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Narrating a subaltern consciousness: Bama's 'Sanagti'

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Bama is one of the first dalit women writers whose work has been translated into English. While 'Karukku' was personal in nature, 'Sangati' deals with the community at large: the community of Dalit women who are marginalized both on grounds of caste as well as gender. This paper looks at Bama's 'Sangati' as a narrative of resistance and voicing. Bama loosely strings voices that demonstrate how Dalit women's bodies are scarred by the many burdens of domestic, farm and sexual labour and yet how in ways they are better placed than caste-Hindu women. Touching upon Spivak's 'Can the Subaltern speak?' the paper reads 'Sangati' as a work which gives voice to the doubly marginalized Dalit woman. The paper questions the hegemony of the non-Dalit women writers in claiming to speak for the Dalit women as well as that of the Dalit men who claim to speak for the women. The paper tries to explore how Bama has, through her narrative, especially the form of the autobiography, relocated herself and other Dalit women to the centre and regained their self-esteem and carved out an identity for them. The paper analyses the Dalit woman's voice and questions whether it is clearly articulated and heard through a study of Bama's non-conventional language.

Key words: Subaltern, Dalit woman, marginalization, consciousness, identity, caste and gender, voicing.

INTRODUCTION

There is enough work to and there is always much work to do: But that is behind. The worst that you can do is set me back a little more behind. I can't catch up in this world, anyway. Robert Frost (A Servant to Servants). These lines taken from Robert Frost's poem 'A Servant to Servants' clearly articulates the feeling of being put at the back on the societal front. It is this feeling of being behind the others that is explored by subaltern writers. Subalterns are those people or groups who are located outside the hegemonic power structure in society. They are discriminated on various grounds and lack the basic rights and opportunities in society. The term was first used in the non-Military sense by Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1881 to 1937), an Italian writer, to refer to any person or group of inferior rank and station, and can be employed in discussions of race, class, gender, sexuality,

ethnicity and religion. Some thinkers use it in a general sense to refer to marginalized groups and the lower classes—a person rendered without agency by his or her social status. Others, such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak use it in a more specific sense. She argues that:

Subaltern is not just a classy word for oppressed, for Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie....In postcolonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern—a space of difference. Now who would say that's just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It's not subaltern....Many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean, just by being a discriminated-against minority on the university campus, they don't need the word 'subaltern'...

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They should see what the mechanics of the discrimination are. They're within the hegemonic discourse wanting a piece of the pie and not being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic discourse. They should not call themselves subaltern. (de Kock 1992)

In current criticism it has come to be refer as those who lack agency in society and access to social power. The Dalit in India is one of such marginalized and excluded community lacking agency and power in society. There are numerous Dalit writers who have tried like the subaltern historians to "dismantle the past by decoding biases and value judgments in records, testimonies and narratives of the ruling classes and also restores the subaltern groups and their agency" and role in history as subjects "with an ideology". (Perusek 1993) And one such writer is Bama.

Bama is a Tamil Dalit writer and Lakshmi Holmstrom's translation of her work 'Karukku' established her as a distinct voice in Indian literature. Born in 1958 as Faustina Mary Fatima Rani (her grandfather had converted to Christianity) in a village called Puthupatti in Tamil Nadu (southern India), her landless ancestors and parents worked as laborers for the landlords. Bama's father, who was in the Indian army, was very particular about the children's education. "If he had not joined the army, we would never have had the regular income for education. Education also gave us freedom to get away from the clutches of the landlords and lead our own lives," says Bama. Her brother Raj Gautaman, also a writer, introduced her to the world of books. "I read Tamil writers like Jayakantan, Akhilan, Mani and Parthasarthy. In college I read my favorites - Kahlil Gibran and Rabindranath Tagore. I didn't have many books to read so I read the same ones again and again," she recalls.

In college she also wrote poetry. But after college Bama became a schoolteacher and chose to educate very poor girls. Her life took a big turn when at the age of 26 she took the vows to become a nun. This was an attempt to break away from caste bonds and further pursue her goals to help poor Dalit girls. But seven years later, in 1992, Bama walked out of the seminary. Her family insisted she get married and settle down. "I had lost everything. I was a stranger to society. I kept lamenting about life and harked back to my happy childhood days in the village," narrates Bama. Struggling to find herself again, Bama followed a friend's advice and started to write her childhood memoirs. She also created her pen name - Bama - a blend of different sounds from her Christian name. (Dutt Nirupama 2012, *Half the sky*) While 'Karukku' was more personal in nature, 'Sangati' talks about the community and as the name means it is a recollection of events from the lives of the marginalized dalits.

This paper seeks to study 'Sangati' (2009) as a narrative articulating the Dalit mind. How does her choice

of form and style help in centralizing the Dalit woman and her daily struggles? The paper seeks to use Spivak's 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' to show how Bama has successfully brought to the centre a group from the margins and shown their ability to speak and to be heard. The paper also focuses on the demand of the Dalit women to speak for themselves instead of any male or upper caste woman becoming their voice.

Before entering into a discussion on the above mentioned, one needs to be clear about what is consciousness or subjectivity. If we take Descartes' cogito 'I think, therefore I am' to be a self-conscious "I" to be in command of its destiny, we are stressing on 'self-conscious reflection' (Hall 2003), one of the traits of modern life. Subjectivity is a concept which invites us 'to consider the question of how and from where identity arises, to what extent it is understandable, and to what degree it is something over which we have any measure of influence or control.' (Hall 2003). Spivak in her discussion of 'subaltern consciousness' talks of the counterpoint suggestion that 'subaltern consciousness is subject to the cathexis of the elite, that is never fully recoverable, that it is always askew from its received signifiers, indeed that it is effaced even as it is disclosed, that it is irreducibly discursive.' (Spivak 1998) And generally it is elite documentation that gives us news of the consciousness of the subaltern. Spivak refers to the retrieval of the subaltern consciousness as 'subaltern subject-effect.' (Spivak 1998).

Identity, on the other hand, is the particular set of traits, beliefs and allegiances that gives one a consistent personality. When we apply these theoretical concepts to Dalit life, we find that Descartes' Cogito is present in the individual but repressed. And their identity is something not made by them but given over to them by society through the Lacanian symbolic order. It is the realm of language, the unconscious, and an otherness that remains other" (Bowie 1991) The 'I' of the dalit consciousness is suppressed by the society at large though its laws and belief systems and the existing systems hegemonize them in such a way that in Althusser's words 'the subject freely accepts his subjection.' (Hall 2003) And the process of narration is one of the ways in which the subaltern subject can make his voice heard and prove to the world of the existence of a free self.

Historians visit the archives for information about the natives during colonial times with the aim of producing a body of knowledge about the colonial encounter. But generally the native subject remains unheard and apart from his own history. This has also happened in the context of the women where the first world women usurped the right to speak for the third-world women. And again if we look at the case of Indian feminism, the upper-caste women took on themselves the task of speaking for all women thereby excluding the already excluded dalit women. Bama through the arduous task of

narrating her experiences and of her fellow women brings the dalit women to the centre of the discourse.

In 'Sangati' Bama uses the form of the autobiography not only to portray her life but also to portray the lives of other Dalit women by giving them an identity through the narration of their story. This narration is generally done either through observation as in the following:

After a few days, she set out again to find work. Her younger sister Annamma too was ready to go with her.....

One day Mariamma gathered her firewood as usual and came home in the burning heat carrying her bundle.....She happened to be in Kumarasami Ayya's field. 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. (Sangati 2009).

Or through a narration by another individual as in the case of the story of Pecchiamma who left her first husband and married a second time. (Sangati 2009). The narration of events through observation method enables the writer to act as a journalist drawing a portrait of the events with details and leaving the readers to examine and analyze the situation for themselves. When a third person tells a story to the narrator, the readers get the story and the time to ponder over the issues and the narrator also gets the time to express her opinion leaving the readers free to agree or disagree.

When I thought about all that she had told me, I was quite shocked. But it seemed to me that it was a very good thing that some of our women had the option of ending their marriages. Because it meant a woman need not spend her entire life, burning and dying, with a man she dislikes, just because of this thing called marriage. But I also feel sad that Christian women didn't have this chance. On the other hand, many upper-caste women could not even think of it in their wildest dreams. If a woman leaves her husband and chooses to live apart from him, people will keep on tormenting her and even drive her to death. She has to accept that even if he is only a stone or a blade of grass, he is still her husband. (Sangati 2009). Things get richer when we look at the opening sentence of the text:

'If the third child is a girl to behold, your courtyard will be filled with gold.' This shows the working of Barthes's cultural code which designates any element in a narrative that refers "to a science or a body of knowledge" (Barthes 1974).

In other words, the cultural codes tend to point to our shared knowledge about the way the world works, including properties that we can designate as "physical, physiological, medical, psychological, literary, historical,

etc." (Barthes 1974). The "gnomic" code is one of the cultural codes and refers to those cultural codes that are tied to clichés, proverbs, or popular sayings of various sorts. Through these codes or say language, Bama goes on to create the Dalit woman's subjectivity. And this 'subject' is an individual being, a person speaking and acting purposefully in a world illuminated by rational freedom or the impersonal "structure in dominance" – what Marx called the "forces and relations in production" that "operate outside man and independent of his will," and set the pattern and horizon of individual action. (Hall, 2003).

DISCUSSION

Bama, through her narrator and the use of language challenges the institutional apparatuses that work on the reader's concept of self and social order and goes on to produce a subject free of subjection. An instance of this can be seen in the story of the pey in Sangati. This story is narrated by the author's Patti, Vellaiyamma. She tells the narrator that Peys do not have feet and that nothing should be said loud after dark. (Sangati 2009) Such stories not only reveal the popular superstitions and cultural beliefs of people in a region but also show gender discrimination. Peys are frightened of men. A woman becomes its prey easily and especially the ones belonging to the Dalit communities. (Sangati. 2009).

Bama again uses proverbs to show the condition of the Dalits women who are treated with contempt not only by the public but also by government agencies and she exhorts them to uphold their rights and declare that they too are human beings:

It's like the proverb that says, if a man sees a terrified dog, he is bound to chase it. If we continue to be frightened, everyone will take advantage of us. If we stand up for ourselves without caring whether we die or survive, they'll creep away with their tails between their legs.

Another proverb says, so long as it is hidden in the earth, it claims to be big, but when you start peeling it, it's nothing but skin. These fellows are just like that – like onions. They'll shout themselves hoarse, making great claims. They'll forbid us to speak a word. They'll see the like cobras and say that they alone own everything. But why should we hide our own skills and capabilities? (Sanagti, 2009).

Though Bama uses the form of the autobiography, it emerges as an extension of short stories or narratives and this not only acts as a mode of self-assertion and protest for the figures in the narrative but also for the dalit populace at large. Such autobiographies or personal testimonies act as documents of 'social history' (Abedi, 2010). Moreover, what makes Sangati special is that it is

not the autobiography or personal testimony of an individual in isolation but the story of the community. The narrative focuses on the struggles, oppression, assertion and quest for identity of the self as well as the world of Dalit women.

What again makes Sangati special among Dalit autobiographies is the exhibition of double discrimination which Dalit women face. Untouchability, along with machismo mark out a woman's body as a site for control and oppression. (Abedi 2010) Narrating the death of her daughter to the narrator, Paatti said:

When a man is hitting out like that, can a woman go and pull him away?..... even if the bystanders had tried to stop him, he would have shouted at all of them, "She is my wife, I can beat her or even kill her if I want." (Sangati 2009)

Woman's memoirs do not display laments, resentment or shame of oneself. They do not beg for pity but draw upon internal forces to survive with respect. Though Paatti's daughter had been killed by her son-in-law, her narration of the event does not ask the reader/ audience for pity or sympathy but actually shows her will to survive and her self-respect and her anger:

I reared a parrot and then handed it over to be mauled by a cat.... My womb, which gave birth to her, is still on fire. He killed her so outrageously, the bastard. I give my word on this. You just wait and see. Heaven alone knows what kind of death he'll die. (Sangati 2009)

The focus on minute peculiarities of women's lives and their daily chores brings the women to the space of knowledge. While social institutions ignore the women, the writing of their stories shows the roles they have to play and the labour they are destined to perform. (Abedi 2010). It was always like this in our streets. Although both men and women came home after a hard day's work in the fields, the men went off straight away to the bazaar or the chavadi to while away their time, coming home only for their meal. But as for the women, from the minute they returned home, they washed vessels, cleaned the house, collected water, gathered firewood, went to the shops to buy rice and other provisions, boiled some rice, made a kuzhambu or a kanji, fed husband and children before they could eat what was leftover, and go to bed.

Even if they lay down with bodies wracked with pain, they weren't allowed to sleep. Whether she died or survived, he had to finish his business. When I thought about all this, I was often disgusted by this daily routine. Men at least, I thought, had a better time of it. (Sangati 2009). The narration and creating of an identity for the marginalized is accomplished not only through the form of the book but also through the language used by the author. In this context Lakshmi Holmstrom writes:

Throughout her work, Bama uses the Dalit Tamil dialect more consistently and easily than many of her contemporaries; for narration and even argument and comment, not simply for reported speech. Besides overturning received notions of decorum and propriety, she bridges spoken and written styles consistently. She breaks the rules of written grammar and spelling throughout her work, elides words and joins them differently, demanding a new and different pattern of reading in Tamil. (Sangati 2009).

In Sangati Bama has reclaimed the language of the women of her community. We find multiple female voices speaking to and addressing one another and sharing the events of daily lives. The language is reported exactly and is full of expletives, often sexual in nature. An apt example is the abuses hurled at Thaayi by her husband:

You common whore, you, any passing loafer will come in support of you, you mother fucker's daughter. You'll go with ten men. (Sangati 2009).

Another one is from a wife towards her husband:

Go on, da, kick me, let's see you do it, da! Let's see if you are a real man. You only know how to go for a woman's parts. Go and fight with a man who is your equal and you'll see. You'll get your balls burnt for your pains. (Sangati 2009).

The text is replete with such examples. Husbands hurling abuses at wives, women hurling abuses at men and at other women, and the violence and irritability evident from the time they wake up till they go to bed work to shake the readers' consciousness and realize the existence of the Dalit mind as an independent force. Bama makes an analysis of such linguistic behavior. She draws attention to the fact that male violence is due to the fact that men do not get an opportunity to exert their pride and authority in the outside world. Therefore they vent their suppressed anger at home on their wives. (Sangati, 2009). Lack of sleep and rest, according to Bama, is what drives women to irritability and quarreling and the lack of pleasure and fulfillment in sexual relations is what tends to make them use terms of abuse for their body part. (Sangati, 2009).

There is another aspect to the language of Dalit women which shows a bright side to their life. It is the vigour and closeness to proverbs, folklore and folk songs and songs and chants which lay before the readers the cultural heterogeneity and richness of Dalit lives. While on the one hand, the lives of the Dalit women is full of pain and turmoil, on the other they find time for the affairs of life: coming of age, wedding, even death. Bama writes:

From birth to death there are special songs and dances.

And it is only the women who perform them. Roraattu (lullaby) to oppaari (dirge), it is only the women who will sing them. (Sangati 2009).

The form and language of Bama along with the events narrated go towards talking about Dalit feminism and carving a separate identity for the Dalit women: an identity different from the upper caste women and Dalit men. While carving out an identity for the Dalit community, Bama compares the Dalit women and children with the upper-caste women and children and comes to the conclusion that the 'marginalized' are in a better position than the ones at the 'centre'. In various descriptions of Dalit life, one can trace the concept of racial exclusiveness. Chittu comments on her daughter:

She talks as if the upper-caste women are all beautiful, like Rambhas stepping down from the heavens. As if she knows anything about it! As if a donkey would recognize the scent of camphor! Always the wretch must put down her own community. (Sangati 2009).

Marypillai (Sangati 2009) feels lucky to be born into the paraiya community as she does not have to face the checks, rules and regulations the upper caste women have to face:

It's only on the surface that they look so good, really. It isn't that easy for them to get their daughters settled. They have to cover the girls' necks with jewellery, give them cash in their hands, and write off property and land in their names. Even after all this do you think the girls are happy in their new homes? Their in-laws keep on complaining that this and that is not enough, and they torment the girls.

In the paraiya community the groom's family sees to the wedding expenses and the groom gives a cash gift and takes away the girl and marries her. (Sangati 2009) Bama and the other women feel that this is better than the dowry system prevalent among the upper-caste. Since colonial times, Indians have been discriminated on the basis of their colour but in Sangati one finds a positive approach towards dark complexion:

Even if our children are dark-skinned, their features are good and there's a liveliness about them. Black is strongest and best, like a diamond. (Sangati 2009).

Generally the notion of a good society implies the protection of its women. This is a problematic statement which implies that women are objects in need of protection. In light of such critical argument, one can come to a false conclusion that the Dalit world is not a 'good' one since the women are threatened both by their men at home and the landlords in the outside world. To become 'good' in that case means to follow the life pattern of what

is considered, generally, as 'good' and in this case it would be the upper - caste life. Bama is critical of this attitude of copying the upper-caste:

These people, for some reason, want to copy the upper-castes. It's becoming a real problem having to make so many jewels for the bride and giving a lump sum worth so much, on top of that. Such people can change themselves into a different caste only in these superficial matters, though. Because, whatever we do, whatever rituals we copy from other castes they, for their part, always rate us as beneath them. So what is the point of trying to copy them? Why should we lose all the better customs that are ours, and end up as neither one thing nor the other? It's like forgetting the butter in one's hands and going in search of ghee. (Sangati 2009).

We can see an anti-colonialist ideology at work here. Bama is critical of those dalits who are 'aping' or 'copying' the upper-castes as the colonized Indians tried to copy the colonizing powers during colonial times. Bama subscribes to Nativism and outlines the positives of Dalit life. Bama's writing of the book Sangati and her narration of the events from the lives of the Dalit women is an attempt to over throw the cultural hegemony of the upper-caste. Capitalism, Gramsci suggested, maintained control not just through violence and political and economic coercion, but also ideologically, through a hegemonic culture in which the values of the bourgeoisie became the 'common sense' values of all. Thus, a consensus culture developed in which people in the working-class identified their own good with the good of the bourgeoisie, and helped to maintain the status quo rather than revolting against it (Anderson 2010: 102). The working class needed to develop a culture of its own, which would overthrow the notion that bourgeois values represented 'natural' or 'normal' values for society, and would attract the oppressed and intellectual classes to the cause of the proletariat. This is what Bama hints at when she talks of elections and votes:

However much we strain to leap forward, caste holds us down like a tap root. It is at the centre of religion, politics, education, and every other wretched thing...Our women never know a thing about who's in power, what they do, and why they do it; why we should vote and who we should vote for. Why even the men don't understand any of all this.

...Given how many women there are altogether, there is so much we could achieve. We could demand the rights that are due to us. We could fling away the beggarly coins the party workers bother to give us when they ask us to vote for them, an elect an M.L.A. from our own community. We could demonstrate our own strength through political power.... (Sangati 2009)

Spivak in 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988)

acknowledges the "epistemic violence" done upon Indian subalterns, she suggests that any attempt from the outside to ameliorate their condition by granting them collective speech invariably will encounter the following problems:

- 1) *A logocentric assumption of cultural solidarity among a heterogeneous people, and*
- 2) *A dependence upon western intellectuals to "speak for" the subaltern condition rather than allowing them to speak for themselves.*

As Spivak argues, by speaking out and reclaiming a collective cultural identity, subalterns will in fact reinscribe their subordinate position in society. The academic assumption of a subaltern collectivity becomes akin to an ethnocentric extension of Western logos--a totalizing, essentialist "mythology" as Derrida might describe it--that doesn't account for the heterogeneity of the colonized body politic. But as far as women are concerned, Spivak takes a pessimist stance in Other worlds where she writes:

"...the figure of the woman, moving from clan to clan, and family to family as daughter/sister and wife/mother, syntaxes patriarchal continuity of community or history, for subaltern or historian alike, is produced on..... the repeated emptying of her meaning as instrument." (Spivak 1998). She pays little attention on how the subaltern woman may come to voice.

As critics our goal must be to 'listen to the subaltern subject' and interpret what we hear without ascending to a position of dominance over that voice. (Coronil 1994) Traditionally the academic wants to know about the subaltern's experiences but not their own explanations of those experiences. Hooks argues that according to the received view in Western knowledge a true explanation can only come from the expertise of the academic. The subordinated subject, gives up their knowledge for the use of the Western academic. Hooks describes the relationship between the academic and the subaltern subject:

No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still colonizer the speaking subject and you are now at the center of my talk (Hooks, 1990).

CONCLUSION

Bama in Sangati shows the ability of the Dalit women to think and rethink and analyze situations for themselves.

They are independent subjects in the process of realizing their value in society. A close and critical reading of Sangati shows how Bama has given voice to the Dalit women but in doing so she does not 'objectify' them as was the case regarding women during colonial times. Rather the Dalit woman becomes the subject and an agent who 'acts it out' (Spivak 1988). Whether the woman rebukes and leaves her husband, whether she changes her religion, the choice is hers irrespective of the fact whether it's for better or worse. Bama does not portray a case of 'White men saving brown women from brown men' (Spivak 1988) but rather one of 'brown women saving themselves from brown men'. And in doing so is constructed the consciousness of Dalit women.

Conflict of Interests

The author(s) have not declared any conflict of interests

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