

Resisting Historical Silences: Rewriting History from the Margins in *Sangati* and the Little School

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Abstract

This article looks at both *Sangati* by Indian Tamil Dalit author Bama Faustina, and *The Little School* by Argentinian author and activist Alicia Partnoy as subjective narratives which challenge the ways in which historical facts and events are presented by conventional “mainstream” history, which is a direct product of White Western European colonial historiography. Through texts like these the two authors in their own specific geographical spaces and cultures, bring to front voices of their respective marginalized communities, as they present authentic, witnessed pictures of their community lives, their lived-experiences, and real-life figures – all of that, and all of those who otherwise tend to get hidden or deleted from mainstream history, without reaching a wider audience. The mainstream history is critiqued in the postcolonial literary and research spaces as one that poses as a narrative that seems obviously moulded in accordance with the convenience and choices of the particular historiographer, often influenced by their own biases or political agenda. Bama and Partnoy also show in their texts how the indigenous communities and marginalized voices of women come to terms with the brutal colonial oppression and blows, and then start the process of a new postcolonial identity-creation by “writing back” and healing themselves through it. How the voice and the truth of one person from the community becomes that of its entirety. These two texts will be discussed as ones which could exist at the interesting intersection of being both literary texts and historical documents that bring out hidden histories and suppressed truths “from below”.

Keywords: Subaltern, History, Historiography, Women’s narratives, Marginalization, Literature, Postcolonial literature, Indigenous community, Dalit writing

1. Introduction

When White Western European colonization was taking place over the eastern side of the world which could be traced back to the 16th century, many officials among the former posed as front-ranking historians. These colonial officials obviously followed that ideology (conquest, subjugation and exploitation of people and resources of the colonies), and as they described histories, cultures, societies and knowledge-systems of their colonies, they injected their prejudiced, blanketed and homogenized understandings of those. The colonial ideology was at the forefront, while the subjects and their knowledge-systems were pushed back. Thus, a version of history-creation, history-writing and a historical narrative was born out of it – that unfortunately was broadcasted all over the world as “mainstream” history. This mainstream history became the shaper of the popular imagination and popular consciousness, also the greatest influencer of world views. We are still suffering from it. A ray of hope is that when the

field of postcolonialism solidified in the 1960s and 70s, the erstwhile colonial ‘subjects’ from the former colonies started ‘writing back’, taking control of, and defining their own histories, cultural knowledge and social fabrics in their own terms – releasing the latter from the prisons that the colonizers shackled them in, for quite a long while. In the field of literature, we understand historiography as the act of writing/documenting and narrating history of people, places, human societies, objects and so on, along with the study of the already documented histories. We try to look at a literary text as a product of a specific social and temporal moment, and a cultural utterance; A witness account, especially non-fiction writing; A history that is subjective, and in the case of fiction the representation of historical facts and figures in the diegetic world of the text could often allude to that of real life. Can we then consider literary texts as oblique forms of historical documents – having authentic representation and truth-claims? The answer isn’t a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’. However, the best response to it could be: “It depends”. *Sangati* by Bama and *The Little School* by Alicia Partnoy show characteristics which could make them to be considered as such. We will examine these two texts as expressing to the wider world, what is not covered/left out by mainstream historiography, as they try to alert the audience/readers of the flaws of such histories.

2. Textual analyses

Sangati (which means ‘events’ in English), published in 1994, talks about the lived experiences of Dalit Paraiya women of Tamil Nadu in the late 20th century, about their struggles and resilience in the oppressive frameworks of caste, class, and gender hierarchies in the Indian society of today. The text could both be a historical and a cultural document that captures the realities of these women, calling upon a historical background that shows the legacy of caste and gender oppressions. The text is not only the autobiographical narrative of a single person from a marginalized community, but also that of her entire community. It gives way to a critique of systemic inequalities through the celebration of the resilience and solidarity of these women, and possibly women all over the world who are oppressed in one form or another. The text also makes the readers recall social reform movements in Tamil Nadu, such as the Self-Respect Movement of 1925, led by Periyar E.V. Ramasamy. These movements aimed to tumble-down caste hierarchies, and empower marginalized communities, focusing on the notion of self-respect, hard work and meritocracy. However, despite these efforts, it was found that Dalit women continued to remain excluded from most reformist discourses, as they primarily focused on men. Texts like *Sangati* also serve as a response to this exclusion, showing us that oppression could be intersectional. They give voice to Dalit women as agents of change rather than being mere victims, capturing the strength and agency they exhibit in the face of adversity. Post-independence India saw significant discussions around equality and justice, yet caste and gender inequalities persisted. While the second wave feminist movements gained momentum in the 1960s, they often seemed to prioritize the concerns of upper-caste and middle-class women, still leaving the ‘doubly-marginalized’ Dalit women at the margins. Bama’s text bridges this gap by offering a feminist critique that is rooted in the specific experiences of Dalit women. It highlights how patriarchy and caste are deeply intertwined, creating unique challenges for Dalit women that are not the same as those faced by upper-caste ones.

Dalit literature emerged as a significant voice in Indian literary history in the post-Independence era, primarily during the 1960s and 1970s. It was rooted in the experiences of Dalit communities who have faced centuries of marginalization and oppression under the caste system. It often reflected themes of resistance, identity, and social justice – which mainstream history and privileged historiographers have

conveniently left out. Bama as a literary figure is instrumental in this movement, particularly because she centres Dalit women, whose voices have been doubly silenced by patriarchy within their communities and the broader patriarchal and caste-based oppression. Historically and socio-culturally, Dalit women have been demoted to the lowest level of the social hierarchy. They have been subjected to gruelling labour as agricultural workers, domestic helpers, and manual labourers, often while being paid significantly less than their male counterparts or that of the upper-castes. Beyond economic exploitation, Dalit women faced systemic discrimination, physical abuse, sexual exploitation by upper-caste men, and violence within their own homes. Even in the Christian community in the text, we find that religion is not really providing solace. It is perpetuating casteist and patriarchal practices. This dual marginalization forms the crux of *Sangati*, as it brings to front the everyday struggles of Dalit women (narrated through the unfortunate case of the character, Mariyamma), while also celebrating their extraordinary resilience and solidarity (through the characters of Paati and a younger version of Bama) – all that has been largely ignored and unacknowledged by mainstream colonial historiography.

Bama draws on oral storytelling traditions, which go in sync with Dalit cultural expression. The text is structured as a series of interconnected events narrated by a young girl (based on Bama herself), who observes and participates in the lives of the women around her. She not only observes, but also calls out the various ‘absurd’ notions that men have adopted, or the injustices faced by the women around her. By adopting this style, Bama not only preserves the oral histories of Dalit women but also challenges the conventions of mainstream literary forms that have historically excluded marginalized voices. The voices of Dalit women and the narration of their struggles disrupt the colonial framework, which largely ignored caste as a social determinant and failed to account for the complex forms of oppressions faced by women within marginalized communities. Colonial mainstream historiography typically addressed caste from an outsider’s perspective, focusing on its exoticism, or as a monolithic system without understanding its complexities. Bama counters this. We could recall how the husbands are called ‘useless’ and the women are regarded as the hard-workers – often resulting in their angry husbands beating them up, or leaving them for other women. How the birth of a girl child is celebrated in the household more, how ‘normalized’ it is for the widows to remarry, how poor Mariyamma goes through an attempted molestation by a higher caste and wealthy feudal man, and is later blamed as an ‘immoral’ woman due to the latter’s manipulation of the system using his power and connections. When, where and how will mainstream history tell you all this?

Colonial historiography often posited colonial rule as a civilizing mission. It often portrayed Western European reforms as liberatory, especially for marginalized groups in the colonies. *Sangati* dismantles this notion by showing how systemic inequalities persisted even post-independence, perpetuated by both upper-caste dominance and internalized oppression within Dalit communities. The text points to us that “progress” was neither inclusive nor transformative for Dalit women. Bama’s use of the Tamil dialect spoken by the members of her community in *Sangati* challenges the linguistic dominance of colonial and upper-caste historiographical frameworks. The raw, unpolished mentioning of what they say, in different parts of the text rejects the sanitized recorded language of colonial narratives, emphasizing authenticity and reclaiming agency. Bama questions the legitimacy of colonial historiography, which relied heavily on English and elite vernaculars. Let me cite a couple of examples of how the members of Bama’s community speak among themselves, from the English translated version of the text:

“The rain was pissing down as if an elephant was up there in the sky”

Or

“When we got married ... it was our parents who decided on the match ... But these days, young men and women get to know each other at work and make up their own minds to live together. Disgraceful donkeys!”

Mainstream historiography often considered marginalized groups as passive recipients of their historical narrative, refusing to acknowledge their efforts of resistance/ voicing out their accounts. *Sangati* counters this by portraying Dalit women as active agents of change. It documents their resilience and acts of defiance (through the portrayal of the elder women of the community, like Paati) — whether through small gestures like speaking out against injustice or through communal solidarity. This act by Bama undermines the colonial portrayal of subalterns as powerless. While colonial historical narratives often compartmentalized identities, *Sangati* presents an intersectional approach, showing how caste, gender, and economic status intersect to oppress Dalit women. This challenges colonial historiography’s simplistic notion of the colonizer and colonized binaries, as it points out towards the layered complexities within Indian society that were often overlooked.

Now, let us look at Partnoy’s text: *The Little School – Tales of Disappearance and Survival* (1986). Professor Kathryn M. Smith tells us in a pioneering Paper of hers that “Latin American women react in a myriad of ways to governmental, military, and patriarchal controls. The stereotype of the self-sacrificing, victimized Latin American woman is all too false in the wake of activist organizations such as The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina. This political group openly protested against the military’s (or junta’s) abduction and torture of their children and family members. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo also cleverly manipulated their sacred position as mothers as a protection against severe governmental persecution... In response to the aforementioned atrocities in Argentina... Writer Alicia Partnoy... [Wrote] *The Little School*, which describes her experiences as a political prisoner. She then disseminated the book throughout the international community in order to resist the oppressive regime.” Partnoy’s text “portrays the plight of Argentinian political prisoners in the late 1970s... [A]lmost 30,000 Argentines ‘disappeared’ between 1976 and 1979, the most oppressive years of the military rule. During these years, the reactionary Argentinian government abducted and tortured any person they suspected was involved with the Peronist party or other revolutionary movements. The ‘disappeared’ included mainly college students and young adults, but also extended to middle-aged citizens, mothers, fathers, and even children. On January 12, 1977, anonymous military guards took Alicia Partnoy to a concentration camp. The camp’s name was the ‘The Little School’ (La Escuelita), meaning that political prisoners were to be ‘taught a lesson,’ mainly through violence, torture, and even murder. Partnoy was eventually released from The Little School and became one of the lucky ones: a survivor. Instead of hiding or going into exile, however, she began to write *The Little School*, a fictionalized yet extremely detailed account of her time in prison.” She “organizes her memories into short chapters of anecdotes, vignettes, and other daily occurrences... There are ‘hard facts’ but there are also ‘fictive’ sections, such as the chapters in which Partnoy takes on other prisoners’ identities and memories in order to try to tell their stories.” She “recounts the fate of friends whom newspaper accounts described as ‘killed in confrontations with the police,’ but who were in reality drugged and taken from the prison to the site of the alleged confrontation”. Which mainstream colonial history is going to tell us these things? Events, people, happenings that go out of their comfort zones? Partnoy’s “story is, furthermore, proof that not all guerillas, activists, and revolutionaries are men... Often, the stories of revolutionaries are either ‘gender neutral’ or overtly masculine, and ‘[t]his removal of gender from all references to prisoners obscures the number of women participating in political

activities of all sorts, including female members of guerilla groups’... Partnoy, in response to this stereotype, constructs her story as a political activist, a woman, a mother, and a wife – in that order.”

Partnoy composed this text as a testimony of her imprisonment in one of Argentina's clandestine detention centres during the country's Dirty War (1976–1983). She disrupts dominant historical discourses by foregrounding the lived experiences of political prisoners and survivors, especially women, of the then state-sponsored violence. Dismantling mainstream colonial historiography's stance of privileging the voices of elites (which include political leaders, colonizers, or state authorities) Partnoy centres the voices of the silenced and oppressed, particularly those who were labeled as "subversives" by the military junta. She does not claim to provide an objective, overarching historical account. She presents fragmented, deeply personal stories of resistance and survival of these women. In the text, for instance, her descriptions of blindfolded interactions with fellow prisoners emphasize the human cost of state-propagated violence, otherwise absent in mainstream historical accounts. Colonial mainstream historiography often tries to set down that the state represents order and progress, and the opposers of its ideology are viewed as threats to that 'stability'. The Argentine civic-military dictatorship adopted this logic, terming its violent actions as a necessary response to 'protect' the civilization. Partnoy's text dismantles this view by exposing the inhumanity of the regime's actions. We could look at how she recounts the everyday dehumanization in the detention centre, being denied food, proper clothing, and even the dignity of her name, emphasizing the barbarity of the so-called agents of civilization and order. Partnoy's accounts prevent mainstream historiography from erasing/ manipulating collective memory and establishing its dominant authority. Her text transforms personal memory into a political act of resistance. Each vignette preserves the names, voices, and struggles of her fellow detainees, ensuring that their stories are not 'lost'. In the text, Partnoy's vivid recollection of Graciela, who smuggles bread crumbs to feed her fellow prisoners, becomes an act of reclaiming agency and humanity in a space that is hell-bent on not allowing that to happen.

Women's experiences of political repression, often marked by unique forms of violence, like sexual abuse, are frequently omitted or shoved under the carpet in mainstream historical accounts. Partnoy highlights the gendered dimensions of violence by the power structure and in time, emphasizes women's resilience, solidarity, and leadership, as seen in the text in the mutual care and subtle acts of defiance among female prisoners. Colonial mainstream historiography often pretends to take on a 'neutral' or 'objective' perspective. This stance could conceal its simplistic understanding of power structures and falling into the notion of binaries. Partnoy's position is subjective and humanized, in her testimony. She is rejecting the pretence of neutrality. The fragmented structure of *The Little School*, with its episodic and sometimes surreal vignettes, mirrors the disorientation and trauma of her private experience. It is countering the White Western European linear, 'rational', calendrical historical narratives. Colonial historiography often tends to focus on grand events, treaties, and wars. It often obscures the everyday violence inflicted on the minorities of the society – marginalized however they are. Partnoy's text brings to light the micro-level, systemic, dehumanizing abuses that were experienced in the detention centres: the psychological torment, physical deprivation, and attempts at the erasure of personal identity. In her story about naming ants or imagining life outside the prison walls – as seen in the text, Partnoy shows us how the regime sought to destroy individuality and hope. How prisoners resisted through small but significant acts of imagination and humanity.

3. Conclusion

As we see, Bama Faustina's *Sangati* and Alicia Partnoy's *The Little School* challenge mainstream colonial

historiography by reframing history through the voices and lived experiences of marginalized communities and people, offering a much-needed counter-narrative to dominant mainstream White Western European colonial historical discourses shaped by such powers and privileges. Both texts disrupt the glossed over, sanitized, official records of history by centering the subjugated, the oppressed, and the silenced. Bama and Partnoy show structural violence and systemic discrimination perpetuated by authoritarian power structures in their relevant geo-cultural and socio-politico-economic spaces. They counter the monolithic and conveniently simplistic frameworks of mainstream colonial historiography by reclaiming voices and historical narratives ‘from below’. Their texts help us reshape our understanding of history/historiography, as we then view this field as a contested terrain where the marginalized should come forward and assert their presence, resilience, and agency. A terrain where colonial mainstream historical narratives and such historians would try to erase and exploit such narratives from below. In doing so, Bama and Partnoy remind us that history is not solely the purview of the powerful but a mosaic of lived experiences that demand acknowledgment, justice, and inclusion.

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