dependent on them for money. This is the reason why Dalit men fail



to show their mental and physical strength to the works and it remains secret within themselves.

Conclusion

The Dalit men are the victims, subjecting to frustration, traumatization, oppression, upper caste domination, shame in the public, unemployment. Their identity as male is hidden and their identity is projected just as a Dalit man. Everywhere around the world, they get humiliated but the pain and the distress that they carry out throughout their mind and heart is hidden in the society. Bama's articulation of Dalit men's plight is obscurely visible when the readers pay specific attention. Through this article, it can be understood that it is not only the women, who suffer physical pain in the Dalit community but also the men, who bury their miseries inside their hearts and experience both physical and mental anguish. They sacrifice their desires and emotions just to support their family. Thus, one can blindly say that the Dalit men are not living, they are just surviving.

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