

Textualized Realities of Dalit Girl Child in India: Unraveling Bama's *Sangati*

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Abstract:

The paper looks at the conditions of children specifically the female children. The neglect that a girl child faces is being accepted by all. However, the treatment a Dalit girl child undergoes in the Indian society is pitiable. We aim to understand the Dalit girl child as represented in English literature. The specific genre we have chosen is Dalit literature. Dalit literature, the literature of the oppressed presents the exploited, ill-treated and broken personalities of children. Children can be seen as binaries to adults and their emotions and understanding as a contrast to the adult mentality and selfish needs. A Dalit child's identity and agency suffer due to the caste and class mentality. A child is further marginalized if she is a girl. The becoming of a woman and the pressure exerted by the society in the making can be very clearly observed through the narratives of this genre. Gender and caste start operating right from one's birth. The study will focus on the answer to the major issues, how the child of a Dalit family perceives the society around and how the family and the society frame the personality of the child. It also brings to focus the various rituals they are made to follow, the caste and the sense of untouchability they are made to imbibe and how it affects their way towards life. Drawing incidents and discourses from "Sangati" by Bama the paper will focus on how a Dalit girl child suffers in the society and undergoes the process of becoming a woman. Apart from textualizing adult's lives and experiences Dalit narratives serve as a means to give the life experiences of the Dalit children, irrespective of their genders, a discourse which renders a new dimension to the literature of the oppressed. It also highlights the customs, rituals and superstitions they are made to follow due to the age old culture and caste factors. Children are made to go by the age old tradition according to their genders are tormented, devoid of the basic needs, exploited and even sold by their own parents.

Introduction:

Literature represents society and the people living in it. Most of the literature centre on adults and does not pay adequate attention to the child or their perspective. One, they do not have the voice and then whatever they speak is often unheard. The voice of the children can serve as an important tool to understand the uncorrupted, unbiased thought process. Moreover if the child is a girl, the neglect is almost doubled. The pain, oppression and voice of the female child are multiply marginalized. The paper aims to bring to the focus the representation of these children in texts which do not belong to the mainstream literature rather to the section which is marginalized and succumbed to continued oppression on the basis of caste and untouchability since ages in Indian scenario, the Dalit literature.

The text on which the paper is focused on is "*Sangati*". The novel was originally written by Bama Faustina in Tamil and published in the year 1994 which later got translated to English by Lakshmi Holmstrom and was published in 2008. The novel gives a naturalistic treatment to the situations of the society. It presents the society in the bare lights of the reality and the behavioural day to day activities and social practices prevalent in a dalit society.

Bama Faustina, the writer:

Bama Faustina Soosairaj (1958) is the most distinguished Dalit fiction writer in Tamil, and one of the most acclaimed of all Dalit women writers. Her novel "Karukku" (1992) was the first Dalit text on the Christian Dalit community which shows the joys and sorrows of Dalit Christian women in Tamil Nadu. She consecutively wrote two novels "Sangati" (1994) and "Vanman" (2002) centering on Dalit women and society. She works as a school teacher in Uthiramerur, TamilNadu. Her father served in the army. Her grandfather got converted to Christianity and the

ancestors belonged to the Dalit community and worked as agricultural labourers. She had her early education in the village and after her graduation she worked as a nun for seven years. After serving as a nun for seven years, Bama left the convent and began writing. “Bama Faustina, a famous Dalit activist and writer has written books that are critical of the discrimination by the nuns and priests in Churches in South India.” (The Hindu. 16th Sept. 2001).

Lakshmi Holmstrom, the translator:

Lakshmi Holmstrom is an Indian-born British writer, literary critic and translator of Tamil fictions into English. She has received the Crossword Award for translation twice (2001 and 2007) apart from the Iyal Award from the Tamil Literary Garden, Canada (2008). She has translated the writings of famous Tamil writers like Mauni, Sundara Ramaswamy, Ambai, Bama Faustina and Iyamam. Lakshmi is a Founder-Trustee of SALIDAA (South Asian Diaspora Literature and Arts Archive). She has also faced the traumas of untouchability and has a keen interest in writings dealing with this pain and suffering.

***Sangati*, a Brief Introduction to the Text:**

Writings of Dalit women are discourses of those “lower caste women who were being marginalized and were absent in these debates.” (Jogdand vii). Jogdand refers to the movements concerned with women and the early social reforms which was all focussed and talked about the upper caste women. The work *is* an autobiography not just of a person but of the entire community. An autobiography is a work by the writer about his/ her own life and issues but “*Sangati*” is the portrait of the whole community and the people who are same and lead a similar life if put on the pedestal of caste and untouchability. This makes the novel unique by increasing the margins of the genre of autobiography and universalizing the pain and issues of the people

discriminated on the grounds of untouchability. The term Sangati means events or happenings and the book is one of the interconnected anecdotes to the events as well as the incidents of the narrator's life and those she witnesses in her society. The book flouts the features of a novel and has no plot in the normal sense rather is a powerful combination of the series of events of the narrator's life beginning from her childhood to her adulthood. The story begins from the view point of a child and discusses the events of her childhood at length highlighting various issues from a child's perspective and showing a child's psychology. The world presented is through a child and how the scenes and society influence the child and frames her as a woman who should be submitted both to the caste system and the patriarchal forces.

"*Sangati*" is a work by a woman who as a first person has faced all the oppressions, humiliations and pain of the upper castes, the patriarchal hegemony and religion. She endows her characters with a special strength with which they can break the shackles which have inhibited their growth and development. The real life stories the novel brings into attention of the readers and the inhuman environment which they are made to suffer into is the focus of the story. In the process of narrating their pains the characters also reflect their power, challenges, choices and risks they take by successfully handling the traumas and oppressions. The title of the novel means events or news which the narrator shows by looking back at her life. She doesn't look at her past with a sense of disregard but with pride and a positive anger which gives her the strength to compose a story of their lively and rebellious culture. In the acknowledgement to the story Bama states the aim behind the composition:

It is '...about the self-confidence and self-respect that enables them to leap over their 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.' (Bama xvi).

Representation of a Dalit Girl Child:

Generally the writings about children present the attractive side of their lives. The fantasy they indulge into but never is the gloomier and unseen part seen which is greatly highlighted by Dalit writings.

“If the third is a girl to behold, your courtyard will fill with gold’. When I was born, it seems that my grandmother, Vellaiyamma quoted this proverb and rejoiced.” (Bama. 3).

Although in a Dalit community, as the narrator as a child states, there was not much difference between a girl and a boy child at the time of birth but as they raised them the differences became prominent. The girl is always thought to be good natured, soft, polite and helping the household affairs. The adults of the society think if they send her to school, this will hamper her becoming and after all it is the house she has to take care of and live in.

If we look at cases depicted in the text like those of Mariamma, she appears as a victim without any offence. She was a Dalit girl who was molested by Kumaraswami Ayya, an uppercaste landlord. After she escapes he is afraid of his reputation and makes a false claim that she was found having some illicit affair for which the society charges her fine and regular insults and abuses are thrown at her. Nobody listens to her or to any woman.

Small girls had to follow the same code of behavior as the women of the society and behave as adults because they had no freedom. *“All our men folk gathered in the front community hall, and sat down. The women stood about, behind them, here and there, watching.... Even the little boys were all seated there.”* (Bama. 21). This shows the code of behavior which the society expects from them. Mariamma, a girl of sixteen years is abused, threatened and emotionally harassed for no fault of hers. Nobody listens to her, she is no better than an animal. The society degrades the

existence of girls and dehumanizes them. These insults which occur at regular intervals act as a huge burden on the victims' mental state and many commit suicide. *"But Mariamma didn't sleep a wink that night. She even thought that it might be best to hang herself by a rope. She sat and wept all the night long."* (Bama. 27).

The narrator recalls her childhood days and remembers the coming of the Christian priests to their villages. The transformation of the Dalits to Christianity in order to get access to education and overcome the discriminations they faced before was not fully accomplished. While the boys went to school and studied, the girls were devoid of any such benefits. *"....They had enough to do at home anyway, carrying the babies around and doing the housework"*. There are different forms of discrimination which the child narrator experienced in her life. *"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.... If the boys catch an illness or a fever, they will run around and nurse them with the greatest care. If it's a girl, they'll do it half-heartedly."* (Bama. 7).

Becoming of a woman:

The treatment of a girl starts in a different way right from her birth and continues till her death. Simone de Beauvoir states in *The Second Sex* (1949), One is not born a woman rather becomes one. (Beauvoir. 281). The boy child can eat as much as he pleases to and play around while a *"...girl child must stay at home and keep on working all the time, cleaning vessels, drawing water, sweeping the house, gathering firewood, washing clothes... When all this is done, they will carry the tiny babies, minding them even when they go out to play"*. (ibid. 7).

They start identifying themselves as boys and girls from the time they can understand words. They are made to follow the norms of the society and know what they should do and what should be their limitation. Their perspectives towards life is framed in that manner and affects other children too as they have to follow the same. Small girls are made to think and practice that they cannot play boys' games and can only play at cooking and getting married. Games like "thattaangal" or "thaayam" (those played with stones and shells were for them and if any of them was seen playing "kabadi", lines of abuse would follow them. *"People would say, 'Who does she think she is? She's just like a donkey, look. Look the way she plays boys' games'"*. (ibid. 7).

As children the narrator would see her grandmother whom she addresses as "Paatti" bring anything at home she would always call the grandsons first. *"If she brought cucumbers, she scooped out all the seeds with her finger nails, since she had no teeth, and gave them the remaining fruit. If she brought mangoes, we would only get the skin, the stones and such; she gave the best pieces of fruits to the boys. Because we had no other way out, we picked up and ate the leftover skins."* (ibid. 7-8).

There were certain difficult jobs like digging wells which demanded youths and young girls. Even though it meant hard labour, the youngsters went to work there hoping to pick up a few coins which would help to fill their bellies. *"In this kind of work, the men climbed right inside the well, dug out the sides, and filled baskets with stone and rubble. The women had to go down, carry the baskets on their heads, bring them up and tip them out. It was the men's job to blow up the rocks with the dynamite, dig out the well, and build up its walls with cement. So they got the bigger wages. The women, in any case, whatever work they did, were paid less than men. Even when they did the very same work, they were paid less. Even in the matter of tying up firewood*

bundle the boys always got five or six rupees more. And id the girls tied up the bundles, but the boys actually sold them, they got the better price.” (ibid. 18).

The perspectives and identity of a child be it boy or a girl is affected by the social practices they follow and perform. The Dalit boys were made to clean the dead animals and filth by the family as Omprakash Valmiki states in his autobiography “Joothan” and face regular harassments at school. Some could not bear it and quitted going to schools, joining their ancestral occupation and living in the same ideological state. Their inner desires and ambitions died and so did their development. Hatred, pain and rebel were a part of their lives. Many social institutions have deep effects on the members of the society and one such is the institution of marriage.

Girls of the Dalit community lead a very unsecured life which is because of the economic scarcity, the caste and religious factors and the gender issues. The only safe measure which the parents of the girl seek is the marriage of the girl as soon as she comes out of age. The view point of the girl is never taken into consideration. Often the child is never ready both mentally as well as physically for the marriage but the parent’s will and force makes them to go by it. The consequence would be deteriorating health conditions, regular fights and physical and mental exploitations. *“Her father won’t allow her to stop off now. He wants her to study at least to the tenth.... Paatti was furious at this. ‘Have you any idea what that will mean? How are you going to keep a virgin girl at home and not get her married? Everyone will tittle-tattle about it. Keeping young women at home is like keeping a fire going in your belly. How long will you protect her, tell me?”* (Bama. 9-10). Many a times because of this hurry and indecisiveness they *“reared a parrot and handed it over to be mauled by a cat”* (ibid. 10).

Unheard voices:

The narrator (child)'s innumerable questions and arguments show her desire and inquisitiveness to question the social norms and practices. In some cases the brutal treatment caused the deaths of the young mothers leaving behind two or more children who having no one to look after them had to take their care by themselves. The writer gives the instance of a family where a girl child named Seyakkodi and had lost her mother when she was just five or six years old. "*She never went to school, but stayed at home and did the housework.*" (ibid. 11). It shows what Julia Kristeva says "Even though they were excluded from power and language, she possesses the hidden, invisible element that allows them to function. On the one hand, she can become a source of negativity and harassment, pushing power to its limits and then struggling with it... yet she can also lay claim to power until she identifies with it and supplants".

Young girls, their thoughts and freedom were controlled and governed as per the whims and fancies of the adults. The games, food, clothing, entertainment and movement all were controlled. "*Young girls mustn't wander about here and there*"... "*They don't even allow us to go to allow us to go to 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.*"(ibid. 13). Their movement and space were restricted as per the whims and fancies of the adults. Their world and thoughts always overpowered the children's world and ideas.

The text deals with small girls like Maikkanni who supports her mother and her family by working in the matchbox factory. When the season of cultivation arrives, she switches her job to the fields and when dry the factory in the town calls her. She does the job and looks after the

household activities too when her mother gets pregnant. She plays the role of an adult woman in the garb of a child which innocence on face and maturity and confidence underneath.

The narrator as a young girl was filled with pity as well as anger. She questions the age old patriarchal system and the way it silenced the woman making her a victim and a victimizer together. There was no justice for her just a command which she had to follow and remain silent. Children when young were kept out of the village meetings, "*we just stayed inside our homes and drank our kanji.*" Even if they went out for fun they were chased away and scolded. They as children were ignorant of the outside world which soon was to catch them in its claws and kill them. Even in games the small children imitate the lives they saw of their parents. They imitated the lives in which the boys served the men first and the girls as women and the boys would pull their hairs and beat them as they saw their parents. The enactment of the life of the elders' show how the surrounding atmosphere engulfs them and trains their mental processes in such a manner that they accept the wrongs without much ado and it becomes a part of their social norms.

The narrator as a child has been facing and looking at the differences between men and women, what it means to be a girl and when she grows up she is full of anger and pain. She blames the women who have been treating girls and boys in different manners and have been putting them down. "*It's you folk who put butter in one eye and quicklime in the other.*" (ibid. 29).

Bama questions the discrimination done. "*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 nor 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?” (ibid. 29). This is what Judith Butler calls “*to be it*.” She elaborates the call to identity and highlights the manner in which ‘naming’ the subject and ‘calling’ it into existence occurs within a power relationship.

Conclusion:

The working of any human or gender cannot be separated from the culture one lives in and so is the situation of the dalit children who are made to follow the practices as “*potrajas*” and please the people who come under the control of some spirits. Their silence, acts and the physic condition is never analyzed. They are born in a cruel world, live just for the name sake and die every day. Through the figures of the girls and women Bama admires and applauds not only the traditional Tamil ‘feminine’ ideals of “*accham*” (fear), “*naanam*” (shyness), “*madam*” (simplicity, innocence) and “*payirppu*” (modesty) but courage, fearlessness, independence and self esteem. The writer opines for the equal treatment of both the genders right from their birth. “*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. If we rear our children like this from the time they are babies, women will reveal their strength.... ‘women can make and women can break’.*” (Bama.123). This is what Paulo Freire talks as “*conscientizacao*” (Freire. 17) whereby one breaks the culture of silence one is caught into and takes action against the oppressive elements of reality. The struggle against the process of dehumanization is a historical reality and the literary narratives present a naturalistic picture of the whole scenario, *Sangati* being a picturesque example of the Dalit narrative genre.

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