

OPEN ACCESS

Manuscript ID:  
ASH-2024-11036909

Volume: 11

Issue: 3

Month: January

Year: 2024

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

Received: 06.10.2023

Accepted: 18.12.2023

Published: 01.01.2024

Citation:

Lakshmi, Deepa. "Echoes of 'Untouchable Lives': A Study on Bama's Sangati as a Dalit Feminist Narrative." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2024, pp. 31–34.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v11i3.6909>




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# Echoes of 'Untouchable Lives': A Study on Bama's Sangati as a Dalit Feminist Narrative

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## Abstract

*Literature is as old as human language. It has the power to transcend the boundaries across the world, thereby sharing all kinds of human experiences. Seen as a reflection of the society and the people residing in it, literature mirrors the lives of those who are marginalized as well as secluded from the mainstream society. And when it comes in the Indian context, it is the Dalit community becomes the utmost victims of the traumas of marginalization. As a part of the literature of the marginalized, Dalit literature enabled the articulation of the growing aspirations of Dalits in a new language. This paper is an attempt to analyse the rigid caste barriers existing in the Indian society and also examines how literature has emerged as an iconic tool in sharing the hopes and aspirations of Dalits, previously branded as 'the untouchables'. This paper also examines how Tamil Dalit Feminist writer Bama's novel Sangati becomes an epitome of Dalit feminist narrative.*

**Keywords:** Dalit as 'Untouchables', Marginalization, Hegemony, Caste-slavery, Subaltern, Dalit Writings

Literature is a global experience, also the most prominent medium for projecting the human experiences. Dalit literature, emerged as a part of the Indian writing is already more than five decades old, and its foundation lies in the establishment of the Dalit Panthers in 1972 in Maharashtra. But later the waves of Dalit literature have reached every nook and corner of the nation. Like any other uprisings, Dalit movement also emerged as a way to raise their voice as well as ensure the existence of a subaltern group who were dumbled for so many years. Apart from exposing the inner psyche of the Dalits, who are considered as the 'untouchables', Dalit literature is worth reading for its high-spirited aesthetic values. It can be seen as an innovative literary movement to narrate the oppressive lives and also a reflection of their growing awareness and consciousness. And being the literature of the marginalized and the weak, it becomes the creative expression of a community who were silenced for a long time. Dalit writings became the reflection as well as remembrance of Dalit history as well as Dalit lives.

Like Indian society, Indian literary canon too showed indifference towards the Dalit community. Their entrance into the field of literary scene were considered as a forbidden one. It is only at the beginning of the twentieth century that a few upper-class Hindu writers attempted to depict the lives of the lower caste 'Dalits'. And their writings are only filled with sympathy and compassion for the marginalized. But the problem lies in the fact that the writings made by the upper caste people on the lives of the untouchables do not find to be real; because they were presented as idealised and portrayed as following the elite way of life that they can never be treated as ordinary human beings full of vitality, hope and despair.

The responsibility for social equalization fell partly up on literature. Through literary outputs, the society which composed both higher and lower caste people get an overview about the life of those who were marginalized and silenced solely because of their caste. Dalit literary canon has created an alternative aesthetic environment for the marginalized sections to open up their psyche. Voices came out from the literature of the marginalized are a kind of protest against the existing social structure as well as caste hierarchy. The experiences of Dalits are dehumanising, wherever they go, whatever they do and however they try, they are tightly bound within the constraints of caste. Literature liberates them and gives an independent identity. It heals them and strengthens them to fight for their freedom to live like a human being.

Indian society is fundamentally caste-centric. And so the power and privileges available in Indian society is circulated along with the caste lines. Casteism, one of the dominant forms of oppression that has been present in the Indian society for centuries, and made the life of the lower caste people miserable.

The emergence of Dalit literature as an innovative discipline enriched the aesthetic values of Indian writing. Apart from the problems evolved out of casteism, today Dalit writers also write about gender related issues, which has not been noticed previously. In fact, a good number of Dalit women writers came into the literary scene to write about their personal experiences, mainly in the form of autobiographical notes, about the various kinds of oppression that they are facing, apart from their caste stigmas. Their writings aimed at critiquing the patriarchal social structure that exists both within in and outside of their communities. Thus, a quintessential wave is clearly visible with many Dalit writers raising their voices against different forms of subjugation based on caste, gender, religion, language, ethnicity and so on.

Michael Foucault's thesis of knowledge and power can be applied here in order to understand one of the primary ways in which Dalits were oppressed. His premise is that knowledge – its production and dissemination- cannot be separated from the complex activity of domination:

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it does not only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as negative instance whose function is repression.

Bama, also known as Bama Faustina Soosairaj is a Tamil Dalit feminist and writer rose to fame with the publication of her autobiographical narrative (Bama: *Karukku*). Being a member of Dalit community, she experienced the bitter forms of oppression. *Sangati* was Bama's second work published in 1994 and later translated into English as 'Events' in 2001 by Lakshmi Holmstrom. The second novel *Sangati* too contains autobiographical elements and is set in Virudhunagar. Narrated in a first person account, the novel starts with the birth of Fatima who is the third child in her family. In the novel, Fatima says that if the third is a girl to behold, your courtyard will fill with gold.

Discrimination based on gender, for being a girl starts very right from her birth and it continues till her death. "One is not born, but rather becomes, [a] woman" (de Beauvoir: *The Second Sex*) shows how gender and gender roles are constructed within the society. It varies across time, place and cultures. Gender stereotypes are socially constructed. Women are always trapped with in the roles of a submissive wife, loving mother and must be inferior to the entire male community. Here also the novel centres around the exchanges between Vellaiamma and Fatima based on the daily events happening in their village, about the gender roles that are expected to be performed by a woman.

Being a representative writer of Dalit feminism, Bama incorporates the exchanges that are mostly on how Dalit women continue to be subjugated by the men within the community and by society as a whole outside the community. Through *Sangati*, Bama presents the double victimised condition of Dalit women. Caste and gender are the two prominent entities that prevents the entry of a Dalit woman into the mainstream.

The novel *Sangati* chronicles the lives of several generations of women from Dalit community.

It narrates several individual life stories, anecdotes and memories that peeps deep into the life of women in Paraiya community in Tamil Nadu. The female characters in Sangati are depicted as daily wage earners. But the discrimination is very much evident in the case of wages they earn. Like the whole women community, here too the women characters earn less than men do. Also, men possessed financial independence, as they can spend according to their own wish. At the same time, women have to bear the entire financial burden of running the family.

The sexual harassment encountered by the women in Dalit community is presented through the words of Marriamma. As a representative of the Dalit female community, Marriamma describes the plight of her community to fight against the sexual exploitation that they are facing from both inside and outside of the community. The physical abuse is realistically portrayed in the novel through the acts of whipping and canning committed by the male characters. It is the plight of the whole Dalit community, not about a particular individual. Even though the Dalits are treated as untouchables, the upper caste land owner Kumarasami Ayya sexually abuses Mariamma, the women who belonged to the so-called untouchable caste. The men who belonged to the Paraiya community were speechless when she was victimized for molestation by Kumarasami Ayya. Because, they too were afraid of losing their jobs and did not have the power as well as courage to question the wrongs committed by the upper-class people.

As women are powerless in every society, they have to blindly accept the patriarchal hegemony of men over their life. Apart from the physical harassment faced, they had to suffer a lot from their family too. The female characters Maariamma and Thaiyi have faced baffling shame in their family life. Their male partners regularly best them up and also establishes the idea that it is their right to humiliate and dominate their female counterparts in every possible way. Throughout her life Maariamma suffered a lot. In her childhood days too, she didn't get the love and affection from her parents. When the proposal of Maanikkam came, she didn't even get a chance to express her opinion, her likes and dislikes. Maanikkam, who is a drunkard finally

becomes her husband without her consent. She was forced to accept him and its final outcome was the continuous beatings she suffered.

One of the remarkable features of Sangati is its language, its choice of vocabulary. Sexual references are widely used in this work. Bama questions the normalisation of man's attitude of humiliating and disrespecting women. From time immemorial, women in the entire world are treated as second class citizens. And when it comes in the context of Dalit women, the problem doubles. Through the depiction of Dalit women from different generations, Baba deviated from the normative literary style of having a single plot line. They should take their lives into their own hands. No one from within or outside their community is going to help them to claim their identity and also to establish a place for them.

The first half of Sangati focuses on the protests against all forms of violence and suffering faced by the Dalit women. But the second half of the novel attains a new perspective, that moves away from the state of trauma and frustration faced by the community. Instead of purely focusing on the problems faced by the community, the novel projects an affirmative outlook on Dalit women, focusing on the necessity of moulding their inner strength and vigor. By citing the example of Pechiamma belonging to Chakkili community, who studied upto fifth class, the writer delves deep into the education system prevailing in the Dalit community. The girls of Paraiya community were denied of getting education.

Changes are inevitable for all society, and predominantly essential for a caste-oriented patriarchal society. Through Sangati, Bama raises the need of the hour to appeal for a change, an initiative for the betterment of Dalit community, especially for Dalit women. The novel becomes a social documentation that discusses the multiple layers of suppression and marginalization encountered by Dalit women in their everyday life. By providing a naturalistic treatment, the novel Sangati becomes the manifesto of resistance and a call for action against the process of dehumanisation.

“In conclusion, the exploration of ‘Echoes of Untouchable Lives’ through Bama’s ‘Sangati’ unveils a profound Dalit Feminist Narrative, capturing the

enduring struggles and triumphs of marginalized individuals. Bama's evocative storytelling serves as a poignant call to dismantle the entrenched structures of caste oppression, emphasizing the urgent need for intersectional awareness. As we resonate with these echoes, it becomes imperative to foster a society that recognizes, challenges, and ultimately transcends the boundaries that perpetuate untouchability, paving the way for a more equitable and inclusive future."

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