

Women, Caste, and Resistance in Bama's *Sangati*

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Abstract

Bama's *Sangati* is a major Dalit feminist text because it records the ordinary lives of Paraiyar women with anger, humour, memory, and political force. The novel does not follow a single plot in the conventional sense. It gathers incidents, conversations, village memories, work scenes, songs, quarrels, and moments of reflection. This structure gives the text the quality of collective testimony. The women in the novel face caste humiliation from the outside and male authority within their own homes and community. Their labour supports families, fields, rituals, and village life, yet their bodies and voices remain controlled by caste power, poverty, and patriarchy. This paper studies the marginalization of Dalit women in *Sangati* with attention to childhood discrimination, labour, wage inequality, sexual danger, domestic violence, social judgement, and the exclusion of women from public decision-making. It also studies the resistant energy in Bama's writing. The women of *Sangati* speak sharply, laugh loudly, share stories, challenge men, and keep one another alive with practical care. Bama's feminism grows from the everyday lives of Dalit women rather than from abstract theory. Her narrative insists that education, self-respect, collective speech, and equal freedom are necessary for change. *Sangati* becomes both a record of suffering and a call to remake social life.

Keywords: Bama, *Sangati*, Dalit feminism, caste, gender, marginalization, resistance

Introduction

Dalit literature in India arose from the lived experience of caste oppression and from the long struggle for dignity, education, equality, and social justice. It rejects polite literary distance and speaks from the wounded body of society. It brings into literature those lives that caste society pushed to the margins. In Tamil Dalit writing, Bama holds an important place because her works combine memory, protest, humour, folk speech, and feminist anger. Her *Sangati*, first published in Tamil and later translated into English as *Sangati: Events*, moves away from the single-hero model of the novel. It gives space to many women and many incidents. The result is a narrative of a community rather than a story about one person. *Sangati* records the experiences of Dalit Christian women in a Paraiyar settlement in Tamil Nadu. The narrator grows up among women such as Vellaiyamma Paatti, Mariamma, Annamma, Thaayi, Maariamamma, and others. Their lives include childbirth, field work, wage labour, domestic violence, caste insult, religious custom, gossip, jokes, rituals, and constant negotiation with hunger. The novel shows that Dalit women carry a double burden. Caste society treats them as inferior, and male power inside the community further restricts their freedom. Their labour is needed everywhere, yet their speech carries little authority in village decisions.

Narrative Form and Dalit Feminist Voice

Sangati differs from many conventional novels because it is made of events rather than a single linear plot. The subtitle, *Events*, is important. Each incident becomes evidence. A birth story, a wage dispute, a village meeting, a quarrel, a joke, a ritual, and a memory all reveal how power works. This method suits Dalit feminist writing because oppression rarely arrives as one large event alone. It is repeated in small daily forms. It is present in food, dress, work, speech, marriage, schooling, wages, sexuality, and public honour. The narrator's voice grows from listening. Paatti's stories are especially important. She is uneducated in the formal sense, yet she carries memory, practical knowledge, and social understanding. She delivers children, organizes women workers, knows village

histories, and speaks with rough wit. Bama uses such oral storytelling to challenge the idea that knowledge belongs only to schools, books, or upper-caste spaces. The women may lack institutional power, but they possess experience. Their speech is often sharp, comic, and angry. It refuses the soft and obedient image usually expected from women.

Bama's language is rooted in the speech of the community. The novel gives dignity to colloquial Tamil rhythms, local names, village idioms, teasing, abuse, songs, and proverbs. This style has political value. It allows Dalit women to speak in their own social texture. Their words do not seek upper-caste approval. Their speech carries the smell of fields, kitchens, wells, streets, and labouring bodies. In this way, Bama's narrative form becomes part of her feminism. The novel gives literary space to women whose voices are usually pushed outside formal history.

Gendered Childhood and the Training of Inequality

Sangati shows that gender inequality begins early. The narrator recalls that the village may not make a major difference between boys and girls at birth, but the difference grows during childhood. Boys receive more care, food, time, and freedom. Girls are trained for service. They must help at home, carry babies, draw water, wash vessels, gather firewood, and behave modestly. The boys play and move freely, while girls learn the limits placed on their bodies. Bama's account of childhood shows that patriarchy is more than an adult structure. It is taught from infancy.

The difference is visible in food and affection. When a boy cries, he is immediately cared for. A girl receives less urgency. Boys are fed better and allowed to eat more. Girls learn to accept leftovers. This everyday discrimination creates a deep social lesson: the boy's body matters more. The girl's body must adjust itself to shortage. Even play becomes a training ground for gender. Girls are told to play cooking and marriage games, while boys claim games such as kabadi and marbles. A girl who crosses this boundary becomes an object of ridicule. The pressure increases when a girl reaches puberty. Her body becomes a family problem. Paatti's advice that the narrator should stop studying after menstruation shows how fear surrounds female adolescence. Marriage becomes a method of control. Education becomes risky because a grown girl in school challenges the expected order. The narrator's father wishes his daughter to study, yet Paatti expresses the older fear that a young unmarried girl at home brings gossip and danger. This conflict reveals a society caught between the hope of education and the pressure of custom. Bama does not treat puberty rituals merely as colourful tradition. She records their songs, gifts, food practices, and celebrations, but also shows how poverty changes ritual experience. Mariamma's coming-of-age ceremony lacks the grandeur of richer families. Soon after, she returns to labour. Her body enters womanhood, but no protection follows. The ritual celebrates fertility while economic life pushes her back into danger. This contrast is one of the strongest feminist points in the novel. Society marks a girl as a woman, yet it gives her no real security.

Labour, Poverty, and Wage Injustice

Work occupies a large part of *Sangati*. The women work in the fields, forests, homes, wells, and streets. Their labour is physical, repetitive, and often dangerous. Paatti's statement that women "labour in the fields" and also care for children condenses this double burden (Bama 6-7). Men return from field work with some leisure, but women continue to cook, clean, fetch water, care for children, and meet sexual demands inside marriage. Work follows them from field to home. Poverty forces women into labour even during pregnancy. The story of Kaatturaasa's mother, who gives birth while cutting grass and returns home with the baby and the bundle, shows the brutality of survival. The point is not that she is extraordinary. Paatti says such experiences are common among the women of the street. Bama uses this story to show how poverty reduces the distance between childbirth and wage labour. The woman has no protected time. Her body must produce children and food at the same time. The novel also records wage inequality. During well-digging work, men perform one set of tasks and women carry rubble from the well. Even where the burden is severe, women are "paid less than the men" (Bama 18). This phrase gives the economic structure of gender in simple terms. Dalit women are essential to labour, but the value assigned to their work remains lower. The same pattern appears when girls tie firewood bundles and boys sell them for better prices. Male mediation increases value. Female effort alone receives less recognition. Mariamma's accident at the well highlights the physical risk attached to women's labour. She falls into a deep well while carrying rubble and returns from hospital only after months of suffering. The community mourns, but the system

continues. Bama places this accident beside other stories of workers harmed or killed in the fields and wells. Work is never safe for the poor. Their bodies absorb danger for the benefit of landowners and employers. For Dalit women, economic need turns risk into routine.

Caste, Sexual Violence, and the Politics of Blame

Sangati presents sexual danger as a constant part of Dalit women's lives. Paatti warns the young narrator that upper-caste men may drag women away and rape them if they go alone to isolated places. This warning is not a passing fear. It arises from a history of caste power. Dalit women must work in fields and gather firewood, but those same spaces expose them to sexual violence. The landowner's field becomes a place of livelihood and danger at once. Mariamma's experience with Kumarasami Mudalaali gives one of the most painful examples. She goes to drink water near the pump-set after carrying firewood in the heat. The landowner pulls her into the shed. She escapes, but he protects himself by accusing her and Manikkam of sexual misconduct. The village meeting then turns the victim into the accused. This episode shows how caste and gender join hands. The upper-caste man's word gains authority. The Dalit woman's body becomes available for suspicion. The women know the truth, but their testimony carries little weight. They say that if Mariamma speaks, she will be called a whore. They also know that the village men lack the courage to confront the landowner. The community's dependence on upper-caste employers blocks justice. The fear of losing work becomes stronger than the need to defend a woman. One woman says that they must return to the same landlords for work the next day. Economic dependence protects sexual power. The judgement in the village meeting exposes the patriarchal logic of honour. Mariamma is forced to ask forgiveness, while Manikkam receives lighter treatment. The naattaamai's words reduce female life to humility and bodily shame. Bama later condenses the injustice in the bitter recognition that the "blame falls on the woman" (Bama 27). This short phrase gives the moral order of the village. A man's act can be hidden, excused, or transferred. A woman's name carries the punishment.

Domestic Violence and Patriarchy within the Community

Bama's feminism also questions male domination within Dalit households. *Sangati* presents Dalit men as caste victims and also as men capable of domestic violence. Men who suffer humiliation under caste hierarchy may reproduce violence at home. The narrator observes that Dalit men must behave submissively before upper-caste landlords in the fields. At home, some men assert authority by beating wives and children. This insight gives the novel a sharp internal critique. Caste oppression cannot justify male violence. Perimma's death shows the horror of marital power. Her husband beats her because he demands sexual access even after she has worked all day and night. Paatti's memory of this violence carries grief and rage. The husband's claim over his wife is treated by society as almost unquestionable. Bystanders cannot easily intervene because marriage gives him social permission. The wife's body becomes his property. Bama exposes this structure without sentimentality. The novel also shows how women survive such pressure. They quarrel, shout, laugh, mock, and speak boldly. Their language may seem rough, but it protects sanity. Silence would destroy them. Bama presents loud speech as a survival strategy. The women may lack formal authority, but their everyday speech creates a counter-public space. In kitchens, fields, streets, and gossip circles, they interpret their own lives. This is why *Sangati* cannot be reduced to a catalogue of suffering. Its women are wounded, but they are not passive. They remember, compare, judge, and advise. Paatti scolds Mariamma for not kicking the attacker. Other women protest the unfair fine. Some women may repeat patriarchal suspicion, but many others defend the truth. Their solidarity is imperfect, yet it remains vital. Bama portrays community as a space of both harm and care.

Silencing Women in Public Life

The village meeting after Mariamma's accusation shows how women are pushed out of public judgement. Men sit in front and decide. Women stand behind, whisper, and are repeatedly chased away. Even when women know facts about the incident, their words are treated as disturbance. Susaiamma's complaint that men do not allow women to sit in meetings captures the exclusion of female testimony. The village council claims to protect community honour, but it denies women the right to speak about women's lives. The narrator's later reflection is important. She wonders why women are pushed aside everywhere. She also asks why Paatti, an experienced and respected woman, could not speak openly at the council. Paatti answers with the bitter realism of her generation. A woman cannot simply confront a group of men. Male judgement has long been treated as the only valid

judgement. This conversation marks the narrator's political awakening. She begins to understand that injustice survives because women are denied public voice. Bama's critique here is subtle and strong. The problem reaches beyond one wrong decision. The deeper problem lies in the structure that gives men the exclusive right to decide. A public meeting without women produces false justice. A community that depends on women's labour but rejects women's speech cannot claim moral authority. *Sangati* makes this contradiction visible.

Education, Self-Respect, and Feminist Awakening

Education in *Sangati* is both a practical need and a path to self-respect. The older generation often lost education because of poverty and domestic labour. Girls were kept at home to care for younger children and perform housework. The narrator's father sees education as a way to avoid ruin. His desire that the girl study at least up to the tenth standard represents a small but important shift. The narrator's own education gives her some distance from the conditions around her. She can look back, question, and write. Yet Bama does not present education as escape from community. The educated narrator remains connected to the women whose stories formed her. Her education becomes meaningful because it allows her to name injustice and demand change. She speaks for herself, but also from within a collective memory. Toward the end of the novel, the narrator moves from description to instruction. She says women must recognize their "self-worth, honour, and self-respect" (Bama 68-69). This is one of the clearest statements of Bama's feminist ethics. Self-respect is not presented as an individual luxury. It is necessary for survival. Women must stop accepting suffering as destiny. They must think, decide, and act. The final vision of the novel calls for a new upbringing of children. Bama asks society to "educate boys and girls alike" (Bama 123). This demand directly answers the unequal childhood described at the beginning. The novel begins with boys receiving more care and freedom. It ends by asking for equal education and equal freedom. The structure itself moves from inherited inequality to feminist hope.

Characters as Collective Experience

Vellaiyamma Paatti is the moral memory of the novel. She is illiterate, but she knows the village deeply. She delivers babies, organizes labour, tells stories, and comments on social life with fearless language. She also carries contradictions. She cares more for grandsons, accepts some patriarchal beliefs, and fears public confrontation. Bama does not idealize her. Instead, Paatti represents a generation of women who survived by strength, compromise, humour, and endurance. Mariamma represents the vulnerability of Dalit women under caste and gender power. Her life includes delayed puberty, hard labour, bodily injury, sexual danger, public humiliation, and debt. Yet her story also reveals the politics of testimony. The truth of her experience is known among women, but the official verdict denies it. In Mariamma, Bama exposes the violence of social judgement. The narrator represents the growth of feminist consciousness. At first, she listens as a child. Gradually she begins to question. Her anger after Mariamma's humiliation becomes a turning point. She learns that pity is not enough. The conditions that silence women must be named and resisted. The narrator's movement from listener to critic gives *Sangati* its political force. Other women in the novel also matter because they form a collective body. Anandamma, Susaiamma, Kaliamma, Maadathi, Bhakkiyam, and others speak in different tones. Some defend women, some repeat suspicion, some joke, some advise. Together they create a living community. Bama's feminism grows from this plurality. There is no single model of the Dalit woman. There are many women, many temperaments, many wounds, and many forms of courage.

Conclusion

Sangati is a powerful Dalit feminist text because it connects personal events with social structures. Bama shows how caste and gender enter ordinary life. A girl receives less care at home. A woman receives less wage at work. A labouring body faces injury. A Dalit woman faces sexual danger in upper-caste fields. A wife faces violence inside marriage. A victim faces blame in public judgement. A woman with knowledge is denied a place to speak. These scenes reveal a society built on the labour of women and the silencing of women. At the same time, *Sangati* refuses despair. Its women possess speech, memory, humour, anger, and endurance. They do not always defeat oppression, but they interpret it. They refuse to let pain remain nameless. Bama's narrative style itself becomes an act of resistance because it gives literary form to women's oral worlds. The novel values the speech of grandmothers, field workers, girls, widows, wives, and labourers. It turns everyday stories into social criticism. *Sangati* presents Bama's feminism as a politics rooted in lived experience. It speaks from caste-bound labour,

bodily vulnerability, hunger, and community memory. It also moves toward self-respect, education, and equal freedom. The novel asks readers to see Dalit women as thinkers, workers, survivors, and makers of social change.

Works Cited

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