



## SALVAGING THE IDENTITY: DALIT LITERATURE AND WOMEN

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### ABSTRACT

*Dalit literature is the recording of the lives and experiences of untouchables who have been socially-ostracized by the upper-caste people of caste-ridden patriarchal society of India. Dalit literature is the testimony to the atrocities, humiliation, oppression they faced for being born in the lower-caste family. It is the story of crushed people and their inferior position in the caste system where they have been accorded the lowest place. This paper endeavors to explore various issues related to Dalit and their lives. The focus is to understanding what it does feel to be a Dalit in a society like ours which discriminates people on the basis of one's gender, caste, color and creed. It reinforces the need to revise and reinvent the rules of the society which denies the very basic human right to them. Bama's Sangati has been selected to analyze myriad of problems of Dalits as it provides ample scope for it; not only scope to discuss problems but it also gives an opportunity to shed light on their culture which will help in reconstructing the mind which considers Dalits as inferior. It also examines how by adopting ethical and humane approach one can help them in reclaiming their identity and individuality.*

**Key Words** – Marginalization, Subaltern, Triple discrimination

*“I am conscious of the fact that if women are conscientised the untouchable community will progress. I believe that women should organize and this will play a major role in bringing an end to social evils ..... the progress of the Dalit community should be measured in term of the progress made by its womenfolk.”*

**Dr. B. R. Ambedkar,**  
Speech to the Dalit Mahila Federation in 1942 (Smith, 2008)

The word 'Dalit' has been derived from Marathi which means 'Oppressed' or 'ground down'. In a multi-lingual Indian society, Shudra, Bhangi, Depressed Class, Scheduled caste, Harijans, Subaltern, Untouchables (Achhoot), Pariah have been various terms used



interchangeably for Dalits. Mahatma Jyotirao Govindrao Phule (1827- 1890) is one of those social reformers who took the cause of Dalits. He extensively worked for the education and empowerment of lower-castes, peasants, women and laborers. He set up a school in India for girls in 1848 to promote education. To eradicate ills of the society, he formed the “Satyashodhak” Samaj (Society for Truth Seekers). He is believed to use the term ‘Dalit’ to address people of lower-class and others as he found the existing caste-system as discriminatory and man-made. If one goes back into the origin and birth of the term ‘Dalit’, one needs to go back to pre- independent India. Instead of referring these people as ‘Scheduled Castes’, Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891- 1956) also preferred to address them as “Dalit”, and it became more acceptable and usage of common currency with the second wave of the Marathi Dalit movement which saw the establishment of the Dalit Panthers in 1972. Being inspired from Afro-American Black Panthers, Namdeo Dhasal founded ‘Dalit Panthers’ which acted as a radical anti-caste organization. Arun Kamble, J. V. Pawar and Raja Dhale are other founding members of this organization. Here one needs to remember that from here on the term Dalit came to be used as a broader term that not only include people considered inferior in the hierarchy of caste but also have been extended to the other groups who were oppressed, crushed, marginalized and exploited, be it women, gays, lesbians or Blacks. In the manifesto of the Dalit Panthers, the founding members have included a number of people as Dalits. “All Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, neo-Buddhists, labourers, landless and destitute peasants, women, and all those who have been exploited politically and economically and in the name of the religion” have been identified as Dalits.

It was ironical that the word ‘Dalit’ when it was typed, the MS Word didn’t recognize it, underlined it red and suggested some other words instead of using the word Dalit. Same is the attitude and perception of people belonging to upper-caste and upper-class who denies them the right to have an identity of their own. It was very symbolic and suggestive. In the caste-ridden patriarchal society, Dalits are placed out, marginalized and subjugated. Raj Gauthaman writes in *Dalit Panpaadu (Dalit Culture)* that:

*“Dalit literature describes the world differently, from a Dalit perspective. Therefore it should outrage and even repel the guardians of caste and class. It should provoke them into asking if this is indeed literature” (98).*

It is easy for the historically dominating caste and gender to violate human rights of Dalit women who are at the lowest step of the hierarchical ladder. The type of violence inflicted on Dalits is in the form of severest violation of human rights. Certain kinds of violence are traditionally reserved for Dalit women. These include: extreme verbal abuse and sexual epithets, being paraded naked, dismemberment, being forced to drink urine and eat faeces, branding, pulling out of teeth, tongue and nails, and violence including murder after proclaiming them guilty of witchcraft. Dalit women are also threatened by rape as part of



collective violence by the higher castes, but sexual assault and rape of Dalit women and girls occur within their own communities too. Dalit and tribal women are raped as part of an effort by upper caste leaders, land lords and police to suppress movements to demand payment of minimum wages, to settle share cropping disputes or to reclaim lost lands (Human Watch Report, 1998). Maria Mies in the essay “Class Struggles and Women’s Struggles in Rural India” in the book *Women: The Last Colony* reveals how masters or people in power exercise their control over poor people:

*Sexual exploitation mainly in the form of rape, is a means used by the ruling classes to discipline the exploited classes. In order to punish rebellious poor peasants and landless labourers, landlords and police are not satisfied with beating up men and burning their huts; in many cases they also rape their women ... women are seen as the only property that the pauperized men still possess. The rape of their women teaches poor men the lesson that their status is one of absolute powerlessness and propertylessness. This sexual aggression on the part of landlords and police against poor women is a weapon with which to beat the men of the propertyless classes and to stabilize the existing or newly emerging power relations in the countryside. Class rule and the oppression of women are here closely interwoven. He who owns the land owns the women of the land (Mies 138).*

*Sangati* is the second work of Bama which first published in Tamil in 1994. Bama is famous for her first autobiographical book *Karukku* which made furor in the literary world and placed Dalit literature on the map of mainstream English literature when Lakshmi Holmstrom translated it into English. ‘Sangati’ means news, events, or happenings which take place in the lives of Dalit women and it has been written in the form of anecdotes put together in a book. Bama asserts her intentions of writing *Sangati* in the acknowledgements:

*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 labor. I wanted to shout out these stories.*

Bama has portrayed a society where women are subjected to have violent treatment in the hands of their male counterparts. It deals with the issues of conversion, caste-hierarchy, gender-discrimination, violence against women etc. As one reads *Sangati* one could have a plethora of instances where there is discussion related to child labor and violence against women, especially domestic violence:



*The position of women is pitiable and humiliating, really. In the fields they have to escape from upper-caste men's molestations. At church they must lick the priest's shoes and be his slaves....when they go to their own homes . . . they have to submit themselves to their husbands torments. (Bama 35)*

Women belonging to marginalized groups suffer triple deprivations arising out of lack of access to economic resources, caste and gender discrimination. They are discriminated against three times over given that they are poor, they are women, and they are Dalits. Although both Dalit men and women suffer under the same traditional taboos, Dalit women are confronted with these more often. They are discriminated against not only by people of higher castes, but also within their own communities, where men are dominant (Irudayam, Mangubhai, Lee, 2006). *Sangati* is replete with examples where gender discrimination has been highlighted. A girl finding it difficult to understand it logically, questions the rationale behind the age-old tradition of giving more importance to a male child:

*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 water, sweeping the house, gathering the firewood, washing clothes and so on. (Bama 7)*

As *Sangati* has been written in the colloquial language in the form of conversations taking place among the women belonging to many generations, it gives a chance to read how things have been changed over the years. But undoubtedly, there is a long way to go because still in rural areas Dalits have been treated inhumanely. On listening to the opinion of Pathima's father who wants her daughter to continue her study further before getting married, Paatti furiously asserts:

*"How are you going to keep a virgin girl at home and not get her married? Everyone will tittle-tattle about it. Keeping young women at home is like keeping a fire going in your belly" (9-10).*

It is argued if it is male-dominated world where women are considered as submissive and inferior then why and how girl children are getting married against the wishes of their fathers? If "from (the) ancestors" times it has been agreed that what the men say is right" (28-29) then why can't they protect the rights of a girl child? At these occasions, where their male-ego, dominance and power of decision-making as a Patriarch go? Granddaughter of Paatti feels fired with some questions and cannot help asking her grandmother as why girls have been put everywhere in the shackles of traditions:



*We aren't allowed to talk loudly or laughing noisily; ...we always have to walk with our heads bowed down, gazing at our toes...we are allowed to eat only after the men in the family have finished and gone. What, Paatti, aren't we also human beings? (Bama 29)*

A character in *Sangati* named as Mariamma is humiliated “for no fault of” her own and gets “abused wherever (she) go(es)” (40). It is very much evident that “women (don't) show any pity or compassion towards other women” (40). These situations get worse when people do deny their right to speak. Many discriminatory double-standards of Patriarchy forced the women of Dalit society conclude that: “Whatever a man does, in the end the blame falls on the woman” (Bama 26). The stories of Mariamma and Thayeri raised many questions who were subjected to live in a perpetual hell:

*...because of some upper-caste man's foolishness she was made the scapegoat, and her whole life was destroyed. If a woman is slandered, that's always her fate. People won't consider whether the accusation is true or not, nor will they allow the woman to speak out. They'll marry her off to any disreputable fellow and wash their hands off, not caring in the least whether she lives or dies. (Bama 42)*

It is a vicious circle of violence and discrimination that needs to be broken. Thus the situation of Dalit women needs urgent and special attention, as argued by Grey. Of two hundred million Dalits, nearly 50% are women, often referred to as ‘thrice Dalit’ for they suffer from the triple oppressions of poverty, being female and being female Dalits (Grey, 2005). Raj Gauthaman claims that it is the stated design of Dalit writing to disrupt received modern (upper- caste) language properties and to expose and discredit the existing language, its grammar, its refinements and its falsifying order as symbols of dominance. Similar to his sentiments Krishnasamy, Varghese and Mishra in their book *Contemporary Literary Theory: A Students' Companion* says:

*Dalit literature is “foregrounding differences and diversity and ‘otherness’ as potential source of vitality and change and rejecting (the) notions like standardisation, conformity, universalisation that are seen as sources of power, hegemony and colonialism.” (93)*

It is argued that to deconstruct the mind which perceives Dalits as inferiors, secondly it is very necessary to awaken the Dalits by reinforcing their ethnicity, culture and traditions. Bama in the Preface to *Sangati* clearly states:

*Oppressed, ruled, and still being ruled by patriarchy, government, caste, and religion, Dalit women are forced to break all the strictures of society to live.*



*In Sangati, many strong Dalit women who had the courage to break the shackles of authority, to propel themselves upwards, to roar (their defiance) changed their difficulty, problem-filled lives and quickly stanch their tears. Sangati is a look at a part of the lives of those Dalit women who dared to make fun of the class in power that oppressed them. And through this, they found the courage to revolt.” (vii)*

Bama ends *Sangati* on a positive note where she stresses on the fact that if Dalits wish to put an end to the atrocities and injustices done to them, they have to be of self-help. They have to work as a change-agent. Women folk should not inculcate and instill a child’s mind with gender-discrimination and should treat both girls and boys alike. Equalitarian and humane approach towards them is strongly needed to have a sea change in their lives. The behavior, perception and attitude of people belonging to upper-caste need gross changes to have a gender and caste-just society.

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