

# Dethroning Institutional Oppression: Voicing Out the Female Concerns in Bama's *Sangati*

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Received Date 29/09/22, Revised Date 10/10/22, Accepted Date 18/12/22, Published Date 20/12/22

## Abstract:

Casteism has rightly been regarded as one of the pivotal social evils which plague a particular society to the core. The Indian societies, since a very long time, have always been divided into different categories based on the power politics and the dominance of patriarchy. The identity of the women, in this regard, appears to be a very far cry because apart from the institutions, they also get oppressed by the male members of their own group of people. The Dalits of the Indian societies have been the worst possible sufferers with them getting relegated to the extremes of the societies with no authoritative assertion of their own. Bama, the stalwart of Dalit writings, blatantly voices out the concerns pertaining to the females in her literary females. Her thought-provoking novel *Sangati* deserves a place alongside the classics of literature with its portrayal of the de-structuring of the power structures by the females in order to establish the identity and position of Dalit females in the society. This paper argues that *Sangati* not only shatters established structures of power in the society but also epitomises female concerns to grant them a position of authority to them. It conceptualises the positivity of Bama in her hope to dismantle the oppressions leading to the pathway of self-identity of the Dalit women.

**Keywords:** casteism, Dalits, Dalit-feminism, power-structure, self-identity.

The construction of the identity of an individual calls for a probing attention to the various roles of the society which, directly or indirectly, plays its part in granting one's identity. The identity of the females, particularly in the context of the societies in India, has always been under the radar as the male-dominated societies always construct their identities by attributing them a position of relegation. With regards to Dalit women, the combination of the power politics exerted by the male members of the society along with their class, it becomes next to impossible in order to attain an identity of note for the Dalit females. The primary function which they are generally associated with in the society is to carry out tasks which are generally considered as "impure" in the society. Thus, one can well comprehend the unimaginable plight of the Dalit females who are marginalised both by the society and their own caste. Paul Ricoeur makes a valid point regarding the roles played by the different acts of the society in the creation of the identity of a person as he remarks

self-understanding is an interpretation; interpretation of the self, in turn, finds in the narrative, among other signs and symbols, a privileged form of mediation; the latter borrows from history as well as from fiction, making a life story a fictional history, or if one prefers, a historical fiction, interweaving the historiographic style of biographies with the novelistic style of imaginary biographies. (114)

"*Sangati*," which literally represents "events," with the help of different local tales and anecdotal articulations draws the attention of the readers to the plight which Dalit women undergo in their lives in the village of Puthupatti. The novel very painfully recounts various experiences which Dalit women

have to encounter in their lives every day while carrying out their living in the society. Through the eyes of Bama, the readers, too, can associate themselves with the secondary position of the females in the society who get converted into mere objects meant for manipulation and objectification. Bama, by turning the tables, showcases almost a reversal of narration in the novel by raising her voice for the emancipation of the Dalit women so that they can rise up the ladder in the society by breaking free from the shackles of dominance. Bama showcases that the distinction between the males and the females start right from the respective households where boys are given a superior position even in games which were played. As she recounts,

when we played ‘buses,’ there were always boys at the start and finish of the rope as driver and conductor, who allowed the girls to enter in the middle, and shouted at them. And when we played husbands and wives they were the ones in authority; they took the roles of policemen and shop owners. (Bama 31)

What was even more pathetic than the depiction of games based on gender discrimination is that the situation which the Dalit women faced in her actual life was even more worse. Bama opines that her patti always had a special liking for the grandsons more than the daughters. The boys, as the narrative indicates, were always given the preference and were allowed to play in the field out in the open unlike the girls who were meant for the accomplishment of the different kinds of chores associated with one’s home. Bama recalls the indifferent attitude of her patti towards the plight of the women in the lines below

As Patti said, though it is quite true that the women in our street led hard lives. That is how it is from the time that they are very little. When they are infants in arms, they never let the boy baby cry. 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. (Bama 7)

Bama portrays the character of Pathima in order to question the politics associated with marriage as it bogs women down. She remarks, “I am sure that god doesn’t want us to be living like slaves to the day we die, without any rights or status, just because of a cord around the neck. Don’t you agree?” (Bama 95). Her character is a blatant realisation to the entire Dalit females as she introspects that men have always been subjugating them and have never allowed them to prosper in the society. The following lines by Pathima are very significant in this context

It is by repeating that to us that they have made us as useless as rotten eggs. Nowadays women can take up all sorts of responsibilities. But just as they fooled us and took away our rights within our homes, they have also marginalized us in the world outside. (Bama 104)

Bama reiterates that there lies an indomitable spirit in the Dalit women to overcome any kind of hardships in their lives and this is one of the significant positives which can help them break the shackles. She also urges that the Dalit women need not necessarily depend on their male counterparts for the accomplishment of different kinds of tasks in the society as they are also very much capable of executing a particular work themselves. “Somehow or other, by shouting and fighting first thing at dawn and last thing at night, if need be, our women survive without going crazy” (Bama 86). The identity of the females which the novel portrays can be called as what Alexander Wendt calls “social identity.” In his words, “Social identities are sets of meanings that an actor attributes to itself while taking the perspective of others, that is, as a social object” (395).

*Sangati* showcases the act of dethroning numerous so called obstacles in the way of the establishment of the identity of the Dalit females by the narration of numerous tales which epitomise their strength. The basic feature related to the establishment of the identity of the females is the act of observation which Bama carries out in the society in order to uncover the hidden talent of Dalit women. The different anecdotes which are seen in the text act as ample testimony to the inherent subjective essence which the Dalit women possessed within. Thus, the

language plays a key role as well in understanding the essential position of the self of the Dalit women. It can, then, be stated that the entire narration which Bama pens down in the novel is the indirect process of the creation of a different world- a world of the subjective individuality of the Dalit females where there are no boundaries to curb their instinctual desires. The following use of proverb is quite apt in illustrating the inherent zeal of Bama to showcase the identity of the Dalit females

It's like the proverb that says, if a man sees a terrified dog, he is bound to chase it. If we continue to be frightened, everyone will take advantage of us. If we stand up for ourselves

without caring whether we die or survive, they'll creep away with their tails between their legs.

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