Veritas: A Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities
ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

THE DOUBLY BURDENED: A STUDY OF BAMA'S SANGATI

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Abstract

Bama, a renowned Dalit writer was born in Pudupatti, a small village in Virudhunagar district. She has experienced the pain of untouchability even at her young age through the upper caste people living in her village. The early agony encountered by her, shaped her as a writer and she has produced four noteworthy pieces of literature. *Karukku* (1992) was the first Dalit autobiography born out of a sense of alienation. Her second novel *Sangati* (1994) brings out the dual oppression of women on the basis of gender and caste. Her third book *Kusumbukaran* (1996), a collection of short stories conveys the voices of the downtrodden. Her third novel *Vanmam* (2002) focuses on intercaste clash. Bama's second novel *Sangati* portrays the life of Dalit women from the Dalit point of view. It depicts the double oppression experienced by the Dalit women through the characters Vellaiyamma Kizhavi, Mariamma, Maikkani, Esaki, Rakkamma and Kaliamma. They had to suffer at the hands of their husbands, upper caste men and also women. In spite of all their pains, Dalit women try to emerge from the clutches of caste and gender. They are marginalized by their own people and the world outside. But they feel that the time has come to overthrow all their obstacles.

Keywords: dual oppression - gender and caste - intercaste clash - marginalization – emergence.

Dalit literature presents the world differently from Dalit perspective. It acquaints the people with the caste system, untouchability and exploitation. Dalit is not a caste but a realization related to the sorrows and struggles of the people in the lowest stratum of society. Dalit literature advocates the necessity of equality. The purpose of the literature is not spreading hatred among people but to instil brotherhood. Being segregated and deprived of justice and security, the downtrodden group grope in the dark for survival. Sharatchandra Muktibodh in his essay 'What is Dalit Literature" reports "Dalit literature is the literature produced by Dalit Consciousness (21)

Tamil Dalit Literature has emerged slowly but strongly. Sivakami, a noted writer and Dalit activist, published the first Tamil novel *Pazhaiyana Kazhidalum* (1989) which has seen its English translation in *The Grip of Change* (2006). In this novel she advocates education and empowerment of Dalits. Other writers in this genre includeGunasekaran, Unjai Rajan, Abimani, Anbadavan, Imaiyam and Bama. Bama has topped the list with her four noteworthy pieces of literature. *Karukku* (1992) was the first Dalit autobiography, born out of a sense of alienation which led her to realization. She tries to understand her life in three phases: as a woman, a Christian and a Dalit. Her second novel *Sangati* (1994) brings out the dual oppression of women on the basis of gender and caste. Her third book *Kusumbukaran* (1996) is a collection of short stories. Her third novel *Vanmam* (2002) focuses on inter-caste clash. She argues for their unity by burying their differences for their welfare.

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Bama was born in Pudupatti, a small village with an idyllic scenery of fields, mountains and tanks inVirudhunagar district. Her village consists of people from all castes like Naiykars, Nadars, Thevars, Chaliyars, Paraiyars, Pallars and Chakiliars. She learnt about untouchability at an early age from the upper caste people in her village. The initiatives taken by her father and brother enabled her to become a teacher. She wanted to become a nun as she aimed for the emancipation of the poor dalits. But her aim ended in vain due to the flaw in the whole structure of the convent. She walked out of the nunnery and she is working as a teacher at a school in Ongur near Utheremerur. Bama's works portrays the life of Dalits from the Dalit point of view. As Eleanor Zelliot reports, "Dalits can write it because they have experienced the social as well as the economic problems of the lowest castes" (32).Her novel depicts the double oppression exercised by dalit women elaborately. This article entitled "*The Doubly Burned: A Study of Bama's Sangati "*, focuses on the double marginalization encountered by the women in the novel *Sangati*.

Bama in her second novel *Sangati* brings out the marginalization and demarginalization of women through her characters Vellaiyamma kizhavi, Mariamma, Maikkani, Mannachi, Esakki, Raakamma, Kaliamma, Pechiamma and Shanmuga Kizhavi. Vellaiyamma kizhavi, the narrator's grandmother, had married at the age of fourteen. Govindan, her husband deserted her and ran away. After a long wait for the return of her husband, she boldly removed her mangalsutra. She worked hard and suffered a lot to bring up her daughters. She married her first daughter as soon as she attained age. Her first daughter died after giving birth to three daughters. Her cruel husband was the reason for her early demise. Now, her agony and pain were shifted to her first daughter Mariamma. She had to work hard to raise her two sisters as her drunkard father was least bothered about them.

The episode of Mariamma narrates volumes of sexual attacks and abuse made on the Dalit women. One day when she was returning home after collecting firewood in the forest, an upper caste man Kumarasami tried to misbehave with her. Being a dalit she fails to voice her protest against this debased gesture. But Kumarasamı, fearing of his own reputation, reported to the Panchayat that Mariamma and her husband Manikkam had behaved indecently in his field. The Panchayat composed of male chauvinistic elders refused to give a chance to Mariamma to speak out the truth. She in humiliated and compelled to pay a fine of Rs. 200/- The nattamai concluded the Panchayat by telling:

> 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 girls should consider what you are left with in your bellies (S 26)

Bama feels severe pains to see the sufferings of women. But this was the fate of every woman in her village. The Thaayi, a light skinned woman was beaten up by her husband in public. Pakkiaraj and Rakkamma was another couple fighting in the public. Rakkamma used obscene words to escape from the blows of her husband. It was the same in the case of Chinnappan and Kaliamma. Chinnappan assaulted her verbally. Dalit Women receive, less wages than men. Though, they did the same work, they were paid less than men. It is striking to note that there is a caste hierarchy prevailing within the subcastes of Dalit community. In the matters of love and inter caste marriage, the community is gender biased. Men enjoy the freedom of falling in love and marrying girls from

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Dalit subcastes. But aDalit woman will be prevented if she attempts to do the same: “If the men do it, it's fine. But a girl does it, it is terrible." (S 109).

The Catholic priests were also gender biased. They treated the converted Dalit Women as inferior.

> The Church rules, such as the one against divorce, militate against women and keep them under control, Parish Priests are not sympathetic towards women's individual choice of life partners. They are given the meanest job in the church with a promise of a reward in heaven (Sangati Introduction xvii)

The inferiority of Dalit girls is stressed right from her childhood. Girl babies are always considered inferior and are taken less care of, "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. With girls, they wean them quickly, making them forget the breast." (S 7). When a boy is sick, they will nurse him with great care, but if it is a girl, they will nurse them half-heartedly. Bama reflects that the girl children never enjoy their childhood. Dalit girls are made to do all the household duties like cleaning vessels, drawing water, sweeping the house, gathering firewood, washing clothes and so on. They are given the responsibility of looking after their younger ones. Maikkani is one such girl who has started to work from the day she learnt to walk. Maikkani loved her brothers and sisters and took good care of them. The girl is forced to work in the factory when her mother delivers a baby .When her mother goes to work she has to take care of the new born baby. In *Sangati*, Bama brings out the triple oppression of Dalit women. They had to suffer at the hands of their husbands, upper caste men and also women. Bama says that the men engaged in violence as they had no place to show their authority. The Dalit men are suppressed at all places and hence the only place they can show their masculinity is home. The women meekly accept attacks. Bama says that their violence will stop only when the women fight back. They have the capability of working hard and they can lead an independent life. Hence if they uphold their rights and stand up for themselves they can be emancipated. In this context Bama reports, "Even the ocean will support us, if we only dare (S 67).

Sangati does not stop with an analysis of the plight and sufferings of the Dalit women. The book takes us to the inner premises of dalit culture asserting its richness and traditions. *Sangati* reveals the innermost feelings of Dalit women. In spite of all their sufferings and oppression, Dalit women consider themselves privileged than the upper caste women. They take pride in having the liberty to swim and bath in the pond. They also feel proud of their financial independence. Bama expects that the feminine ideals of fear, shyness, simplicity, innocence and modesty are replaced by fearlessness, independence and self esteem. *Sangati* aspires that women can take up all sorts of responsibilities and carry it out with precision. She has been marginalized by her own people and the world outside. But now the time has come to overcome all her disabilities and come out successfully.

ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

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