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Wounds and Words: An Intersectional Reading of Bama's *Sangati*

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Abstract

Literature serves as a mirror to lived realities and critically engages with the social issues that shape human experience. Dalit literature, in particular, articulates the lived realities of oppression, rigid caste hierarchies, pervasive social inequalities, and systemic forms of domination. In India, Dalit women occupy a profoundly marginalised position, confronting compounded and intersecting oppressions of caste, gender, and multiple structural injustices embedded within society. This paper undertakes a critical examination of Bama's novel *Sangati* through the theoretical framework of intersectionality. Bama powerfully exposes the inhuman exploitation of Dalit women, revealing how social, cultural, and economic forces operate simultaneously to marginalise them. *Sangati* foregrounds a multiplicity of female voices that engage in dialogic interaction, collectively narrating, sharing, and negotiating their everyday lived experiences. The novel vividly portrays the complex challenges faced by Dalit women, including systemic discrimination, sexual exploitation, enforced illiteracy, structural inequality, and pervasive social injustice.

Keywords: Dalit literature, intersectionality, gender discrimination, sexual exploitation, inequality, caste hierarchy and patriarchal authority.

Bama Faustina Soosairaj, born in 1958, is popularly known as Bama, a distinguished Tamil Dalit writer, feminist, and social activist. As a woman belonging to the Paraiyar Dalit community, she has powerfully documented the harsh lived realities of caste and gender oppression through her writings. Her major works include *Karukku* (1992), *Sangati* (1994), *Vanmam* (2002), and short-story collections such as *Kisumbukkaran* and *Oru Tattum Erumaiyum*. Bama's writing style is marked by the use of spoken Tamil, folklore, proverbs, and community dialects, which lend authenticity to Dalit voices often excluded from mainstream literature. Many of her works have been widely translated into English and are included in university syllabi in India and abroad. Through her writings, Bama foregrounds resistance as a vital tool of liberation, articulating the collective struggles and aspirations of her community.

Intersectionality and Dalit Women's Collective Experience

Bama's *Sangati* is a powerful documentation of the lived realities of Dalit women, narrated through a series of interconnected episodes drawn from everyday life. Unlike conventional autobiographical narratives centred on a single protagonist, *Sangati* foregrounds the collective voice of Dalit women whose lives are shaped by multiple, overlapping systems of oppression. Through incidents involving characters such as Mariamma, Thaayi, Maikkani, Esakki, and Rakkamma, Bama exposes the complex ways in which caste, gender, class, and patriarchy intersect to structure women's suffering.

The concept of intersectionality, first articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw, provides a crucial framework for understanding the experiences represented in *Sangati*. Intersectionality emphasises that oppression does not operate through isolated categories such as gender or caste alone but through their interlocking and mutually reinforcing interactions. In the Indian context, Dalit women occupy a particularly vulnerable position as they face exploitation not only from upper-caste men and women but also from patriarchal practices within their own communities.

In *Sangati*, Dalit women are subjected to unpaid domestic labour during the day and sexual exploitation by night. They are burdened with household responsibilities such as collecting firewood, fetching water, and preparing food, while simultaneously being forced into wage labour to sustain their families. As Bama reveals, these women experience a continuous cycle of physical, emotional, and economic violence that begins in childhood and persists throughout their lives. By narrating these experiences, *Sangati* becomes a critique of entrenched social hierarchies and a testament to Dalit women's endurance and resistance.

Gender Discrimination and Hardships in Childhood

Discrimination against Dalit women begins at an early age, shaping their identities and preparing them for a lifetime of subjugation. Bama vividly describes how gender bias operates even in infancy, particularly in matters of care, nourishment, and affection. She observes: "When they are infants in arms, they never let the boy babies cry. If a boy baby cries, he is instantly picked up and given milk. It is not so with the girls… a boy is breast-fed longer. With girls, they wean them quickly" (Bama 7). This unequal treatment reflects deeply ingrained patriarchal values that regard male children as assets and female children as burdens. The neglect of girls' physical and emotional needs demonstrates how gender discrimination is normalised within the family structure.

Dalit girls are denied the freedom of childhood and are compelled to assume adult responsibilities prematurely. From a young age, they are expected to manage domestic work, care for younger siblings, and contribute to family income through wage labour. Bama poignantly notes: "In our streets the girls hardly ever enjoy a period of childhood. Before they can sprout three tender leaves, so to speak, they are required to behave like young women" (Bama 75). This early loss of childhood illustrates how caste and gender intersect to deprive Dalit girls of education, leisure, and emotional security.

Even recreational spaces reflect gendered discrimination. While boys are encouraged to participate in physically active games such as kabaddi or marbles, girls are confined to domestic games that mimic cooking or marriage, reinforcing traditional gender roles. Such practices ensure that obedience, labour, and silence are internalised from an early age.

Thus, childhood in *Sangati* is not a phase of innocence but a preparatory stage for lifelong exploitation. Through these depictions, Bama reveals how patriarchal conditioning operates in tandem with caste oppression, making Dalit girls particularly vulnerable to future sexual, economic, and social injustices.

Sexual Threat, Caste Power, and Social Defamation

Sexual violence in *Sangati* emerges as a direct consequence of the intersection of caste hierarchy and patriarchal authority. Dalit women's bodies are rendered vulnerable spaces over which upper-caste men exercise unchecked power. From an early age, women are made aware of this danger through collective warnings passed down by elders. Bama recalls her grandmother's cautionary words: "If upper-caste fellows clap eyes on you, you're finished. They'll drag you off and rape you, that's for sure" (Bama 8). This warning encapsulates a grim social reality in which

sexual violence is not an aberration but an anticipated outcome of caste inequality. Dalit women are expected to constantly police their bodies and movements, while upper-caste men remain immune from accountability.

The episode involving Mariamma powerfully illustrates how sexual harassment is compounded by social defamation and institutional injustice. Mariamma is sexually assaulted by Kumaraswami, an upper-caste landlord, when she goes to drink water in his field. Although she manages to escape the attempted rape, the burden of shame and suspicion falls entirely on her. To protect his caste status and masculine authority, Kumaraswami spreads false rumours accusing Mariamma of immoral behaviour. He reports to the *naattaamai* that Mariamma and Manikkam were involved in illicit conduct in the fields.

What is particularly revealing is the unquestioned acceptance of Kumaraswami's version of events. Neither Mariamma's testimony nor her physical trauma is considered credible. Even her own father internalises patriarchal values and turns against her. Bama narrates: "When Mariamma saw her father advancing towards her to beat her again, she was so terrified that she fell at last and asked for forgiveness" (Bama 26). Mariamma's forced confession is not an admission of guilt but a survival strategy in a system that denies Dalit women the right to truth or justice.

The punitive measures imposed by the village further expose the gendered nature of caste justice: "Mariamma was asked to pay a fine of Rs 200 and Manikkam a fine of Rs 100" (Bama 26). The disparity in fines highlights the unequal moral scrutiny placed on women's sexuality. While Manikkam faces minimal consequences, Mariamma is harshly penalised, reinforcing the idea that women bear sole responsibility for sexual "transgressions," even when they are victims of violence.

This episode demonstrates how intersectionality operates in *Sangati*: Mariamma's suffering cannot be understood through gender oppression alone. Her vulnerability is intensified by her caste location and her lack of social power. Sexual violence thus becomes a tool through which caste dominance and patriarchal control are simultaneously asserted.

Through Mariamma's narrative, Bama exposes a social order where Dalit women are denied bodily autonomy, legal protection, and moral credibility. Sexual assault is followed by social humiliation, familial violence, and economic punishment, ensuring that women remain silenced and disciplined. *Sangati,* therefore, reveals sexual violence not as an isolated act but as a structural mechanism sustaining caste and gender hierarchies.

Domestic Space as a Site of Physical and Psychological Violence

In *Sangati*, the domestic space, which is conventionally imagined as a site of safety and belonging, emerges instead as a significant arena of violence for Dalit women. Patriarchal domination within the family mirrors the larger caste-based oppression that women experience outside the home. Dalit women are subjected to continuous physical and psychological abuse by fathers, husbands, and male relatives, revealing how gender oppression operates even within marginalised communities.

Bama underscores that Dalit women's labour is relentless and unacknowledged. From dawn until night, they perform exhausting domestic chores while also engaging in agricultural or wage labour. Yet, instead of receiving care or appreciation, they are met with harassment and violence. Bama observes: "From the moment they wake up, they set to work both in their homes and in the fields. At home, they are pestered by their husbands and children. In the fields, there is back-breaking work besides the harassment of the landlord" (Bama 59).

This statement highlights the double burden borne by Dalit women and the absence of any space free from exploitation. The home does not function as a refuge but as another site where women's bodies and labour are controlled.

The character of Thaayi exemplifies the brutal normalisation of domestic violence. She is repeatedly beaten and humiliated by her husband, yet her suffering is treated as ordinary and inevitable. The community neither intervenes nor condemns the abuse, reflecting the deep internalisation of patriarchal norms. Violence against women is accepted as a husband's right, while women are expected to endure silently.

Rakkamma, however, represents a more overt form of resistance. Unlike many women who suppress their anger, Rakkamma articulates her defiance through strong and confrontational language. Her verbal resistance challenges male authority and disrupts expectations of female submissiveness. Bama records the broader social response to such resistance:

> Men can humiliate us a thousand times, speak about us with disrespect, and act towards us in that way, too. And that is accepted as normal. But let a woman be outspoken just once… until he has beaten her, broken her spirit, and gained control over her, he won't even digest his kanji (Bama 122).

This passage exposes the punitive backlash women face when they attempt to assert self-respect. A woman's voice itself becomes a threat to masculine authority, provoking intensified violence aimed at restoring control.

The physical violence inflicted on Dalit women includes beating, whipping, and verbal degradation, often justified as discipline. Such practices reinforce women's subordinate status and deny them bodily autonomy. Importantly, *Sangati* reveals that caste oppression does not automatically dismantle patriarchy within Dalit communities. Instead, patriarchal power is reproduced internally, positioning women as the most vulnerable members of an already marginalised group.

Through the experiences of Thaayi and Rakkamma, Bama illustrates that domestic violence is not merely personal or accidental but structural and systemic. It is sustained by cultural acceptance, economic dependency, and the normalisation of male dominance. By documenting these realities, *Sangati* exposes the urgent need to address gender oppression within as well as beyond Dalit communities.

Economic Exploitation, Child Labour, and Gendered Responsibility

Economic exploitation forms a crucial dimension of Dalit women's oppression in *Sangati*. While both men and women engage in wage labour, women bear a disproportionate financial and emotional burden within the family. Gendered expectations dictate that women must manage household expenses, ensure children's survival, and absorb economic shocks, even as they receive lower wages for the same work.

Bama highlights the structural wage disparity between men and women, noting that women's labour is systematically undervalued: "How can she manage everything with just her wages?" (Bama 63). This rhetorical question exposes the inherent injustice of an economic system that expects women to sustain entire families on insufficient earnings. Despite working as hard as men in agricultural fields and factories, women are paid less, reinforcing their economic vulnerability.

Men, on the other hand, are often depicted as irresponsible with their income. Bama observes that men frequently spend their entire earnings on alcohol and food stalls, leaving women to shoulder the responsibility of saving and budgeting. This pattern intensifies women's dependence and exhaustion, as they must compensate for male negligence while enduring domestic abuse.

The character of Maikkani exemplifies the exploitation of Dalit girls through child labour. From a very young age, Maikkani is employed in a matchbox factory, where she endures harsh working conditions and physical violence. Her entry into wage labour marks the complete erosion of childhood, as economic necessity overrides her right to education and leisure. Despite her young age, Maikkani becomes the primary provider for her family, managing household expenses and ensuring daily survival.

Ironically, Maikkani's economic contribution does not protect her from patriarchal violence. When she buys an ice cream for herself—a small gesture of self-care—her father brutally punishes her. This incident reveals the cruel contradiction within patriarchal family structures: women's labour is essential, yet their autonomy is denied. Economic responsibility does not translate into respect or authority.

Maikkani's experience illustrates the intersection of caste, class, gender, and age. As a Dalit girl, she is forced into exploitative labour; as a daughter, she is denied agency; and as a female wage earner, she is subjected to surveillance and punishment. Her suffering underscores how capitalism and patriarchy collaborate to extract maximum labour from Dalit women while denying them dignity.

Through such narratives, *Sangati* exposes the myth of male breadwinning and reveals Dalit women as the true economic backbone of their families. Yet, this centrality remains unrecognised, reinforcing their marginalisation. Bama's portrayal of economic exploitation thus extends beyond material deprivation to encompass emotional suppression, physical punishment, and the systematic denial of women's rights.

Public, Religious, and Leisure Spaces as Sites of Exclusion

In *Sangati*, oppression against Dalit women extends beyond the private sphere of the home and the workplace into public, religious, and leisure spaces. These spaces, instead of offering respite or equality, function as mechanisms of surveillance, exclusion, and humiliation. Through everyday incidents, Bama reveals how caste and gender hierarchies are spatially enforced, restricting women's mobility, dignity, and access to basic rights.

Dalit women face persistent threats of sexual harassment in public spaces such as agricultural fields and village streets. Their movements are constantly monitored, and they are forced to negotiate safety at every step. Bama observes that even religious spaces, which are expected to offer solace and moral guidance, become sites of subjugation:

> "The position of women is both pitiful and humiliating, really. In the fields, they have to escape from upper-caste men's molestations. At church, they must lick the priest's shoes and be his slaves while he threatens them with tales of God, Heaven, and Hell" (Bama 35).

This striking passage exposes the hypocrisy of religious institutions that reproduce caste and gender hierarchies rather than dismantling them. Dalit women are coerced into submission through fear, spiritual manipulation, and social pressure, reinforcing their marginal status.

Access to basic resources such as water further reveals institutionalised caste discrimination. Dalit women are prohibited from using certain wells, compelling them to travel long distances and endure humiliation to meet essential needs. These restrictions demonstrate how caste-based exclusion is embedded in everyday infrastructure, disproportionately affecting women who are responsible for water collection and household maintenance.

Leisure spaces, too, are strictly regulated. Women are denied the right to entertainment and relaxation, reinforcing the notion that their lives exist solely for labour and service. Bama notes: "In our streets, there are any number of restrictions for women. For instance, even today, only men are allowed to go to the cinema—never women" (Bama 105). Such restrictions underscore the belief that women's visibility in public spaces threatens social order. By confining women to domestic boundaries, patriarchal society ensures their continued subordination and invisibility.

Healthcare access represents another critical site of exclusion. Due to relentless domestic and wage labour, women rarely prioritise their own health. Many give birth at home without medical assistance, leading to high maternal mortality rates. Bama documents how women are denied rest, nourishment, and medical care even during pregnancy and childbirth, revealing the expendability of women's bodies within both family and social structures.

Through these depictions, *Sangati* demonstrates that public and institutional spaces are not neutral. Instead, they actively participate in sustaining intersectional oppression. Dalit women's marginalisation is thus not confined to individual relationships but is reinforced through spatial control, religious authority, and social regulation.

By exposing these exclusions, Bama challenges the illusion of social equality and demands a reimagining of public and institutional spaces as sites of justice rather than domination.

Silence, Speech, and Everyday Resistance

Although *Sangati* documents relentless suffering, it does not portray Dalit women merely as passive victims. Embedded within narratives of pain are powerful moments of resistance—often subtle, verbal, and collective. Silence itself becomes a forced condition imposed by patriarchal authority, while speech emerges as a dangerous but transformative act.

Dalit women are systematically trained to discipline their bodies, voices, and emotions. From childhood, they are taught to suppress laughter, desire, and assertion. Bama captures this enforced self-regulation when she writes:

> "Why can't we be the same as boys? We aren't allowed to talk loudly or laugh noisily; even when we sleep, we can't stretch out on our backs… We always have to walk with our heads bowed down, gazing at our toes" (Bama 29).

This passage reveals how patriarchy operates not only through physical violence but also through bodily discipline and psychological control. The regulation of posture, speech, and movement ensures that women internalise subordination.

Despite these restrictions, Dalit women carve out spaces of resistance through language, laughter, and collective memory. Their sharp tongues, witty remarks, and storytelling function as tools of survival and subversion. Women like Rakkamma refuse silence, using abusive or confrontational language to assert self-respect. Though such resistance often invites punishment, it disrupts the expectation of female compliance.

Bama emphasizes that male authority feels most threatened not by women's labour but by their refusal to submit: "But let a woman be outspoken just once—just one single time… If a woman has gone beyond his controlling hand, his very moustache will begin to twitch" (Bama 122). This imagery powerfully conveys how patriarchal masculinity perceives women's autonomy as an existential threat. Speech, therefore, becomes a political act—one that exposes the fragility of male dominance.

Significantly, *Sangati* itself functions as an act of resistance. By recording women's stories, Bama transforms private suffering into public testimony. The collective narration resists erasure and asserts Dalit women's right to speak, remember, and challenge injustice. In this sense, storytelling becomes a form of feminist and Dalit consciousness.

Conclusion

Sangati offers a compelling exploration of the intersectional oppression faced by Dalit women, revealing how caste, gender, class, and patriarchy operate simultaneously across different stages of life. From childhood discrimination and sexual violence to domestic abuse, economic exploitation, and exclusion from public and religious spaces, Dalit women encounter injustice in every sphere of existence.

However, Bama's narrative does not end in despair. Instead, it gestures toward transformation through education and awareness. She emphasises the necessity of questioning oppressive traditions and cultivating self-respect among women. Bama asserts: "Women can make and women can break" (Bama 123). This statement encapsulates the novel's feminist vision—one that recognises women's capacity to dismantle oppressive structures and reconstruct social relations.

By foregrounding collective experience, *Sangati* challenges dominant literary and social discourses that marginalise Dalit women's voices. It demands recognition of their suffering while affirming their agency, resilience, and power to resist. Through its intersectional framework, the text exposes structural injustice and calls for a reimagining of society rooted in equality, dignity, and justice.

Eventually, *Sangati* stands as both a documentation of oppression and a manifesto of hope, asserting that through education, solidarity, and resistance, Dalit women can transform their lived realities and reclaim their humanity.

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