

Predicament of Women and Male Chauvinism in Bama's *Sangati*

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ABSTRACT

Sangati written by Faustina Mary Fatima Rani, a Dalit feminist under the pen name Bama narrates and records the struggles, tribulations, frustrations as well as the triumphs, joys and survival of women. Bama makes a special emphasis on how the women folk are naturally skilled and instinctive in performing them. In *Sangati* she focuses on the double oppression of females. The article explores the themes of predicament of women and of the male chauvinism that the author presents in the novel *Sangati*. The novel *Sangati* depicts the predicament of a Dalit woman in particular and women in general right from their childhood. The article presents the major characters in the novel, Vellaiyamma, Pachamuukipillai, Mariamma, Pathima and Govindan, Samudrakani, Kumarasami, Manikkam as representatives of the predicament of women and male chauvinism, respectively. The women characters in the novel suffer due to inequality, gender discrimination and pre occupied ideas that are dominant throughout the novel. The article is aimed to understand the images of Dalit women, their pain, situations and which has an impact on our emotional feelings, the sufferings, plight faced by the women and in the novel, *Sangati*.

Key words- Predicament, gender discrimination, voices of women, male chauvinism, sufferings of women.

I. INTRODUCTION

Sangati written by Faustina Mary Fatima Rani, a Dalit feminist under the pen name Bama narrates and records the struggles, tribulations, frustrations as well as the triumphs, joys and survival of women. She rose to fame with her autobiographical novel *Karukku* (1992), which chronicles the joys and sorrows experienced by Dalit Christian women. The novelist's major themes are the plight and the gender discrimination practiced among the Dalit community. Bama is considered to be the torch bearer of Dalit literacy. Bama narrates the stories that were born in the her experience. Bama's writings captures the exclusiveness of the folk narrative is its unique, expressive idiomatic style, which is conveyed through a plain raw passionate language of emotions. The novel *Sangati* was originally written in Tamil during 1994 and was translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom into English. *Sangati* means events, news, happenings, and the book is of interconnected anecdotes. It is a unique Dalit feminist narrative. As the title suggests, this novel brings out the numerous events that have taken place in her community. The novel narrates individual stories and memories of her personal experience. By describing the events, Bama pictures the life style of the paraiya community. The article explores the themes of predicament of women and of the male chauvinism that the author presents in the novel *Sangati*.

II. PREDICAMENT OF WOMEN AND MALE CHAUVINISM IN BAMA'S *SANGATI*

Maya Angelou, the American author in her interview with the New York Times dated 23 July 2007, expressed and supported her idea on women as each time a woman stands up for herself, without knowing it possibly, without claiming it, she stands up for all women. Bama stands up for herself and for the women in general in the novel *Sangati*. According to Cambridge Learner's Dictionary predicament is a problem or a difficult situation. The novel *Sangati* depicts the predicament of a Dalit woman in particular and women in general right from their childhood. The narrator Pathima's grandmother Vellaiyamma, is married at the age of fourteen. Her marriage life sustains only for four years after which Govindan her husband leaves to work in Sri Lanka and fails to return. Vellaiyamma struggles a lot to bring up her two girl children. One day Pathima's grandmother Vellaiyamma narrates the story of Pachamuukipillai, who gets married at young age and delivers her fifth child Kaaturasa, when she leaves to work in field. She gave birth to the child by herself, as there was no medical facility to avail. Later she continues to work. According to the author, it is the situation of a Dalit women that if they don't go to work, they could not get any food. It was the condition of every Paraiya women. They could not depend on their parents or their husbands. Only women had to work as men and they had to take care of their children and the home. The husbands never did anything expect hammering the women.

In the novel Bama presents the plight of Paraiya women in particular and women in general. Paraiya women were suppressed a lot. The women in the narrator's street had very painful lives. Each and every day they faced blows and blood. They were treated like slave. According to a report given by The Middle East North Africa Financial Network a leading online and web content and Financial technology:

The nation is yet to emerge fully from deeply inbuilt gender stereotypes. Based on demographic projections, it's estimated that India is missing more than 63 million girls because of infanticide and better care for younger boys. Indeed, particularly in poorer rural parts of the country, girls largely continue to be seen as a burden.

In the novel *Sangati*, parents always give much importance to the boy babies. They did not let the boy babies cry whereas they ignored if the girl babies cried. If the boy babies became ill the parents immediately took them to hospital but it was not the same with the girls. Moreover, Girls were not allowed to play games such as kabadi or marbles. If they play, they will be roundly abused. In Bama's words, "People will say who does she thinks she is? She's just like a donkey, look. Look at the way she plays boy's games". (07)

The women received blows not only from their husband but also from the upper-caste men. The Paraiya women especially young girls were told not to go to the fields alone because if they fell in the evil eyes of the upper caste land owners, they would try to rape Paraiya girls. They were not even allowed to go to cinema theatres. If they went out alone, the men would pierce them by their looks. According to the author Francis Conroy, marriage is an exercise in torture. The ratification of Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 brought the achievement of women suffrage after which gender issues seemed to fade that re-emerged during 1960's and is reflected in *Sangati* that is written in 1994. In the novel, Bama presents women who were meted out only with blows and humiliation at home. It is evident in the case of Pathima's aunt. She is married to a brute man Samudrakani, who tortured his wife and treats her like an animal. He is a lustful man. There are quarrels, blows and violence in their life. He hit his wife in front of the Pathima's grandmother Vellaiyamma and other members of the street but no

one could stop him. At last, she dies giving her third daughter Seyyakodi, who was only four years old to Vellaiyamma . It is the condition of almost all the Paraiya women. “ I reared a parrot and then handed it over to be mauled by a cat. (Bama,10). These lines are a contrary where women valued another women but the thought vanishes when it comes under the society norms.

In the essay *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf, reflects her ideas on the potential of women as “Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (Woolf,36). The story of Mariamma in the novel *Sangati* is not a mere story of a girl but it is a representation of the situation of every girl in a community. It is a narration of events faced by Dalit women. Bama is very careful in portraying the picture of a Dalit-woman. In this story where Mariamma must get back to work soon after puberty, there is no romantization of poverty, but a brave practical approach. Usually when a girl attains puberty, she was confined within a kuchulu for a few days and follows certain rituals and customs. On contrary, Mariamma's the situation is worst. Her life becomes so miserable as she was pushed into a situation where she is supposed to take care of her family and so she pulled down the Kuchulu by herself, burnt it and set off for work.

Bama puts forth Mariamma's plight as “Her mother went and died. Her father is a drunkard”(Bama,16).This line explains the encumber Mariamma's situation to look after her family. As she was the eldest sister, she had to earn for the daily food. She behaved like a matured woman. She was to take care of her sisters and so went to work in digging well. Poverty pushed her to work in the fields, immediately after she was discharged from the hospital. She, along with her sister Annamma began to work in the fields, weeding or harvesting. Though her father did not care for her, she was much fearful of him. This is a result of male chauvinism.

Considering Virginia Woolf's words “Why women ... are so much more interesting to men than men are to women?” (Woolf, 32). The male's chauvinistic approach is a untold custom in any society. According to Cambridge Learner's Dictionary male chauvinist is a man who believes that men are better or more important than women. Many injustices are laid against women in their society. Such an example is the scrape of Mariamma in *Sangati*. One day as she gathered her firewood as usual, she goes to drink a couple of mouthful of water, near pump set where she was seized and pulled in by Kumarasami an owner in upper-caste. The pitiful women have to escape from the upper-caste men's molestations. Mariamma frightened out of wits, she ran out and told her friends about the incident but they felt the landowner being rich as well as an upper-caste man, they could not stand against him and advised her not to reveal the matter to anybody because the real story would be turned against her. Kumarasami feeling afraid of his reputation and spur-out-of a moment to Seeniappan, the head of the Paraiya community and complained that Mariamma and Manikam (belonging to Paraiya community) were misbehaving. Believing his words and no one dare to question him, called in for a meeting that night. Seeniappan believed blindly whatever the upper-caste land owner charged. Even when a chance was given to them to give an explanation from their side, the chance was first given to Mannikkam but the no one relied on their words. Although, other women knew the truth and they were trying to come forward they were not allowed to say because they were not allowed to speak. Putting forth these ideas in Bama's words:

From the group of women, Kaliaamma said, as if she was speaking to herself, “that akka Mariamma went away with her firewood a long time before all the rest of us. Machaan Manikkam helped to lift my bundle on to my head, and then walked home behind me.

How could these two possibly have met and misbehaved? This is rally unjust. Look at the cheek of the mudalali. He came here as fast as he could and told his fibs”

Even as she was saying this four or five of the men got up once again and shouted at us. “Will you she – donkeys get out of here or do we have to stamp on you? The more we drive the wretches away, the more they come back and make trouble! Once again the women were silenced” (Bama, 23)

From this it is patent that women were not allowed to express their opinions where they are voiceless. They have to be a silent sufferer. Finally, Mariamma is asked to beg forgiveness before the gathering. Samudrakani also forced her to beg forgiveness. When Mariamma expressed the truth that it was only the land owner, Kumarasamy who tried to rape her, the whole men-crowd shouted at her and called her a whore. Samudrakani came forward to kick his daughter Mariamma. Being terrified of her father’s blows she asked for forgiveness. On the other hand Manikkam was not asked to beg forgiveness. Mariamma is fined with rupees two hundred and Manikam is fined with only rupees one hundred, he is not asked to prostrate in front of the gathering. She could not raise her voice against men. Not only Mariamma even the elder grandma couldn’t raise her voice. These incidents highlight the male chauvinism narrated in the novel.

In the novel there is no difference between boys and girls in the village but as the parents brought up their children, they show much concern towards the boys. So, the boys were very proud and haughty. Girl babies are always considered inferior and are taken less care. Dalit girls hardly enjoyed their childhood. They have little time to play. They have to take care of their young siblings. Even when they are infants the society shows discrimination. In Bama’s words,

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 firewood, washing clothes, and so on.(Bama,07)

Although both men and women came after a hard day’s work in the field, men went straight to the bazaar to while away their time, coming home only for their meal. On the contrary women had to take care of household works such as vessel washing, cleaning the house, collect water, go to the shops to buy rice and other provision, boil some rice, feed husband and children before they eat what is left over and go to bed. Women were not allowed to take part on any occasion, the man themselves would dress up and act as women rather than allow them to join in.

When Pathima asked her Grandma why didn’t she speak the truth, though she was a big woman in the village. she gives a negative reply. She advised her that it would be better not to open their mouths against men. Quoting this from the novel:

What do we know about justice? From your ancestors’ times it has been agreed that what the men say is right. Don’t you go dreaming that everything is going to change just because you’ve learnt a few letters alphabet?” (Bama, 23)

Pathima accused her grandmother, for treating them unequally. Because only the elderly women from the beginning showed much concern about boys rather than girls. It was like putting butter in one eye and quicklime in the other eye. It was the parent who did not allow the girls to talk or laugh loudly. Only the parents restricted the women from their free movement. Even in the earlier days women were

after men. The life of the women in the community was really a hell. Everywhere men were at first and exploited women.

Mariamamma's life is destroyed and she is made the scapegoat, because of some upper-caste man's foolishness. Bama makes us to understand through her narration that if a woman is slandered, it is her fate. People won't consider whether the accusation is true or not, nor they will allow the woman to speak out. The grief-stricken situation of Dalit women is depicted through a character Thaayi., who was beaten by her husband. When others protested the beating, Thaayi's husband became enraged and said that it was his wife so he could kill her if she wished. Pathima's words that one should never be born a woman in this world. All cruelties happened to women just as they were tied with the mangalyasutra around their necks. Moreover, the wives could not easily leave the husbands because the tradition would not let them live alone. Till their death, the women had to suffer with their husbands. Bama, through narrator expresses her anger towards the society.

I wanted to get hold of all those who had brought her to this state, bite them, chew them up, and spit them out. (Bama, 42)

Well, Amma, just because he's tied a tali round her neck, does it mean he can beat his wife as he likes? It's just pitiful to see Thaayi, Amma" (Bama, 43)

Bama touches on the question of the church are on broader lines. Parish priests are not sympathetic towards women's individual choice of life partners. They are given the meanest jobs in the church with the promise of a reward in heaven. Women do not get proper food or drink. Many women die at childbirth or soon after. As it is, the families keep going only because of the women.

III. CONCLUSION

Julia Claiborne Johnson, an American writer in her novel *Be Frank With Me* has put forth her ideas on plight of women as explaining the predicament of a women to others is to escape from it. With reference to this idea one could identify that explaining the plight, sufferings of a women to the readers is a way to find a solution to the predicaments. Bama explains the events, incidents that highlight the predicament and male chauvinistic society that prevailed around the Dalit women in particular and women in general through her novel *Sangati*.

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