



SEXUAL VIOLENCE ON DALIT WOMEN: A STUDY OF SIVAKAMI'S THE GRIP OF CHANGE AND BAMA'S SANGATI

Dr. T. Deivasigamani

Assistant Professor of English, Department of English,
Annamalai University, Tamil Nadu, India.

ABSTRACT

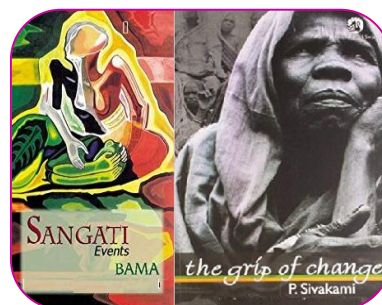
Dalit literature is a literature of the oppressed and the downtrodden of India, of those who are looked down upon by different labourers. It is the challenge literature against all rooms of exploitation based on class, race, caste, occupation, atrocities or any other discrimination. Dalit females are experiencing sexual atrocities and violence due to caste and gender discrimination. Sivakami's novel The Grip of Change delineates on the domestic and sexual violence of Dalit women at home by Dalit men--fathers, brothers, sons, fathers-in-law, brothers-in-law, apart from sexual and occupational harassment faced by Dalit women outside their homes at the hands of upper caste men and the police. Bama's Sangati deals about Dalit patriarchy is an important theme. In this novel, Bama's main concern is about the domestic violence and abuse of Dalit women at home by Dalit men and sexual and occupational harassment faced by them outside their homes at the hands of the upper caste men and the police. The present paper focuses on how Sivakami's The Grip of Change and Bama's Sangati explore the sexual violence of Dalit women experienced by the hands of upper caste men and women and their own community male.

KEY WORDS: Dalit, oppressed, exploitation, harassment, domestic violence, sexual violence, caste, gender, inhuman

INTRODUCTION

Dalit Literature aims to highlight the disabilities, difficulties, atrocities, and inhuman treatment meted out to Dalits in society. The fundamental question is to make social arousing among the discouraged. Dalitness is basically a method towards accomplishing a sense of cultural identity. The feeling of inferiority in view of "to be a Dalit" is currently vanishing. Presently, Dalitness is a wellspring of encounter against the foundation: at the end of the day, the supposed oppressive strategies of the society. This change is the quintessence of the want for equality to all men in the world. Dalitness involves valuing the capability of one's aggregate being. Therefore, Dalit Literature depends on individual, culture, social burden, and Dalitness. At present, Dalit individuals look for a complete social and cultural freedom with the support of their self-elevation and self-identification. Dalit writers have exposed the cruelties and prejudices of the caste society committed against the Dalits, and they impart another social and cultural awareness among the individuals from the Dalit community. Dalit literature is displayed predominantly as poetry, short stories, and autobiographies. However, pain, despondency, negativity, frustration, humiliation, submission, and rebellion are common themes throughout Dalit literature. Dalit Literature is influenced by the African American struggle for liberation and equality in the white-dominated America. Dalits in Maharashtra united themselves to fight against the tyranny of caste.

Dalit women have been currently taking an interest in the social, cultural, and political methodologies of the Dalit development. Dalit women see their freedom as related to the cancelation of standing



mistreatment. Dalit women do not look upon their husbands as “protectors” and “providers” and, in this sense, they stand far more committed and efficient than their-male counterparts in the family and society. Dalit women being a part of a larger movement, their struggles become everyday practice from which will emerge a new society. The subaltern women have made some amazing progress from their enslaved and severe condition of late and women writer uncover that the artistic custom includes the connection amongst them and the society in which they live in. Women's literary world incorporates and mirrors their life and encounters from their point of view, which is very surprising from that of the male. A focal precept of present day women's activist idea has been the statement that all women are persecuted. This declaration infers that women share a typical part like class, race, caste religion, and even sexual inclinations. Sexism can be an oppressive force in the lives of individual women, who inevitably undergo with diverse experiences that create a unique space for each one of them.

Sexual assaults at home and rape at workplaces or custodial rape are the most encountered experience of Dalit women. Dalit writers foreground such a sexually repressive and oppressive social structure that invades the domestic as well as the social space. Their writings call attention to collusion of caste hegemony and patriarchal structure which seek to control a Dalit woman's sexual life and conduct. Sexual orientation is a developed theme that can be obviously found in the everyday human life substances. The idea that sexual orientation is developed through self-reflexivity and it ends up successful just through the social, entices us to diagnostically look at the fields like sex based parts, sex relations, self, character, the social, sex recognitions and so forth. Dalits of all sexual orientations encounter estrangement and persecution in the public arena and are regularly let alone for the standard on an assortment of fronts.

The status of Dalit women is the lowest position in the society, sexual violence is a major issue to both gender and caste oppression. There are many cases in which sexual assaults and rape of Dalit women by upper-caste men serve as a means of control and power over Dalit men and the Dalit community. In this case, humiliating a low caste woman and at the same time reducing the ‘manhood’ of the male members demonstrated the control over the lower caste. This shows the vulnerability of a Dalit woman due to gender and caste and the helplessness of her community. The assault on her is an expropriation for the men and an attack on her entire community. The issue of sexual violence becomes particularly paradox in the context of caste pollution. In the case of rape, the body of an untouchable woman becomes ironically more than just ‘touchable.’ This ambiguity is also visible in case of conflict over public resources and in the use of Dalit's working power (where untouchability does not matter). Untouchability gets deactivated in case of labour exploitation, revenge, punishment or coercion. The discourse of caste-based sexual violence against Dalit women is crucial for the question of how Dalit women are perceived. Laura Brueck in her article “At the Intersection of Gender and Caste: Rescripting Rape in Dalit Feminist Narratives” examines:

The experience and threat of sexual violence against Dalit women and its impact on the narration of Dalit women's identities. Both Dalit and feminist communities have rhetorically constructed sexual violence as constitutive for Dalit women's identities. In these narratives, the Dalit woman's subjectivity is entirely erased. Brueck points out the centrality of what she calls “social scripting of sexual violence” in the debates in Dalit literature and literary criticism. (Brueck 2)

Rape, sexual atrocities, molestation, harassment, and disrobing are the different forms of oppression that the Dalit women face. Molestation and rape, sexual harassment and wife abuse and bias against the girl child are a global phenomenon. Gang rapes and custodial rapes, molestation, eve-teasing, bride burning, child and sexual abuse, prostitution, dowry, wife battering, domestic bias, and social injustice take a heavy burden on Dalit women. Sexual harassment outside the house is of the major atrocities.

Sivakami is one of the earliest Tamil Dalit writers to draw attention to the dual oppression of Dalit women--on account of their gender and caste, at the hands of the upper caste men as well as Dalit men. Her novel *The Grip of Change* has arranged the ground for a managed study of abusive behaviour at home and mishandling of Dalit women at home by Dalit men - fathers siblings, children, fathers-in-law, brothers -in-law, aside from sexual word related badgering looked by Dalit women outside their homes on account of upper rank men and the police. Double abuse of Dalit women on grounds of station and sexual orientation

frames an imperative issue of worry in Dalit Literature. Sivakami focuses on the violent exploitation of woman's body and points out how the family as an institution is embedded in patriarchal, oppressive system that is blatantly unjust to women. Dalit women's sexuality (whether daughter, wife or beloved) is violently contained and repressed.

Bama's writings observes that Dalit women's' subversive procedures to conquer their abuse. While some go about as vixens and overpower their alcoholic spouses with their abusive words and along these lines escape physical viciousness, some others grapple with the men while a few of them leave their violent husbands. Bama's novel *Sangati* represents Dalit women primarily as workers - - honest, hardworking, poorly-paid and exploited workers. Her novels record economic and sexual exploitation of Dalit women and argue that their Dalit identity renders them more vulnerable to injustice than other women workers. At the same time, they also point out that Dalit women are subjected to violence, brutal oppression not only by upper caste, male landlords or state administration but also by Dalit men.

Pramod K Nayar in his article, "The Politics of Form in Dalit Fiction: Bama's *Sangati* and Sivakami's *The Grip of Change*" explains that the narrative radicalization through the infusion of rights discourse and alternative storytelling voices energizes the genre of Indian fiction. The novel is no more a natural form as our genre criticism has demonstrated. Bama and Sivakami open up their novels to new trial shapes. Dalit fiction does not subvert mainstream Indian fiction by foregrounding authentic voices or folklore but by messily merging folklore - or contesting it - with the discourse of law, rights or Ambedkarite philosophy. Sexual violence on women at the work place is an important theme that is interrogated by these novelists. Though atrocities on Dalit women like rape and physical violence were occasionally reported in newspapers and sociological studies, they weren't considered as a subject meriting immense public discussion.

Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* is about Dalit women's dual oppression due to gender and caste depicted in great detail. It discusses the issue of Dalit leadership and points out the pitfalls inherent in an imitative model wherein Dalit leaders duplicate corruption and manipulative politics prevalent among empowered, upper caste politicians. This present novel's noteworthy commitment to Dalit discourse lay in its foregrounding of Dalit men's abusive treatment of Dalit females at home. The protagonist of the novel is Thangam, a poor parachi widow who suffers not only for being a Dalit but for being a woman, other too. Ironically, she is victimized even by her own Dalit community also. She faces triple marginalization economic oppression, gender subordination and caste discrimination. Thangam is treated as a 'body' in the novel. She is assaulted physically, verbally, and sexually not only by upper caste patriarchs but by the womanizers of her own community too. After the death of her husband she becomes a 'surplus woman' for her brothers-in-law and they force her to become a prostitute. Even her right on share of land is rejected on the basis of her infertile 'body' which could not produce child. She can get share of property only if her 'body' can satisfy their lust. As she tells Kathamuthu, "My husband's brother tried to force me, but I never gave in. they wouldn't give me my husband's land, but wanted me to be a whore for them! I wouldn't give in. . . ." (TGC 7). But, she is unable to save her body from the jaws of hierarchy. Hence, Thangam moves outside her home to earn her livelihood by working as a laborer in the fields of an upper class landlord Paranjothi Udayar and there she is raped by him. She narrates, "I didn't want it. But Udayar took no notice of me. He raped me when I was working in his sugarcane field. I remained silent; after all, he is my paymaster. He measures my rice. . ." (TGC 7). This brutality of class hierarchy made her 'subaltern' who can't even speak! Thus, poverty makes a poor widow to bear the sexual exploitation silently.

Caste is the most demoralizing aspect in a woman's identity who is already located at the periphery of a male dominated society. Caste disparities lead to violence against lower caste woman, who is expected to yield to upper caste male chauvinism. The cruelty of caste discrimination is exposed when she moves from passivity to active assertion of her angst against the exploiting masculine brutality and has to suffer social indignation. When the liaison between Udayar and Thangam is disclosed, Udayar's brothers-in-law attack her and beat her doggedly and even she is threatened to be killed. The duality of the upper class is exposed when Udayar abuses her:

Ungrateful whore! Even if she was hurt by the hand adorned with gold! A parachi could have never dreamt of being touched by a man like me! My touch was a boon granted for penance performed in her earlier births (TGC 31).

These words reveal the hypocrisy of Hindu caste system who at one hand hate the lower caste considering them untouchables, and at the other hand gratify their corporeal hunger through Dalit bodies. But, Thangam's saga of exploitation is not complete yet. Still she has to face oppression for being poor and particularly a 'woman' and now she is exploited at the hands of the rich of her own Dalit community. Unguarded in her own village, she seeks help in Arthur village but this help proves transitory. Not only her money is grabbed by her so called guardian Kathamuthu but her 'body' is also violated. The rich and influential Dalit Panchayat leader Kathamuthu who earlier gave shelter to Thangam turns into animal and once more her 'body' is abused. In an afternoon while she was sleeping in the kitchen, he rapes her and she is so tormented that she can't even see his face. And then she becomes a mistress to him forever. Ironically, Thangam epitomizes the dilemma of all the subjugated women as the novel projects her in a wretched condition of an outcaste from the beginning to the end. Mangalam in her article "Caste and Gender Interface in Tamil Dalit Discourse" point out that "Sivakami's fiction documents violence against women within the domestic space. Her fiction exposes caste and gender hierarchies outside and inside the home that renders the woman an outcaste in her community" (111).

Dalit women are victims of sexual harassment. Even before the sun rises, the Dalit woman goes to the field for her daily survival. When she returns home, she has to cook for her children and her drunken husband. She feels exhausted having worked throughout the day in the field under hot sun. She is forced to accommodate her husband at night whether she likes it or not. To the drunken husband, she is just an available body, not a woman with feelings. In her tiredness, if she refuses to share his bed, she is subjected to violent beating that she succumbs to him, finally. This harassment at home is worse than the treatment she received from the place where she works. In *Sangati*, Bama exposes such violence heaped on Dalit women, both within and without their communities.

Bama in *Sangati* explores how *Dalit* women engage patriarchy; this occurs between the narrator and her grandmother, or her mother, and occasionally turns into a conversation as another woman joins them. She goes on to state that Perimma's husband physically abused her as she refused to have sex with him because she was exhausted after laboring both field and home. Her Grandmother laments that she "reared a parrot and then handed it over to be mauled by a cat. Your *Periappan* (*Perimma's* husband) actually beat her to death. ... He killed her so outrageously, the bastard"(Sangati 10). When the narrator criticizes grandmother for not preventing the violence, the latter states that "she was helpless because she was a woman, and that *Perimma* did not have a male relative to protect her "(Sangati 10-11). Commenting on the reasons for domestic abuse, the narrator observes:

Even though they are male, because they are dalits, they have to be like dogs with their tails rolled up when they are in the fields, and dealing with their landlords. There is no way they can show their strength in those circumstances. So they show it at home on their wives and children. But then, is it the fate of our women to be tormented both outside their houses and within? (Sangati 65)

The narrator implies that caste and patriarchy are closely related to one another here. From her perspective, Dalit masculinity which is a consequence of discrete patriarchal norms, and is consolidated in the domestic sphere, is undermined in the work place through the physical exploitation and psychological humiliation imposed by the hierarchy of the caste structure. However, while the narrator sympathizes with the Dalit men and rationalizes the violence they inflict on the women, she does not justify this behavior. Towards the end of the commentary, the narrator explores how caste and gender oppression affects women. Whereas the narrator initially thought that women quarreled with each other in the evening and morning because they were busy working during the day, she "gradually ... came to understand the real reason" (Sangati 67). She views that women are triply oppressed. Like men, they are physically exploited and socially humiliated in the work place, but are also solely responsible for labour within the domestic sphere, and are also sexually and physically abused by their husbands. Not being able to rest at home or at work,

and being physically and sexually abused in both spheres, they take out their frustration on each other. For instance, she points out that though women will “raise hell” if their husbands have mistresses, when they quarrel with one another they often describe each other as “my husband’s whore.” For the narrator, this subordination of women by women, especially in sexual terms, legitimizes patriarchal norms. She states: We too have accepted what they want us to believe - that this is actually the right way, that our happiness lies in being enslaved to men. But if only we were to realize that we too have our self-worth, honour, and self-respect, we could manage our own lives in our own way. (Sangati 68)

Therefore, the narrator rationalizes this violence as a means for women to release their frustration from the economic, social, and physical exploitation that they suffer, at the hands of the upper castes, and the men of their community.

Women are constantly vulnerable to sexual harassment and abuse in the workplaces. Bama brings afore many characters in *Sangati* who were victimized for being a woman. Mariamma was accused, abused, and made a scapegoat because she escaped from the landlord's efforts to molest her. It shows that power rests with men, whether they are caste-courts or churches, the rules regarding sex differ for men and women. The men had the freedom to have concubines or even to end the marriage and it is accepted as natural: “They say he is a man, if he sees mud he'll step into it, if he sees water, he'll himself. It's one justice for men and quite another for women” (Sangati 24). *Bama's Sangati* traces an account upper caste tyranny towards the Dalit women in terms of labour, exploitation, and threat of rape. Being a Dalit woman is to constantly be on a bed of thorns. A Dalit woman has to safeguard her honour which is always insecure due to the sexual abuse fears from the upper caste men. The story of Mariamma (Bama's cousin) speaks the helplessness to assert. Mariamma becomes a victim of sexual advances by an upper caste landlord, Kumarasami. But she dare not raise her voice against this injustice for fear of social ostracizing. At the same time, Kumarasami inverts the whole incident for fear of defiling his image by making up a different story. He makes Mariamma a victim of lust, indulging in advances towards her Machaan Manikkam. The Panchayat singles her out, rarely giving a chance to talk her version, disgraces her in front of all and also forces her to pay fine more than the boy who is also involved in it. The women are not given an opportunity to talk and are chased away. Kalliamma's attempt to support Mariamma meets aggressive vehemence from the men folk who silence her.

Dalit women are humiliated and molested by men at work places. They are neither allowed to enact nor allowed go to theatres. They are ill-treated both by upper caste and by the Dalit men. Rakkamma, a Dalit woman in the text, shouts in a revolting way and shames her husband by lifting her sari in front of the crowd, when her husband drags her to the street by the hair and stamps her belly. It clearly means survival and escape. Bama does not forget to mark the oppression imposed on Dalit women by the upper caste men, who take privilege over their caste for protection. One such instance is Kumarasami, who attempts to molest Mariamma, turns the story upside down and as a result of which Mariamma undergoes disgrace among her community people and destines to marry an unmatched person against her wish. Mariamma who gets sick of life says, “For no fault of mine, I get abused wherever I go. Did I ever look that fellow in the face even? Yet the people of this village call me every kind of name” (Sangati 40).

Bama also brings out sexual exploitation of Dalit women outside and within the house. At workplace they have to escape the molestation by the landlords, while at home husbands are least bothered to understand them. They think of their own satisfaction without caring for their health and mood after day long's hard work. Work are overwhelmed and crushed by their own disgust, boredom and exhaustion due to physical exploitation, as a result, they are totally oppressed and succumb to mental ill-health. The novelist appeals to women folk that they must stand for themselves; they must be strong and must show that they believe ardently in their own independence:

It is we who must uphold our rights. We must stand up for ourselves and declare that we too are human beings like everyone else. If we believe that someone else is going to come and uplift us, then we are doomed to remain where we are, forever. (S 66)

CONCLUSION

This paper concentrates on sexual violence faced by the Dalit women in the hands of male like their own husbands, father, brother, and other upper caste men. Dalit literature has opened up new perspective on the Dalit women. The literary imagination weaves an oppressed and subjugated image of a Dalit women. But they explode the image of this helpless Dalit women tracing, their journey from “subjugation” to the heights of a “celebration” of their life. The truth is that a Dalit woman's problems are diverse and multifarious when compared to the other caste women which necessitated the need to articulate their plight. A Dalit woman's woes begin at home with her husband. She is a victim of caste oppression outside and a patriarchy outside and inside her home. Dalit women suffer multiple oppressions. Being women they are vulnerable, and being Dalit and poor, they are even more vulnerable. Dalit women, being illiterate or less educated, have no alternative than to work in the fields. They are as hard working as men. Landless labourers, they have to work in the fields of the landlords. They are the only employers who provide them a means of living. This helplessness of the poor Dalit women becomes their weakness, and the landlords take undue advantage of their misery. They molest and sexually abuse them. They know that if they complain against them, nobody will listen to them and the ultimately blame will rest on them, and at the same time they are afraid of losing means of living, as in such event the landlord will no longer allow them to work in their fields. In such circumstances, they prefer to be silent, and thus sexual exploitation continues endlessly. Through their writings, Sivakami and Bama have voiced on behalf of voiceless Dalit women against their age old patriarchal system.

WORKS CITED

- Sivakami.P. *The Grip of Change*, New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2006.
- Bama. *Sangati: Events*. Trans. Lakshmi Holmström. New Delhi: O U P, 2009.
- Nayar, Pramod K. “The Politics of Form in Dalit Fiction: Bama’s *Sangati* and Sivakami’s *The Grip of Change*” *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*. Vol 18, Issue 3, 2011,pp. 365-80 .
- Brueck, Laura. “The Emerging Complexity of Dalit Consciousness.” In: *Himal Southasian*. Online: <http://old.himalmag.com/himal-feed/54/19-the-emerging-complexity-of-Dalit-consciousness.html> [27.9.2014].
- Mangalam, B. “Caste and Gender Interface in Tamil Dalit Discourse.” *Signifying the Self: Women and Literature*. New Delhi: Macmillan, 2004.