



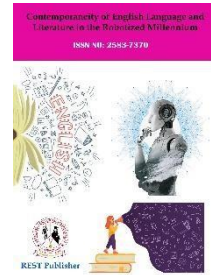
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Gender Constructions and Patterns of Resistance in Contemporary Dalit Women Writers: A Study of Bama's Sangati

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Abstract: *The plight of women in the Indian society as depicted in Karukku is sad and labled with considerable gloom. They are oppressed on the basis of caste, gender as well as class. Karukku very significantly raises questions on caste and religion issues that damage our society. Bama's fictional writings declinate several issues of violence on dalit women, wife-beating, sexual harassment, lonliness, women abondened by their husbands, ignorance, etc at their own homes within the community. In a larger outlook, her literary works potray the marginalization and exploitation of Dalit women as well as the whole community at the hands of upper castes people*

1. INTRODUCTION

Gender Constructions and Patterns of Resistance in Contemporary Dalit Women Writers: A Study of Bama's Sangati: Bama's novel Sangati is considered a manifesto of dalitfemale consciousness. Her novels are acclaimed for celebrating dalit women's "lives, their wit, their humour, their resilience and their creativity" (Mangalam 3). Dalit woman is discriminated against on several counts. Firstly, dalit women have to face great hardships as compared to dalit men to get education. Since they have to do all household chores along with the nurture of babies, they find little opportunity to educate themselves. The result is that first they are deprived of the benefits of learning and then are seen as ignorant fools and are abused for their lack of knowledge. Secondly, there is intrusion of patriarchy in matters of nutrition and health care where the balance is tilted more in favour of boys than girls. Here, dalits show traits normally considered upper castes' domain in which males are preferred and pampered species. The author finds this imbalance even in dalits where if a male child weeps, he is picked up quickly and is given milk while the girl child can cry to its full before any attention is paid to her. Patti, a central character in Sangati rues this male preference in the society where female is seen as appendage, an extra growth: "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 round and nurse them with the greatest care. If it's a girl, they'll do it half-heartedly" (S 07). When the children grow up, girls have to stay at home "cleaning vessels, drawing water, sweeping the house, gathering firewood, washing clothes" (S 07), the boys have no such responsibilities. Further the girls are restricted to play only certain kinds of games which are thought to be proper for them. If they dare to play 'male specific games' they are criticized for trying to be manly. The division of children's games into masculine and feminine, works as indoctrination for inculcating 'feminine virtues' in women and validates the assertion made by Simon de Beauvoir in The Second Sex that that femininity is an acquired virtue and not inherited one.) The male specific values begin to be inculcated in women soon after their birth and they are made conform to a certain kind of behaviour sanctioned by patriarchal ideology. In this task of indoctrination, the older generations of women, which have been made to submit to this peculiar creed long ago and have been naturalized, also play an active part. The complain of the narrator to Patti is a protest against all such discriminations faced by women all over the world: "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 bowed down, gazing at our toes. You tell us all this rubbish and keep us under your control. Even when our stomachs are screaming with hunger; we mustn't eat first. We are allowed to eat only after the men in the family have finished and gone. What, Patti, aren't we also human beings?" (S 29). The advent of modernity has brought with it further overburdening of dalitwomen who

now find no free time to even care for their children. In addition to the childcare and household chores, they have also to work in the factories which leave with them little time for recreation or care for the children.

Since men find it below their dignity to carry babies, these children "wander about with the street dogs and pigs, like dogs and pigs themselves" (S 78). Dalit women have to be busy in their work from morning till late in the night "spinning about like tops" (S 78). It is rightly asserted in this connection that not only dalit women need to be freed from the dual disabilities of caste and gender; it is the dalit men also who will have to come out of their prejudices and patriarchal assumptions. Thus the emancipatory impulses will have to act on both ways. The liberation of dalit women will have to become a liberation movement for dalit men also: Dalit family life is male oriented. The biggest hurdle is man. A woman is always restricted even from stepping out of the house by a husband or a brother or a father. The constant hammering of correct norms of behaviour, of dress, of speech make her feel unequal from childhood itself. These husbands, brothers and fathers need to be freed first if Dalit woman is to be freed. (S. Sharma, *Dalit and Backward Women* 225) A significant aspect of patriarchy operative in dalits is revealed through unequal division of work between dalit men and women. While it is true that both dalit men and women have to work hard to wrest a living in a world full of caste biases and exploitation of the weak, it is dalit women who have to work doubly hard. They not only work outside home to earn money, but also have to struggle against ever mounting household work in which the male members of the family scarcely help. The work of a male ends as soon as his day is done, but the women have to struggle to cook the food, arrange for the firewood, feed the children and perform all the tasks which are seen as falling within the bounds of women and are considered below the dignity of men. Patti rightly concluded that in this world where the burden of labour falls largely on women, "it is best you are born aman. Born as women, what good do we get? We only toil in the fields and in the home until our very vaginas shrivel" (S 6-7). The hard work dalit women put up in the course of their lives makes them prone to various ailments. Mariamma, the eldest daughter of Perimma, has to bear the burden of rearing up her younger sisters in addition to the work she has to do as bread winner of the family. Due to it, she remains physically underdeveloped and does not come of age till very late. The unequal division of labour is conspicuous in all spheres of life, it is even visible in the works related with the marriage. During the preparation for marriage, while men "usually sat on benches outside and chatted or they might stroll off together to the shops" (S 85), the women remain "busy the entire time, cooking the rice and other things, and doing everything else" (S 85). The narrator finds most of dalit men either violent to their wives or just cruelly indifferent to the gruelling labour dalit women had to do in and outside their homes. Unlike women, the work done by men ends with the end of the day. After evening they are free to loiter around the liquor shops or chavadi, leaving the household work to women. The narrator, while conceding that the division of labour is tilted towards males in all cases, takes the stand that in case of dalit women it is more acute: "Even if all women are slaves to men, our women really are the worst sufferers" (S 65). Maikkanni is yet another dalit woman who has to bear the tortures and discriminations along with the hard work she is supposed to do for her family. Just after her birth her father took another woman and started coming home "whenever he feels like it, and goes off again, leaving her mother with a child in her belly every time" (S 69). Maikkanni had to work hard from her childhood to help her mother raise the family: "From the time she woke up, she sprinkled the front yard with water and swept it, and then carried on with all the housework: swept the rest of the house, scrubbed the cooking pots, collected water, washed clothes, gathered firewood, went to the shops, cooked the kanji" (S 70). In addition to these household chores, she has to work in the match factory to help her mother whenever she was pregnant. Her father snatches all her hard earned money for drinking whenever he gets a chance and beats her if she dares to keep even a single rupee for herself. Raakkamma, who is beaten by her husband Paakkiraj roundedly in front of onlookers abuses him and lifts up her sari before the onlookers to shame him. On being criticized by people for her unbecoming behaviour, she defends herself saying: "If I hadn't shamed him like this, he would surely have split my skull in two, the horrible man" (S 62). The narrator too concedes to it later when she opines: "She acted in this way because it was her only means of escape" (S 62). In this context it is pertinent to note that the use of obscenities by dalit women during quarrels serves a dual purpose. The abuses are purportedly used as a strategy to shame the violent male and thus save themselves from further physical injury. At the same time, the invectives using the names of sexual organs become a source of catharsis through which the suppressed emotions of anger and frustration get ventilation. The explicit allusions to sexual parts of the body of both men and women in the abuses also denote their dissatisfaction with sexual life: "Because they have neither pleasure nor fulfilment in their own sexual lives, they derive a sort of bitter comfort by using these terms of abuse which are actually names of their body parts" (S 68). After working hard during the day in fields, they have to unwillingly surrender themselves to the sexual embraces of their husbands, leaving little scope for their own pleasure. The bodily fatigue due to hard work overburdens the body and soul of dalit women who "vented their irritation by quarrelling with everyone they met" (S 67). Thus the writer feels that considering the adverse circumstances surrounding dalit women, their quarrelling is a vehicle to "survive without going crazy" (S 68). The violence perpetrated by dalit men against their women folk has its genesis in the humiliation suffered by them on the hands of upper castes. Dalit women suffer atrocities, to some extent, due to repression of dalit males by of women to undergo sterilization. As there is neither money nor awareness, besides the uncooperative attitude of men, they have to deliver babies at home without any healthcare. The obvious result is prevalence of high

mortality rate during pregnancy and child birth. The burden of using birth control falls squarely on women because men consider using birth control methods as detrimental to their sexuality. Since almost all women work outside home and usually it is on their earnings that the family depends for its survival, they can ill afford to take up rest after sterilization. The narrating voice in Sangati observes: "As for birth control, the men won't do it. They say they'll lose their strength if they do. And women say that if they are sterilized in a haphazard way by people without training, they will not be able to work in the fields as before. If they can't work, how will they eat?" (S 36). 145 .The pervasiveness of superstitions and occult rites indalits has its roots in the patriarchal oppression which together with caste oppression makes dalit women prone to mental ill health. Repressive atmosphere both at home and outside makes dalit women victim of various psychological ailments revealed in the form of fantasy about spirits and ghouls such as 'peys.' The story connected with a particular pey named Esakki is narrated in detail in Sangati and provides an instance of the intimidation and savagery suffered by dalitwomen in a male dominated society in the name of honour of the family. Esakki, a beloved sister of seven brothers, falls from filial grace when she fell in love with a boy belonging to Vanaan caste and despite the objection of her brothers marries him. Her brothers, incensed with anger, pretend to reconcile with her and while taking her back home, kills her in the forest in a most gruesome manner. They do not spare even her unborn child and kill it by twisting its neck. This unfortunate girl Esakki is supposed to have become a pey and possesses women while demanding cradle and winnowing tray from them. In her analysis of the cases of women possessed by peys, the narrator marvels how it is that only woman, and that too only dalit woman, are possessed by peys and spirits and nobody else. She rightly reaches to the pen to articulate and record their experiences of hurt and humiliation subverts centuries old historical neglect and a stubborn refusal to consider Dalit writing as a subject. Sangati (1994) is her second novel and her publications include Karukku (1992), Vanman (2003) and a collection of short stories Kusumbukaaran (1996). Sangati is a record of Dalit women's experiences of the joint oppression of caste and gender faced by multiple Dalit women, and it is an autobiography of a Dalit community. The experiences of Dalit women are narrated in first person. The narrator, in the early chapters, is Pathima, a girl of twelve, and in the last three chapters, it is the same narrator, but she turns a young woman; the reflective narrative voice is that of an adult intermittently present in all three narrations and it looks into the past and probes the present. Sangati analyses Dalit women's oppression as a triple jeopardy of oppression by double patriarchies-"discreet" patriarchy of their own caste and an "overlapping" patriarchy of the upper caste-as well as poverty."Discreet" patriarchy dictates that power rests with men in the community and in the institutions led by them - the caste courts, the church, the panchets etc. The text traces an account of Bama's portrayal of how the Dalit women are being sexually exploited by the patriarchy of the upper caste. Reputation might be ruined, if the wrong deed he has done to Mariamma comes to light. So he complains to the village Headman that mariamma and Manikkam misbehaved in his field. Then the Headman convenes a meeting at night. At the meeting, men folk sit in the community hall, but women are not allowed in the country court. So they stand here and there outside to watch. Mariamma and Manikkam come to the centre of the circle in the court, greet the elders by prostrating before them at full length, and go and stand each to one side, arms folded. The village headman forces them to admit the truth and seek pardon from KumarasamiAyya. Unfortunately they are not given even at least a chance to prove that they are not guilty. Women come forward to support Mariamma. Finally, the junior headman pronounces that Mariamma is a culprit and she should prostrate and beg forgiveness from KumarasamiAyya. Besides, she should pay a fine of two hundred rupees to the court. Her father also joins the headman and others, and abuses and advises her to beg forgiveness only how, she explains that KumarasamiAyya tried to Misbehave with her. But, her father aid the village headman and others are not ready to believe her words. But there is Anandamma who lends her a helping hand to dispense justice by explaining the facts. Unfortunately Mariamma is helpless, because women are not allowed in the country court. They are not given equal right in decision making both inside and outside of their home. This shows that how patriarchy works in the case of Dalit women. In the novel, Mariamma alone is penalized but Kumarasami and her father are not at all punished. Her father has an illicit relationship with a woman and she delivers a child born of him, but Kumarasami, escapes scot-free because men do not have any moral code as women. Women have no power to voice their sense of equality with men. Dalit women should submit to the whims of upper- caste men because they have no volition, and they are landless and uneducated. If they rise against the upper-caste people, they will not get employment in their field. The village Headman says: "Can we bring them to justice, though? After all, we have to go crawling to them tomorrow and beg for work" Sangati (25). Finally, Mariamma prostrates before the headman and apologizes to him for her unproved allegation of KumarasamiAyya's sexual misbehaviour. But no one asks Kumarasami, the real culprit, to prostrate before Mariamma, and on the other hand, she is asked to pay a fine of two hundred rupees. Manikkam is also fined to the tune of one hundred rupees. Then the village Headman concludes the meeting by saying: "It is you female chicks who ought to be humble and modest. A man may do a hundred things and still get away with it. You should consider what you are left with, in your bellies". Then, Bama presents an awful incidence, ie., Arokkyam's grand daughter, Paralokam has also been teased by an upper caste landlord. But the incident is not revealed to anyone as Arokkyam is afraid of his granddaughter being called a whore and punished. In Untouchable

Mulk Raj Anand also describes a heart-rending and pre-planned incident of Pandit Kalinath's indecent suggestion to Bakha's sister Sohini. He shouts 'polluted', 'polluted', more severely and accuses her of defiling him by her physical contact. He is also an imposter, cried in the place of Sohini. The fact is, she has been polluted by the hypocrite. The priest seduced her when she was cleaning the latrine. When he learns the fact Bakha becomes furious and rushes towards him to teach him a lesson. But his hands are tied with the fetter in the name of outcaste. Sohini consoles him and convinces him to get out of the place. Here the novelist insists that women should have courage to take up the cudgels against the upper caste people. Vellaiamma is furious and rails at Mariamma and contends that when Kumarasami pulled her into the shed, she should have kicked him in the balls then and there. Then she would not have been summoned to the village court. Mariamma finds a solution to the sexual harassment she suffered at the hands of the landlord and it is to hang herself with a rope. Mariamma, a Dalit woman, is a Dalit among Dalits.

2. CONCLUSION

The plight of women in the Indian society as depicted in *Karukku* is sad and laced with considerable gloom. They are oppressed on the basis of caste, gender as well as class. *Karukku* very significantly raises questions on caste and religion issues that damage our society. Bama's fictional writings delineate several issues of violence on Dalit women, wife-beating, sexual harassment, loneliness, women abandoned by their husbands, ignorance, etc at their own homes within the community. In a larger outlook, her literary works portray the marginalization and exploitation of Dalit women as well as the whole community at the hands of upper caste people.

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