

Subaltern Perspective: Oppression, Subordination, Discrimination Explores on Bama's *Sangati*

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Abstract

The term Subaltern has been from the writings of Antonio Gramsci and is referred to the subordination in terms of class caste, gender, race, language and culture. Subaltern is designated as a postcolonial theory which studies subordination in its various forms has always been the central focus of the oppressed in South Asia. In India Dalit Literature emerged as a prominent area in the post colonial literature. The main focus of Dalit Literature is on the oppressed people who are under dominant community. Dalit writings are based on the sufferings of the oppressed class which emphasize on the struggle that they undergo due to oppression by the upper class people. Dalit issues are recorded in a variety of genres-autobiographies, novels, poetry and essays. In South India there are many Dalit feminist writers. Among them Bama, Sivagami, Poomari explored subalternity and gender discrimination in their works. The present paper examines the subalternity of caste and gender explored by Bama in her *Sangati* with the special reference to the paraiyar community in South India.

KEYWORDS: subaltern, subordination of gender, caste oppression, inequality, discrimination.

Introduction

The subaltern studies began in the beginning of 1980. The studies aim to promote the study and discussion of the subaltern's themes in South Asian studies. Subaltern history in particular understands the need to document the lives of all the oppressed people like peasants, laborers, tribals, lower caste women and Dalits. Their voices of subalterns never heard before in the Indian history. For centuries the subaltern Dalits have been rendering the menial services for dominant people. By the Dalit Literature the Dalit writers try to bring up the truths in the light before the society. Bama's second work *Sangati* portrays of Dalit women particularly Paraiyars community, it focuses on their troubles, sufferings of her community. From her childhood onwards she witnessed all hardships of women in her community. She raised many questions in her mind and tried to find out solutions for those happenings. However she could not notice the subalternity of women under the hegemonic men and society. According to Gayatri Spivak Chakrabarty in her essay titled "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" she emphasized ; "the condition of women who are doubly oppressed firstly by patriarchy and secondly by colonialism". (p.308) Similarly Bama in her preface (*Sangati*) expresses subalternity that "Oppression, ruled and still being ruled by patriarchy, government, caste and religion, Dalit women are forced to break all the structures of the society in order to live". Since the present paper focuses on

the sufferings of Dalit women in two aspects: first, being a woman second, belongs to the lowest community. Therefore they have been oppressed double.

Sangati means news, events, happenings, and the book is one of the interconnected anecdotes.

Bama shows her clear intention in her acknowledgement: “My mind is crowded with many anecdotes: stories not only about the sorrows and tears of Dalit women, but also about their lively and rebellious culture; their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter them, but rather to swim vigorously against the tide; 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”. (*Sangati* xvi).

In *Sangati* Bama explains a real picture of growth, decline, culture, boldness, weakness and liveliness of Dalit women. And also she expresses Dalit women’s oppression at home, working places and society. Bama admits that they face all kinds of difficulties despite they handle all struggles skillfully.

This paper also presents a summary of gender inequality, caste and gender oppression in *Sangati*. Bama describes the women’s domain in the rigid society. The novel starts with the quote; “if the third is a girl to behold, your courtyard will fill with gold” (1).

These words said by Bama’s grandmother shows the theme of gender discrimination.

While Bama is a little girl, she says that in her family there is no great difference between the boys and the girls at the time of their birth but as they grow up, family members take more concern for boys than girls. She discloses about her family members, they believe in the fact that it is a lucky thing for a girl to belong to the odd number and for a boy to belong to the even number.

Bama’s grandmother serves as a midwife has been discriminated by upper caste and served for her paraiyar society only. As Bama writes; “in my village it was my grandmother who attended every child birth. Only the upper caste never sent for her because she was a paraichi”(1). Women have to be alone, independent after their husbands’ death. Since they did not get any support from anyone else of their family members they have to survive individually. Hence they frustrated. Bama says that her grandmother was very beautiful but she never wore ornaments because her husband had died. Grandmother mutters that “she had become a corpse without a husband, and struggled single-handedly to care for two children”(1).

Bama discloses that in her community, girls are not allowed to play boys game if they are playing then the people will abuse them: The boys won’t allow the girls to join in, girls can play at cooking or getting married; they can play games with stones or shells such as that taangal or thaayam. But if they go and play boys games like kabadi or marbles or chellaangucchi, they’ll abused by elders. As Bama says, “who does she think she is? She’s just like a donkey, look. Look at the way she plays boys’ games” (7). It explores the gender subjugation which prevails in her community.

Bama raises the issue of gender discrimination by her writing; “if a boy baby cries, he is instantly picked up and give milk. It is not so with the girl. Even with breast-feeding, it is the same story; a boy is breast fed longer, with the girl, they bear them quietly, making them forget the breast.”(7) Bama articulates that of women subjugation is everywhere, they obtain second position where as men have higher position. Even in games the children of both sexes know their gender roles, they play accordingly. “When we played

'buses' there were always boys at the start and finish of the rope as driver and conductor, who allow the girls to enter in the middle, and shouted at them. And when we played husband and wives they were the ones in authority; they took the role of policeman and ship-owners" (31). Women always regard next to men, the gender discrimination have started from their tender age. So the deprivation of women's position started from their childhood itself.

In this novel Bama focuses on Dalit women's lives and their hard work. Women have to bear all family burdens individually. Men are free from all issues; they concentrate on their own contentment, they did not hold any responsibility. But the women of this community have to do great labour or toil in the field as well as at home. The women of this community are self-dependent. Women earn their wages as they are working in the field or in the match factory. Despite they never get equal wages like men, they are paid lower wages than men for the same work. This shows the inequality among men and women.

Bama describes the ceremony of puberty it means that a girl is able to do marriage. After attains puberty for a girl it is necessary to marry a man because people believe that it is the best way to protect a girl from bad persons. Sometimes women of this community lead a very hard life in a very pitiable condition.

Women have been oppressed and they do not get the rights to educate themselves as men do.

Bama rightly says that girls do not have the right of education like boys. They have to suffer not only at the work field but also at home mentally and physically. And when they revolt it causes of violence or their death. When Bama asks her Pattii about the violence she says in angrily: "You ask me why? because the man was crazy with lust. Because he wanted her every single day. How could she agree to his frenzy after she worked all hours of the day and night, inside the house and out? He is an animal, that fellow. When she refused, he practically broke her in half"(10).

Women do not have equality in the society to express their thoughts or views. Moreover they cannot speak among the men and they dare not to speak about what is right or wrong. They cannot eat before their husband: "...the husband beat her up so much even though she was carrying a child- and all this torture just because she caught some crabs from the wet field and made a curry and ate it before he came for his meal" (30).

There is no justice for women. As women regard subdue to men they have to bear all the pains, insult without making any complaint against men. Here Bama gives an example of Mariamma whom an upper caste fellow tries to molest her while she escapes from his hand. After come home she told everything to her friends but they advised her; "it is best if you shut up about this. If you who will get the blame; it is you who will be called a whore"(24). According to her friends' advice Mariamma is dumbstruck dose not reveal to anyone. But that uppercaste man makes a complaint to the village elder before her presence to escape from the issue. In the case of Mariamma, she has not only humiliated but fined also. She tries to tell the truth but nobody believes her. Arokkyam said;

"look how unfair the fines are. Even last week, when my granddaughter Paralokam went to pull up grass for the cow, the owner of the field said he would help her lift the bundle on to her head. That was his excuse for squeezing her breasts, the barbarian. He's supposed to be the mudalaali's son. He is supposed to

be an educated fellow. The poor child came and told me and wept. But say we dared to tell anyone else about it” (26).

Bama explores plight of women as they do not have a single moment of rest for themselves. Always they have to lead such a life in which they work without taking rest. As she insists about women;

“When they come home in the evening, there is no time even to draw a breath” (59) because all day they remain busy with other domestic works like: to collect water, to cook food, to feed hungry children and husband etc. after doing all this they do not sleep soundly as at night they have to satisfy to their husband. As she writes; “night after night they must give in to their husbands’ pleasure. Even if a women’s body wracked with pain, the husband is bothered only with his own satisfaction”(59).

The characters of Mariamma and Thaayi express the theme of universal gender issues, unhappy married life, humiliation and oppression. Their husbands also humiliate them by beating them mercilessly and cutting their hair. But they never revolt against it. When the narrator asks about it to her mother, why does not she leave this fellow? For that her mother replies; “It’s not so easy to get away, once you are married. Once you’ve put your head in the mortar, can you escape from the pestle? No, she must continue to suffer until her head rests on the earth at last”(44).

In this novel Bama expresses the issue that even a little girl of this community does not lead a happy or free life. She gives an example of Maikkanni, a little girl whose father never cares his family. When her mother goes to work in the field, the poor girl has to do all the works like; “From the time she woke up, she sprinkled the front yard with water and swept it, and then carried on with all the house work: swept the rest house, scrubbed the cooking pots, collected water, washed clothes, gathered firewood, went to the shops, cooked the kanji. She did it all, one after other”. (70) She goes to match factory to do work when her mother is pregnant. She has moved from the window seat by the boys as she is a girl. She has beaten by her father because she has spent one rupee on ice from her wages. Still she hides her sorrows, tries to understand hegemonic society in which she leads her life happily.

Bama suggests; “we must be strong. We must show by our own resolute lives that we believe ardently in our independence. I told myself that we must never allow our minds to be born out, damaged, and broken in the belief that this is our fate. Just as we work hard so long as there is strength in our bodies, so, too, must be strengthening our hearts and minds in order to survive”. (59)

Every aspects of society related to women is revealed by Bama and she describes inherently the theme of gender discrimination, caste based oppression, inequality. Bama defines Dalit women as;

“Everywhere you look, you see blows and beatings; shame and humiliation. If we had a little schooling at least, we could live with more awareness. When they humiliate us we do get furious and frustrated.....because we haven’t been to school or learnt anything, we go about like slave all our lives, from the day we are born till the day we die. As if we are blind even though we have eyes” (118). By these words she insists the importance of education for women, for their empowerment and the upliftment of society.

Conclusion

In sangati Bama portrays multilayered oppression of Dalit women. A Dalit girl child has been considered as a unpaid servant maid for her family, has to take care of her younger siblings like a mother, has to do all the house chores, has to go for earning as a daily wage labour, she has to bear all the suffering, pains on her shoulders. A Dalit girl has not been regarded as a child; she has to take all domestic responsibility and pushed as a childlabour never enjoys her childhood. Bama makes an appeal for a change and betterment of Dalit woman,s life in various aspects which includes sex and gender discrimination, equal treatment at home and in the workplace, right to education for girls etc. According to Bama the position and the status of women deprived because of caste and society. After describing all troubles and difficulties of women in her society she suggests something for the welfare of women that we must bring up our girls showing no difference between boys as they grow into adults. We should give our girls the freedom as we give our boys. If we rear our children without any discrimination from their childhood, women will reveal their strength. Then there will be no difference between men and women. Then injustice, oppression, violence, and inequalities will come to an end.

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