

Sangati As an Enrichment of Dalit Women: A Dalit Feminist Reading of Bama's Narrative

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Abstract

Dalit literature in India has emerged as a significant medium for articulating the voices of marginalized communities. Among contemporary Dalit writers, Bama holds a distinctive position for her commitment to social justice and gender equality. Her novel *Sangati* presents the collective experiences of Dalit women who confront multiple forms of oppression based on caste, class, and gender. This paper examines *Sangati* as a narrative of resistance and empowerment. It analyses how Bama portrays the lived realities, cultural practices, and evolving consciousness of Paraiya women. The study argues that *Sangati* functions as a powerful Dalit feminist text that contributes meaningfully to both Dalit and women's movements in India.

Keywords: dalit literature, feminism, bama, sangati, gender inequality, marginalization, social justice

1. Introduction

Indian society has historically been structured through rigid caste hierarchies that have systematically marginalized Dalit communities. Within this framework, Dalit women experience a dual burden of oppression—both as members of a subordinated caste and as women in a patriarchal society. Their voices have long remained excluded from mainstream literary and social discourses.

Dalit literature emerged as a form of resistance against social injustice, discrimination, and exclusion. It records the lived experiences of oppression while asserting dignity and self-respect. Bama, a prominent Tamil Dalit writer, has contributed significantly to this tradition. Her novel *Sangati*, originally written in Tamil in 1994 and translated into English by Lakshmi Holmström in 2001, focuses on the everyday lives of Paraiya women and their struggle for social recognition.

This paper seeks to analyse *Sangati* from a Dalit feminist perspective and examine how Bama represents women's suffering, resilience, and empowerment.

2. Narrative Structure and Technique

Sangati departs from the conventional structure of the novel by presenting a series of interconnected anecdotes, memories, and personal accounts. The title itself, meaning “events” or “happenings,” reflects this episodic narrative form. The novel is divided into twelve chapters, each portraying incidents from different stages of women's lives.

The narrative is primarily in the first person, supported by the voices of elders and community members. This multi-layered narrative technique lends authenticity to the text and emphasizes its collective nature. By rejecting traditional plot-driven structures, Bama adopts an oral storytelling mode rooted in Dalit cultural practices.

3. Double Marginalization of Dalit Women

A central concern of *Sangati* is the double marginalization faced by Dalit women. They are subjected to discrimination by dominant caste groups and patriarchal domination within their own communities. Bama illustrates how social humiliation and economic dependency reinforce domestic violence and gender inequality.

Men who experience exploitation in public spaces often assert power within the household, leading to the victimization of women. As a result, Dalit women become targets of structural as well as personal oppression.

4. Labour and Economic Exploitation

Bama portrays Dalit women as essential contributors to both domestic and economic spheres. They work as agricultural laborers, construction workers, and daily wage earners. Despite performing equal or greater labour than men, they receive lower wages and lack financial autonomy.

After returning from work, women continue to shoulder household responsibilities. Their labour remains largely unrecognized and undervalued. Through these depictions, Bama exposes the intersection of caste, gender, and class exploitation.

5. Gender Discrimination and Childhood Deprivation

Gender discrimination in *Sangati* begins in early childhood. Girl children are burdened with domestic duties and caregiving responsibilities, often at the cost of education and personal development. Characters such as Maikkanni and Mariamma exemplify how young girls are deprived of opportunities and subjected to vulnerability.

By portraying these experiences, Bama critiques social systems that deny Dalit girls their fundamental rights and perpetuate cycles of poverty and dependence.

6. Language, Culture, and Identity

Language plays a crucial role in *Sangati*. Bama employs colloquial Tamil enriched with proverbs, folk songs, and everyday speech. She deliberately challenges literary conventions by incorporating oral expressions and community idioms.

This linguistic strategy serves to preserve cultural identity and resist upper-caste literary dominance. The use of vernacular language validates Dalit experiences and strengthens collective consciousness.

7. Resistance and Female Agency

Although *Sangati* documents suffering, it does not portray Dalit women merely as passive victims. Many characters demonstrate resilience, assertiveness, and strategic resistance. Women like Raakkamma and Kaaliamma confront domestic violence and challenge patriarchal authority.

Bama emphasizes self-respect, solidarity, and emotional strength as essential tools for survival. The narrative gradually shifts from despair to empowerment, presenting women as agents of social transformation.

8. Education and Social Mobility

Education is presented as a crucial means of empowerment in *Sangati*. Bama strongly advocates equal educational opportunities for boys and girls. Limited access to schooling restricts women's economic inde-

pendence and social awareness.

Through various examples, Bama illustrates how education fosters confidence, critical thinking, and self-reliance. She views education as a foundation for long-term social change.

9. Critique of Religious and Social Institutions

Bama critically examines religious and social institutions that perpetuate caste and gender discrimination. The Church, in particular, is portrayed as reproducing hierarchical structures despite its claims of equality. By exposing institutional hypocrisy, *Sangati* challenges dominant ideologies and encourages critical reflection on power relations.

10. Sangati as Dalit Feminist Testimonio

Sangati can be interpreted as a form of collective life narrative or *testimonio*. While rooted in personal experience, it represents the voices of an entire community. The individual “I” merges with the collective “we,” transforming personal suffering into social testimony.

This narrative strategy strengthens Dalit feminist discourse and resists the objectification of marginalized women.

11. Conclusion

Bama’s *Sangati* is a significant contribution to Dalit literature and feminist writing in India. It documents the hardships faced by Dalit women while celebrating their resilience, cultural vitality, and determination. The novel challenges caste hierarchy, patriarchy, and institutional injustice.

By giving voice to marginalized women, Bama promotes dignity, equality, and social transformation. *Sangati* functions not only as a literary work but also as a powerful social document advocating justice and empowerment.

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