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## GENDER POLITICS IN BAMA'S SANGATI

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**Dr. S. R. Chaitra**

Assistant Professor

Department of English, Maharaja's College  
University of Mysore, Mysuru, Karnataka, India

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### Abstract

Indian society is stratified based on gender, caste and class. Literature, as a mirror of life happens to be one of the significant platforms for articulating the voice of the individual. Subsequently, literature as a powerful medium of expression brings forth the realistic picture of the segregated and hierarchically organized society. Many women writers have expressed their thoughts and rendered their experiences in the form of various literary genres. Gender politics constitutes assumptions underlying expectations regarding gender difference in a society. The writings of women concentrate on their subjugation in society. But the literature of Dalit women manifests much more severe needs than the women of higher caste and class. Dalit women in particular have given new dimensions to creative literature as they realistically portray the lives of the fragmented and the oppressed. Many Dalit women writers have written about their communities depicting the miserable, pathetic and vulnerable life style of the women who are marginalized within the marginalized section and oppressed within the oppressed community. They lead their life despite various challenges they face in their day to day life such as economic crisis, physical strain, psychological stress, verbal abuse, physical assault, and sexual exploitation in domestic and social spheres. One such conspicuous narration which exhibits realistic picture of the downtrodden paraiya women is the novel, *Sangatiby Bama*. Much of the lifestyle of the Dalits is revealed by the young narrator of the novel. She scrutinizes each and every kind of discrimination which has been perpetrated on her and other women due to their gender and caste and internalizes all the incidents. Dalit women work till their bodies are tired, they suffer marital rape, domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse within and outside the community, yet they work hard and earn some rupees. Though gender politics is seen at every stage of a dalit woman's life and yet, the narrator is optimistic about the future. As the time changed, there was change in the education of women as the narrator became an educated lady compared to her mother who had studied till her fifth class and her periamma had not even seen the school. Hence she feels that the notion that women believe that married life is a complete service to a man is their fate is wrong. She opines that boys and girls should be educated showing then no difference as they grow, with equal rights and finally ends with a hope that, "Women can make and Women can break."

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Indian society is stratified based on gender, caste and class. Literature, as a mirror of life happens to be one of the significant platforms for articulating the voice of the individual. Subsequently, literature as a powerful medium of expression brings forth the realistic picture of the segregated and hierarchically organized society. Writers of the lower strata depict in their writings the conventions of their days and consequently reveal their sufferings in the society. The voice of the oppressed is a direct self-assertion of resentful anger against the inhuman atrocities committed by the hegemonic class. These atrocities and the pathetic life style of the oppressed are well depicted in the writings of Dalits.

History reveals that from time immemorial men have been ruling the society and in turn ruling women. Even in the contemporary situation nothing much has changed. Though there were movements in different developed countries regarding the rights of women and considerable identity of women has been established, yet the status of women is always inferior to men. Though there are several literary works which concentrate on the women they were all written by men. Hence a female was considered to be so from the perspective of a man. The woman had no identity to reveal her own self. Hence literary movement of feminism constitutes women fighting for their rights to seek recognition through their writings as a literature forms a platform to articulate their voice. Many women writers have expressed their thoughts and rendered their experiences in the form of various literary genres.

They have concentrated on various problems of man-woman relationships and their status in society. The writings of women concentrate on their subjugation in society. If this is the status of the rich class/caste women, the status of the downtrodden women who are considered to be in the lowest strata of the society goes unnoticed in many ways. Hence the literature of Dalit women manifests much more severe needs than the women of higher caste and class. Dalit women in particular have given new dimensions to creative literature as they realistically portray the lives of the fragmented and the oppressed. Many Dalit women writers have written about their communities depicting the miserable, pathetic and vulnerable life style of the women who are marginalized within the marginalized section of the society. They are oppressed within the oppressed community and yet they lead their life despite various challenges they face in their day to day life such as economic crisis, physical strain, psychological stress, verbal abuse, physical assault, and sexual exploitation in domestic and social spheres. One such conspicuous narration which exhibits realistic picture of the downtrodden paraiya women is the novel, *Sangati* by Bama. Bama is the pioneer of Dalit feminism. This research paper deals with the gender politics as expressed in the novel, *Sangati*.

Collins dictionary defines gender politics as the debate about the roles and relations of men and women. Gender politics constitutes assumptions underlying expectations regarding gender difference in a society. Though Indian society has designated certain gender roles, they are sometimes blurred. In spite of assigned roles, they overlap and in some cases, the women take up the role of men in maintaining the family besides doing their female responsibilities.

One such novel which even celebrates womanhood despite its vulnerabilities is Bama's *Sangati*.

Bama's first novel *Karukku* deals with the autobiography of her own self in the Dalit Christian world. Her second novel *Sangati* where she realistically portrays the lives of *paraiya* women can be called as an autobiography of a community. *Sangati* means events or happenings and subsequently the novel deals with many happenings in the community which is reflected by the narrator in first person. Hence the author acknowledges as,

“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, passion about life with vitality, truth, enjoyment and about their hard labour. I want to shout out these stories.”

In the initial chapters the narrator is a young girl of twelve years and in later part of novel she is an adult spinster. In this regard Lakshmi Holmstrom, the translator of Bama's *Sangati* says, “The form of each chapter is therefore exploratory, and the structure of the book as a whole seeks to create a Dalit-feminist perspective.”

Bama raises her voice against caste and gender discrimination in her novel. *Sangati Events* by Bama revolves round the theme of the wretched condition of the Dalit women because of caste discrimination and patriarchy. The novel focuses on the distinct images of girl childhood, which is signified by double imposed burden of caste and gender. The perspective of gender is seen throughout the novel. As the narrator's mother tells her that when a child was born they didn't make any difference between boys and girls at birth. But as they raised them, they were more concerned about the boys than the girls and that was why boys went about bossing over everyone. Boys went to school at least for a short while. The girls didn't even do that much. They had enough to do at home anyway, carrying the babies around and doing the housework. (5) Even with breast-feeding, it is the same story; a boy is breast-fed longer with girls, they wean them quickly, making them forget the breast.

If the boys catch an illness or a fever, they will run around and nurse them with the greatest care. If it's a girl, they'll do it half-heartedly. (7) It's the same when the children are a bit older, as well. Boys are given more respect. They'll eat as much as they wish and run off to play. As for the girls, they must stay at home and keep on working all the time, cleaning vessels, drawing vessels, drawing water, sweeping the house, gathering firewood, washing clothes, and so on. When all this is done, they will carry the tiny babies, minding them even they go out to play. (7) When they are playing too, girls must not play boy's games. The boys won't allow the girls to join in. Girls can play at cooking or getting married; they can play games with stones and shells such as *that taangal* or *thaayam*. But if they go and play boy's games like *kabaddi* or marbles or *chellangucci*, they'll get roundly abused. Even when the young girls and boys played 'mothers and fathers', the girls had to serve the mud rice to the

boys first. The boys would pull the girl's hair and hit them questioning the taste of food. The children who knew their future roles showed discrimination and physical abuse even in the games. They had become a part of the patriarchal world where a women's role was strongly meant to suffer under the iron fist of man without questioning. The gender discrimination is later questioned by the narrator as,

Why can't we be the same as boys? We aren't allowed to talk loudly or laugh noisily; even when we sleep we can't stretch out on our backs nor lie face down on our bellies. We always have to walk with our heads bow down, gazing at our toes even when our stomachs are screaming with hunger, we mustn't eat first. We are allowed to eat only after men in the family have finished and gone what Patti aren't we also human beings?" (29)

This gender bias would worsen in the case of the grownups, as the grandmother says,

We have to labour in the fields as hard as men do, and then on that, struggle to top of that, struggle to bear and raise our children. As for the men, their work ends when they've finished in the fields. If you are born into this world, it is best you were born a man. Born as women, what good do we get? We only toil in the fields and in the home until our very vaginas shrivel. (7)

Much of the lifestyle of the Dalits is revealed to the narrator by her grandmother Vellaiyamma. She was well-known in her community as she was the one who attended every childbirth. Only the upper castes never sent for her because she was a *paraichi*. She never wore a blouse as "Apparently in her times, lower-caste women were not allowed to wear them (5)." Her husband Goyindan disappeared within four years after he married her and since then she raised her two daughters single-handedly. She regrets for the death of her elder daughter and says, "I reared a parrot and then handed it over to be mauled by a cat. Your Periappan actually beat her to death. My womb, which gave birth to her, is still on fire. He killed her so outrageously, the bastard." The reason for her daughter's death as revealed by her is

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. Once in my very presence he hit her with the rice-pounder.

The sufferings of the women don't end here. They are constantly in the fear of sexual exploitation of the upper castes. They fear to walk alone as they are caught by the upper caste men and are raped. Once when the narrator and her grandmother were out gathering firewood, the grandmother warns her saying, "Women should never come on their own to these parts. If upper-caste fellows clap eyes on you, you're finished. They'll drag you off and rape you, that's

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for sure. If you go on a little further, there will be escaped criminals lurking in the plantations. They keep themselves well hidden. You must never let them see you either.” (8)

One such incident is the experience of Mariamma. After finishing her work, when Mariamma is on her way back home, she is tired and rests for a moment. Mariamma saw that there was water running through an irrigation pump-set nearby, and went to drink a couple of mouthfuls of water. She happened to be in Kumarswami Ayya's fields. The man was actually in the pump-set shed at that time. When she went innocently to get some water, he seized her hand and pulled her inside. Frightened out of her wits, she left everything and ran home, hardly knowing how she escaped. When she came home and told her friends, they warned her and said, “It is best if you shut up about this. If you even try to tell people what actually happened, you'll find that it is you who will get the blame; it's you who will be called a whore. Just come with us quietly, and we'll bring away the firewood that you left there. Hereafter, never come back on your own when you have been collecting firewood. That landowner is an evil man, fat with money. He's upper caste as well. How can we even try to stand up to such people? Are people going to believe their words or ours?”

In order to save him the upper caste man blames Mariamma and she is unfairly hauled in front of the whole village and is made to pay huge fine. Her father calls her a slut and blames her. “Well girl, you heard what he said, didn't you? Why are you standing there like a stone then? Beg forgiveness, you bitch, I have suffered enough shame because of you.” (23) He hits her as hard as he could. Her voice to prove her innocence is not heard by the patriarchal world. As a result of her damaged reputation she is married to an elderly man who beats her to death every day. There are several other instances of the upper caste men leave no opportunity to molest the lower caste women. In spite of their innocence the women are labelled as whores and punished and whatever the man does, in the end the blame falls on the woman. Finally people would say, “He's a man: if he sees mud he'll step into it; if he sees water, he'll wash himself. It's one justice for men and quite another for women.” (24) Yet the dalit women had no escape from the torments of men of their respective caste and even of the upper caste. Once they were married, as they had to live they and under the hands of their husbands and with regard to their upper caste men too, they had no escape as they had to crawl to them and beg for work the next day,

Dr. J. Michael Raj and Dr. M. Suresh Babu in “An Analysis of Dalit Women's Distress in Bama's *Sangati*” published in *Language in India* say,

As a feminist writer Bama's feminism is focused in the Dalit community. As women are powerless, they accept the patriarchal role of men in their life. All her women characters are never empowered with education. Therefore they are treated as social victims and easy to attack by whoever wishes.



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Another event that is worth discussing is the possession of *pey* by dalit women. *Pey* would usually possess a woman when they are menstruating. There are many *peys* in the lives of the dalit women who trouble them and one such *pey* is an evil spirit of a woman named Esakki. The reason for Esakki to become a *pey* is heart rendering. According to the story narrated by the grandmother, Vellaiyamma, Esakki was the only sister of seven brothers. She fell in love with a man of vanaan caste, eloped and married him much against the wishes of her brothers. By the time the brothers could find her out, she was a full term pregnant. So the brothers coaxed her to come home for delivery. Poor fool Esakki believed them and set off home happily though her husband's heart was filled with fear. Her villain brothers took her to deep forest, with one sweep of a sword they separated her head from her body, they sliced open her stomach, took out the baby, twisted its neck and killed it and since then Esakki had become a *pey*. The narrator has her own question as to why the *peys* possess only dalit women and not any upper caste women as *peys* always seem to set on women from Pallar, Paraiyar, Chakkiliyar, and Koravar communities.

Hence she examines the lives of the Dalits and concludes that it is because of the fear, the dalit women become possessed and danced in frenzy and infers, "From the moment they wake up, they set to work both in their homes and in the fields. At home they are pestered by their husbands and children; in the fields there is back-breaking work besides the harassment of the landlord. When they come home in the evening, there is no time even to draw breath. And once they have collected water and firewood, cooked a kanji and fed their hungry husband and children, even they can't go to bed in peace and sleep until dawn. Night after night they must give in to their husband's pleasure. Even if a woman's body is wracked with pain, the husband is bothered only with his own disgust, boredom, and exhaustion, because of all this. The stronger ones somehow manage to survive all this. The ones who don't have the mental strength are totally oppressed; they succumb to mental ill-health and act as if they are possessed by *peys*." (59)

The narrator also concludes that men don't have this problem as they have their own freedom. Even though they work hard, they have their freedom and find pleasure in women. Hence the narrator feels that their minds are worn out, damaged and broken in the belief that their life is their fate. She feels that there is a need to strengthen their hearts and mind in order to survive just as women work hard as long as they have strength in their bodies.

Yet there are some rare characters like Raakkamma who understand the brutality of men and shout shamelessly and boldly in order to save themselves. Men don't care for women even in their pregnancy. They are pulled by hair, and their heavy stomachs are dragged on the floor and the poor women are addressed with all sorts of vulgar words. The dalit men who are themselves sufferers of the inhuman caste system have no place to exert their male pride or to show off their authority. All the suppressed anger is vented when are back home and beat their wives. But in all this the women are the worst sufferers. Hence the grandmother says, "It

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is not the same for women of other castes and communities. Our women cannot bear the torment of upper-caste masters in the fields, and at home they cannot bear the violence of their husbands.” (65)

Dalit women are the worst sufferers. They are tormented due to caste, class and gender. In this regard Lakshmi Holmstrom, the translator of Bama's *Sangati* says,

It is remarkable that, writing in the first half of the last decade, Bama was already formulating a 'dalit feminism' which redefined 'woman' from the socio-political perspective of a Dalit, and examining caste and gender oppressions together.

Dalits are in many ways superstitious. The mother reveals to the narrator that, “They used to say that it was a good thing for the first, third, fifth, seventh, and ninth baby, the odd-numbered one, to be a girl. So if the second, fourth, sixth, and eighth baby, the even-numbered one was a boy, it was a lucky thing, they said.” When the girl comes of age, the entire time during those sixteen days, she had to hold a small iron rod or something made of iron in her hands. It was most important for her to take it along when she went outside for 'number one' or 'number two'. They said that an evil spirit, a pey, might jump on her otherwise. (15)

The girls are denied to play with other children. The young narrator of the novel scrutinizes each and every kind of discrimination which has been perpetrated on her and other women due to their gender and caste and internalizes all the incidents. Maikkanni is a small girl who has to work hard as a labour when her mother is about to give birth to a baby. After the birth of the baby, she also has to take care of the new born baby besides other household work. Before she was born her parents were happy. Her mother, when she was a young girl loved her father and they came to know that couldn't get married. Therefore they eloped from their houses and returned after several days. Hence the community had granted their marriage. But after Maikkanni was born, the father ignored the mother and started moving around with his mistress. As this small girl grew up she goes to the city in bus and works in factory as she is not fully grown to work in the fields. She travels by bus every day and feels it relaxing. But she does not have economic independence even though she earns as her father snatches every bit of her earnings from her. She is beaten to death when her father comes to know that she had spent a minute bit of her earning to taste a colourful candy. The child still finds happiness in its life in its own way by working hard. She comes to the narrator's house and laughs with her aunt, who is the narrator, and tells her that in her work place there is place to urinate and shit which is called the shit-room.

The narrator sees the strength of her people to survive in the hardest and toughest situation with their broken bodies and still emerging as strong souls to survive. Even when the men folk hardly contribute to the maintenance of their families, it is the women who with their meagre wages keep up the family in spite of various agonies. The narrator/author draws strength from her own women and acknowledges,

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“*Sangati*, which has as its theme the growth, decline, culture and liveliness of Dalit women, changed me as well. Even in times of trouble, boredom, and depression, the urge grew to demolish the troubles and to live happily. To bounce like ball that has been hit became my deepest desire, not to curl up and collapse because of the blow.”

The narrator feels proud to be born as a dalit and enumerates some positive qualities. Dalit women are unlike the upper caste women who are shut inside their houses throughout life. Dalit women work till their bodies are tired, they suffer marital rape, domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse within and outside the community, yet they work hard and earn some rupees. Many die because they have their babies at home without proper care and yet, no doctors or nurses would come to their street. A dalit woman is very much unlike an upper caste woman by not applying turmeric and dressing up with pottu and flowers. She has no jeweler on one hand and on the other hand, she has no time to decorate herself. The upper caste women never remove their talis throughout their lives. But dalit women never wear a tali, though they marry and live with their husbands. In the upper castes, once a woman becomes a widow she suffers indignities whereas among the lower castes some women marry a second time after the death of a husband. In the street of a paraiya everyone is held the same and widows are not treated differently.

Though gender politics is seen at every stage of a dalit woman's life, the narrator is optimistic about the future. As the time changed, there was change in the education of women as the narrator became an educated lady compared to her mother who had studied till her fifth class and her periamma had not even seen the school. By visualizing the daily activities of her community it seems to her that “society is arranged as if God created women only for the convenience of men.” Hence she feels that the notion that women believe that married life is a complete service to a man is their fate is wrong. She opines that boys and girls should be educated showing then no difference as they grow, with equal rights and finally ends with a hope that, “Women can make and Women can break.”

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