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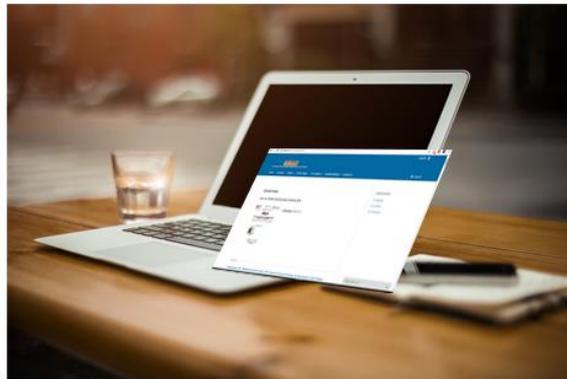
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Agony and Ecstasy of the women in Bama's *Sangati*

Abstract

“My mind is crowded with many anecdotes stories not only about the sorrows and tears of dalit women, but also about their lively and rebellious culture, passion about life with vitality, truth, enjoyment and about their hard labour. I wanted to shout these stories.”(Sangati, 9)

Dalit is a literature in India is of whole community but of an individual. Many writers, thinkers, social reformers and political figures gave their contribution in the dalit literary movement like B.R. Ambedkar, M.K. Gandhi, Rettaimalai Srinivasan etc. Exploitation or oppression of weaker by stronger is as old as mankind itself. The Indian history has been a vibrant record of conflict and dialectic between two opposite forces like exploiters and exploited colonizer and colonized, powerful and powerless. Southern India has witnessed organized attacks against Dalits through Panchami Land issue, Chengara struggle and Muthanga issue. Dalit issues are recorded in a variety of genres-autobiographies, novels, poetry and essays. In South India there are many Dalit feminist writers. Among them *Bama* and *Sivakami* picture their female protagonists as twice victimized as condition is analogous to the situation of black women in America. A recent wave of Dalit literature emerged as Dalit Feminism. *Bama* is a representative novelist of Dalit feminism. Caste and Gender are the two important identity building mechanisms that create a dalit feminist perspective. Dalit feminism redefines women from the socio – political perspective of a dalit, taking into account the caste and gender oppression. This article focuses on the sufferings of Dalit women in two aspects: first, being a woman second, belongs to the lowest community. Therefore, they are double oppressed. From the time they are born, girls are discriminated against just by their sex. A girl-child is neglected at infancy in favour of the boy. The girls

play gender-games like cooking or getting married. The women of Tamil Dalit community are on their feet doing back-breaking work from morning till night, all to just barely make ends meet. The men never do their share of the work. Dalit women participate in productive works, earn wages and participate in the economic chain. But they are paid much less. They are also constantly under the threat of Sexual harassments in the field of work. Family, Church and Caste-Courts are usually male-led. *Sangati* is a strong attempt which is a tool by *Bama* to bounce back the bi-fold oppression of dalit women. Their resistance-both passive and active to oppression makes *Sangati* a piquant depiction of the dalit women. In *Sangati*, *Bama* focuses on the double oppression of women.

Key words: Colonizer, dalit, oppressed, threat

1 Roots to - the Text

The journey termed 'untouchability' could be traced out in two dimensions one from Indian puranas and the other being history. According to E. Vernon Arnold, "The Rig-Veda is not a book, but a library and a literature, It has four canonical sacred texts in Hinduism and the term SHUDRA appears only once in the Rig-Veda, and that "in the Varna ordering of society, notions of purity and pollution were central and activities that divides the people " into four groups arranged in a hierarchy. Dalit means oppressed represented in Sanskrit. *Karruku* was written out of a specific experience, the experience of the Tamil Dalit Christian woman. Yet it has universality at its core which questions all oppressions, disturbs all complacencies and reaching out, empowers all those who have suffered different oppressions.

It covers *Bama's* personal struggle to find her identity and its a protest against patriarchy and caste oppression also a personal crisis and watershed in the author's life which drove her to make sense of her life as woman, a Christian and a Dalit. The events of *Bama's* life are not arranged according to a simple, linear or chronological order, as with most autobiographies but rather reflected upon in different ways from varied perspectives. *Karukku* celebrates the profound religious processions and festivals which became part of the natural yearly cycle of crops and seasons with parallel to religious life runs a socio-political self-education. *Bama's* re-reading and interpretation of the Christian scriptures as an adult enables her to carve out both a social vision and a message of hope for Dalits by emphasizing the revolutionary aspects of Christianity, the values of equality, social justice and love towards all. *Karukku* is concerned with the single issue of caste oppression within the Catholic Church and its

institutions and presents Bama's life as a strong journey of a strong Dalit woman. To compose dalits are adivasi, neo-Buddhists, labourers, destitute farmers, women and all houses that are exploited politically, economically and are socially not been accepted as equals in the society. The people were directly disturbed but by which they ultimately defeated. The novel brings in the aspect of separation from the roots between the upper caste and the lower caste. The Novel shows how life in one subordinate realm of experience is imprinted by the fictions and follies of the dominant realm. 'We only went to the other side if we had worked to do there. But they never, ever came to our parts. The post office, the panchayat board, the milk-depot, the big shops, the church, and the schools –all these stood in their streets. So why would they need to come to our area? Besides, there was a big school in the Naicker Street which was meant only for the upper caste children. When the British came to Malabar, a number of Paravans Pelayas and Pulayas (among them Velutha's grandfather, Kelan) converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican Church to escape the scourge of Untouchability. As added incentive, they were given a little food and money. They were known as the Rice-Christians. It didn't take them long to realize that they were made to have separate churches, with separate services, and separate priests... It was a little like having to sweep away your footprints without a broom. Or worse, not being allowed to leave footprints at all. (Prasad:2002:74). The inheritors derive their authority by changing the caste to gain over identity and clamour for the attention and invited untold misery, their positive sense of expectation and inability to conceive with the ideas that have been imposed tend to untold miseries with the pursuit of expectance and finally it subdivided and proliferated to the extreme level. Finally decide to resolute from the inertness and felt that their aim is to connect not to separate. Bama narrates different stories in order to bring the profound sufferings of the dalits. Oppressed, ruled and still being ruled by patriarchy, government, caste and religion, dalit women are forced to break all the strictures of society to live. In Sangati many strong dalit women who had the courage to break the shackles of authority, they defended their difficulty. Sangati is a look at a part of the lives of those dalit women who dared to make fun of the class in power that oppressed them. Sangati has the theme of growth, decline, culture and life of dalit women. She has given the portrayal narratives, histories, travel tales and authority, an active point of energy that made sense not just of overpowering upper-caste who has the power scarcely imagined that those natives who appeared either subservient or sullenly depressing. The Grip of Change is a process of understanding the dynamics of caste and the 'woman' who was inextricably involved in process. Its a critical realism, Gowri views her father Kathamuthu, the local Dalit leader, with an attitude of

contempt. It speak about the tyrannical overearnings, corruption and polygamy, Sivakami has reflected the universal trend that powerful men usually lead pathetic personal lives. Thangam's body frames the opening scene; her history been moulded in widowhood her body bears testimony to the difficulties faced by dalit women who represents oppression and subjugation. The novel show the changes in the way women, minorities, the point need to be identified is the emancipation and enlightenment in their strongest form were also narratives of integration not separation, the stories of people who had been excluded from the main group and the way they fight for a place in it. The problem animates all sorts of discussions- about influence, blame, judgement, about present actualities and the future priorities. The force laid by the upper caste is the temporal succession and the synthesis of the past. Karukku being an autobiography brings out emotions reactions and understanding of caste from adolescent [Bama] point of view it also brings out a picture of how major resources are unequally distributed among people of same village, highlighting oppression and suppression purely based on caste. All the characters in the low caste are given nicknames by their own people, its important to understand that these names are not given on positive connotations rather pointing out deficiencies and negative attributes, similarly the upper caste term these untouchables as 'Chakkili boys', 'Nari paara', 'Vannaan paara', 'Vattala vitthaam paara'. For example, "there was a woman who leaked all over her legs when she relieved herself; she was called Kazhinjia, leaky... Yet another woman used to go about chasing crows away when she was a small child. The name stuck to her Kaakkaa, crow...Konnavaachi [starrer], deaf one, dambo, crazy, severiyaa [Xavier], black ant, manacchi [flat nose], uzhamuki [running nose], green nose, needle -bum and nicknames were also given to paraya boys like black mouth, nezhucchaan [staggerer], belly button, vidvi [idiot]" [Bama:2017: 8-9], which is quite similar to discrimination on racism in America. Bama narrates her life story from the roots, she states that irrespective of age, both her grandmother's worked under Naicker caste sincerely served them and called them 'Ayya' [colonizer cum colonize relationship]. "The Naicker women would pour out the water from a height of four feet, while these poor hard working labourers have drunk it with cupped hands held to their mouths. The jobs allotted to low caste were to 'sweep out the cowshed, collect up the dung and dirt and bring home the left over rice and curry from the previous evening" (Bama:2017:16). Such jobs were given because they were considered polluted and untouchables. Just because these people belonged to paraya jati, they were never given any honour or dignity or respect and the only means of escape was 'education'. But even in the schools these helpless, innocent minds are forced to do cheap labour; they had to carry water to the teachers house, water the plants and did all chores

needed in school on the other hand upper caste children enjoyed education. There was an incident of stealing which took place and Bama was blindly blamed for that without any evidence, it's surprising to hear from a matured and educated headmaster that "You have shown us your true nature as a paraya"[Bama:2017:19]. This proves that how profound castism was during late nineties and early twenties in south India. Spivak precisely deliberated that "The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with "Woman" as a pious item, she even states that the identity of the native is inimitable, beyond the resemblance of the image. The type of identification offered by her silent space is what may be called symbolic identification."(Spivak:23). The silence and invisible place of the Dalits neutralizes their sufferings in the sight of the upper caste. The dalits cannot simply speak hence Bama provided justification by giving the description of the sufferings by the characters. Instead of restoring the freedom and space, she has mentioned that the silent suffering has become evident of oppression. It demonstrates the desolate condition of the women as the object and as the image. They are exhibited as the objects, in other way these women are tortured by their men as they want to show the power of domination only to the subservient women as they finally end up to multiple exploitations. Dalits in trying to become new and novel and the hope of reaching to the same level they try to change their religion to gain status equality in the society by anticipating entropic future and finally they will become custodian of the displacement and identification. As they expect the search for the equivalent aura which drives them farther and farther from the original point of identification. The irony is that such a valorization of difference occurs at a time when difference as aura of the original has long been problematized by the very availability and increases indispensability. When Bama moved to college, the sprouts of caste emerged, upper caste students refused to sit with lower caste because sitting with them was equal to getting polluted. There was a trend where education belonged only to upper caste and they were labelled as intellectuals and toppers but when Bama became topper in her class, it not only surprised the class but entire administration, this gave pride, confidence and hope. There is also incidents wherein the principal and warden refused to allow Bama for customary holidays whereas upper caste were left free, fundamental right for freedom was refused yet she strongly believes that because of education alone she stood as an empowered dalit women among harsh human made realities of caste difference and discrimination. The criticism of the caste remains within the people as it has been planted through the ages.

Next phase of her life was as a teacher; Bama was very observant that even educated nuns and priests collectively oppressed dalit children and teachers who were immensely filled with humiliation and degradation rather than enlightenment. The race and the colour establish divergent racial perspectives into a complete absence of intellectual people. The Upper caste behaviour is thus framed as they misuse their status by suppressing the minority voices by enacting strategies of belligerence and claims their role.

There are many commendable accounts of how the dalits faced the destruction as exemplified in Karukku where there was a dispute between paraya and chaaliyar community, police and government was in full support of these chaaliyar's because of their caste and power, highlighting the extent of corruption leading to dalits killing and dalit women being raped. when police arrived to the dalit side to capture the mens , Izhava's husband, Maama Parolokam, Chinnappan – Macchaan, Alphonse were caught and were beaten up like animals and all their belongings and money were snatched from these helpless, poor dalit men. The atrocities police created were deeply rooted on these dalit communities and the text lucidly states that police had not followed law and order. "They used obscene language and swore at them, told them that since their husbands were away they should be ready to entertain the police at night,winked at them and shoved their guns against their bodies"[Bama:2017: 40] 'they' here signifies doubly suppressed dalit women. They were blurred and faced due to the stigma given to them in the name of Caste. The diversion of the idea made them to think for the very element of consideration that lead them to change their caste and to avoid the blurring drawn between the caste and the people, they chose education, but if the impetus of the caste is the criticism of the past then much of the changes expected will vanish with the intention keeping the people as the commodities. Dalits were mainly considered to be labourers, which was mere physical work such as ploughing, watering, manuring, sowing the seeds, separating the seedlings and planting them out. There were construction labourers who were digging deep narrowed wells, carrying loads of sand for construction and the work shared by women folk too. "Each Paraya family attached to a Naicker family,as pannaiyaal bonded labourers"[Bama:2017: 48]

Yet in spite of hard labour paraya's were paid less, were in most of the landlords pay in grains rather than monitory which was not sufficient for daily survival. Moreover there was gender based discrimination, irrespective of hard work equal to men, women were poorly paid and ill treated by the upper caste.

2 Profound and Profane sufferings of women

Sangati Events by Bama which was translated from tamil by Lakshmi Holmstrom gives wider view on double discrimination mainly over women, through varied examples from real life situations. Vellaiyamma grandma of Bama was brave and energetic woman among other womens. “Paatti was good to look at. They said that as a young woman she had been even more beautiful”.[Bama: 2017:4]. It’s important to note that one born as a dalit had to follow their ancient rule of not wearing ear rings, not supposed to wear blouse nor were allowed to decorate themselves with gems because these stood as symbolic representation for lower-caste women. This proves through the example of Vellaiyamma that dalit women had no freedom to express their desires or feelings as upper caste women do.

Vellaiyamma Kizhavi was uneducated yet intelligent out of experience, worked hard as kothachi even in her old age, who had to collect labourers for larger landlords and allocated work. Since landowners belonged to upper caste poor grandma had to walk long distances to collect wages, to update the happenings in field like dogs. There is an incident where paati answers Bama, “Women should never come on their own to these parts. If upper-caste fellows clap eyes on you, you’re finished”[Bama:2017:8]. When this statement has been revisioned I found that there might be implications that Grandmaa might have encountered harassment during her venture, which is stored in her unconscious mind. Vellaiyamma was greatly worried about the killing of her daughter by a drunkard man, who also took responsibility for her grand children’s. Mariamma daughter of Samudrakani faced sexual abuse as a child when she had been to work or was on the way to collect folder by her mudalaali [upper caste man], but she was muted by the patriarchy and caste colored society. There was an incident where she was falsely blamed for talking to a upper caste boy and was harshly questioned and she was fined with 200 rupees whereas Manikkam had to pay 100 rupees, here Mariamma and Manikkam were fined for same subject but Manikkam being a upper caste man had to pay less compared to poverty surrounded Mariamma, position of dalit women is both pitiful and humiliating. Mariamma was not supported by her men or her women, “The tears came into my eyes when I heard this. I felt so frustrated that women didn’t show any pity or compassion towards other women” [Bama: 2017:40], Paatti’s words- “if she had only behaved herself, who would have said anything? Is there smoke without fire? Who’s going to marry her now that she’s lost her reputation” [Bama: 2017: 41].

Mariamamma had no privacy and her virginity was under question, which was over body politics. Mariamma was forced to get married to Manikkam irrespective of knowing that he is a senseless creature, drunkard, the saddest event was that she was pushed to marriage by her father and grandmother knowing a animal trait in Manikkam. “From the time she was married, Mariamma suffered blows , kicks and beatings every day and was reduced to no more than a half-life or even less”[Bama:2017:42].

Mariamamma is a silent victim of patriarchy with the outcome of pain and suffering. Thaayi from West Street had worsened condition than Mariamma, who was forced to marriage “Her husband used to drag her along the street and flog her like an animal with a stick or with his belt” [Bama: 2017: 42].

She had been brutally beaten nude in front of others, even educated man like Karuthamuthu questioned he uses abusive words and threatens. Tali [marriage knot] were symbolic of hanging rope to both Mariamma and Thaayi. It's so sad that these two women were greatly insulted, degraded, humiliated and lost hope for meaningful living. Irulappan's wife was possessed by Esakki, where Esakki is speaking through the channel of Virayi [Irulappan's wife], again the concept of only dalits particularly women being possessed by evil spirits has been highlighted by Bama. When a woman is possessed by evil spirits, she is termed to have bodily pains and suffers both internal and external health.

Story of Esakki is heart threatening, which dilutes inter- caste marriage; Esakki was raised in a very protective and comfortable manner by her seven brothers but unfortunately she fell in love with a vanaan caste fellow, her brothers did advised her yet she left home to vanaan boy [her lover] lived happily and got pregnant. “Her brothers found her made a plan and killed poor Esakki in the jungle; those villains had no intention of taking Esakki home. Instead, they made straight for the mountain forests...they dragged her out of the cart and without even caring that she was a full-term pregnant women, with one sweep of a sword they separated her head from her body. They sliced open her stomach, took out the baby, twisted its neck and killed it”(Bama:2017:53) which also shows honour killing in parts of Tamilnadu. Raakkamma was greatly oppressed by her husband yet refused to leave her husband's house because of two reasons haunting her firstly she was pregnant and secondly she was economically dependent on him. Dalit women are the victims of patriarchy, upper caste men, women and their own men. Bama states that “I have to say that even if all women are slaves to men, our women really are the worst sufferers. It is not the same for women of other castes

and communities. Our women cannot bear the torment of upper- caste masters in the fields end at home they cannot bear the violence of their husbands.”(Bama: 2017:65)

Bama also reflects on the sufferings of upper caste women who are like a bird caged without water and poverty are the fundamental reason for such cruelty towards dalit women. Bama gives moral advice and suggestions for dalit women to stand up for them to achieve liberty. Writer symbolizes men, police, government, to ‘onions’, when onions are peeled out there remains nothing similarly Bama wants dalit women and all women together stand for their rights and needs. She states that injustice must be questioned and needs must be demanded or orders instead of sitting back waiting for the sun to rise. She says dalits must voice against injustice and uphold their own rights. Other very important suffering dalit women undergo is partial fulfilment of sexual pleasure. “The women never got a proper night’s peace and quiet after working hard all day. They had to pleasure their husbands whenever they demanded it so they never got any rest.”(Bama:2017:67). “From all sides they have to deal with the pestering of children and the anger and unfair domination of their husbands. Their lives are unceasingly tedious”,[Bama:2017: 68]

Therefore a man gains extra power and supremacy over women’s body which is termed as body politics, in order to control women, a man points towards her biological, physiological condition and takes advantages of her psychological confusions and mood swings. The characters Maikkanni [Seyarani] beautiful, smart girl of eleven years old, who stands as a victim among children oppressed. Being first child of her parents she was considered unlucky because according to the outsiders her birth created separation between her births created separation between her personalities. As a child she could not enjoy the world of education nor her family life, since she took responsibility for her six sibilings and mother. “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....She did it all one after the other.”(Bama:2017:70). This shows how irresponsibility of parents greatly affected a child’s life. She had to cook, work on fields and she worked in match factory in order to earn stable living.

Seyarani was mentally strong and matured yet with innocence, for her travelling in bus to the match factory itself was a great achievement. She was afraid of her mother, father, people around her and entire society. Since she was working in match factory she encountered health issue, which was untreated because of poverty. The abuse Maikkani received from her father

was immense; one day she took a rupee out of her wages and spent on eating ice cream and loved window seat in bus, yet was pushed out by buys from Kakkalayakkudi. This shows that she wears a veil on her face in order to suppress her childish anguish. Maikkani was brutally beaten by maistri- Annaachi of the factory twice firstly for throwing away two matches box labels and secondly when she had been for her natural call. Maikkani being a female child had no proper living facility like toilets, good rooms or a proper kitchen her life was filled with fear and worries, her smiles are a real expression of her sufferings. Bama highlights the background scenes of children under child labor and how family, society and environment push innocent minds to dark lands [child labor, child abuse] it must be understood that 'children of today make a better tomorrow' who must receive basic education and comfort. Maikkani had not just these but also faced caste discrimination in their work place. Maikkani was matured enough to understand the behaviour of abusive men's once she narrated that "That man called me and said there was plenty further along within the woods. We all began to set off there. At once he told the others to stay where they were and said I

Alone was allowed to go further into the woods. I was wearing a skirt that someone had given me, in a thin material and I had nothing on underneath".(Bama:2017:75).

Thus Maikkani's life is filled with silent pain and her helplessness as a child, yet she had commonsense far beyond her years. It must be also understood that if she was a child of upper caste men the condition of would have been completely different. It's so saddening that girls hardly enjoyed their childhood period, which is dominated by child abuse, child marriage and child labor. Maikkani is one example of their suffering but there are many more children who encounter the same, there is high gender discrimination among dalits, girl child has to work for less wages, take care of babies, look after housework where there is both internal and external sufferings but it's not similar to boys.

Irulaayi and East street Aandakanni both, suffered with drunkard husband's who would beat them like animals, had illegal relationships and tortured their kids too. Bama profoundly focuses on the suffering of upper caste women, "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"(Bama:2017:93). Bama's Sangati Events also focuses on the issue of voting since these poor dalits are uneducated and a suppressed right from their roots, their votes are taken into task. Women's in spite of being voiceless do understand the worldly politics of voting, yet men's

like Kannan considers them ignorant donkeys. According to Paati their voting makes no difference in the lifestyle, they remain in the same position and suffer drastically compared to men.

Chapter eleven in Sangati events revolves mainly around the number of restrictions on dalit women and how inter-caste marriages affect their life women under hidden suppression were not even allowed to express their desires and feelings. Women were to express their desires and feelings. Women were not allowed for cinema because they are subjugated to harassments from both upper caste men and low caste. When it came to inter-caste marriage, neither the family nor church supported them. For instance in the text a girl from upper caste fell in love with a palla boy “That girl was beaten up in her house every day by her father and her brother” (Bama:2017:106).

Irrespective of being an educated woman she had to undergo similar cruel treatment as any other women not just this she was, was also labelled as whore and had to lose self respect and dignity. The final chapter in Sangti sparkles on the sufferings of upper caste women and the narrator herself. “Those women submit to their men all the time and are as shut in and controlled, like snakes locked up in boxes’.. ‘One way or another, it’s all the same. We suffer in one way, they suffer in another”(Bama:2017:110).

Firstly, if a upper caste girl has to be married then her parents are supposed to give loads of jewellery, give them cash in their hands, write off property on their names, in spite of it they suffer in-laws mental and physical tortures. Secondly, the condition of women after husband’s death; Kuppusami Nayakkar’s daughter became a widow, where in widowhood meant withdrawal of one’s freedom they cannot wear Kunkumam or use turmeric or wear flowers, jewels and colored saris. They were violated by the society and were not invited to any functions. Poor girls were not even given food on time, they had to literally strive. Uudan would drag his wife by hair to the community hall and beat her up as if she was a animal.

On the other hand dalit women as Kovaalu Paatti feel unprotective in bathing in public wells and were not allowed to bath in upper caste wells because they bathing is equal to polluting the holy water, if it all they do so like Sammuga Kizhavi they would be taken to panchayat and humiliated. Bama says “Our people’s lives wilt and shrivel up because of their pain and suffering. Everywhere you look, you see blows and beatings; shame and humiliations” (Bama:2017:118). Yet they remain suppressing their sufferings. It was mandatory for poor dalit woman like Sothipillai to sweep the church and keep it clean. According to Bama being

a dalit woman creates lots of problem which is both gender and caste specific. When Bama was working; being single unmarried dalit woman she was under great humiliation and danger. She says “The owners of the house and the neighbours around pestered me with hundreds of questions and tore me to shreds”(Bama:2017:120). It was difficult to find a rented house for dalit women, people neglected to give their house, the narrator had to suffer greatly because of external pressures on her, specifically because she was an independent unmarried dalit women, not just then but women too criticized her.

Conclusion:

Her childhood interspersed with events that repeatedly impel her to raise the question. She is perplexed over the passivity of women in her community. She states that the idealized concept of woman in Indian Mythic and scriptures differs to the actual situations in life and for dalit woman, the condition is still pathetic. Dalit studies in Tamil are at nascent stage. It witnessed rather late start in tamil as compared to its counterpart in Marathi or Kannada. The woman’s voice submerged and did not find a ground to break free of the other dominated backward caste.

“Oppression, ruled and still being ruled by patriarchy, government caste and religion. Dalit women are forced to break all the strictures of the society in order to live.”(Sangati, preface)

The Indian history has been a vibrant record of conflict and dialectic between two opposite forces like exploiters and exploited, colonizer and colonized, powerful and powerless. Dalit literature is always marked by revolt and a struggle of lower caste against the high class people commonly known as Savarna. The article addressed the profound and profane sufferings of the lower caste women under the clutches of patriarchal society. The grievance has become louder and heard due to Bama’s Sangati.

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