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Research

Dalit Women and the Paradox of Freedom: A Comparative Reading of Caste and Gender in Bama's *Sangati*

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Abstract

Bama's *Sangati* has garnered critical acclaim for its vivid documentation of the lived realities of Dalit women in Tamil Nadu, serving as both a narrative and a social testimony. While the work is often celebrated for its unflinching portrayal of systemic caste and gender-based oppression, this paper contends that its most compelling contribution lies in its nuanced articulation of paradoxical freedoms—a form of agency that emerges not in spite of marginalisation, but through it. Drawing upon episodes of labour, physical mobility, childbirth, remarriage, linguistic autonomy, and acts of resistance, *Sangati* foregrounds how Dalit women forge spaces of empowerment within the harsh constraints imposed by a deeply patriarchal and caste-bound society. In contrast to upper-caste constructions of femininity rooted in ideals of purity, domesticity, and social respectability, Dalit women in *Sangati* display a distinct autonomy that manifests through their resilience, irreverent humour, collective solidarity, and unapologetic defiance. Their lives, as depicted by Bama, challenge normative definitions of freedom that equate liberation with protection or privilege. Instead, freedom is reimagined as active participation in community life, the capacity to endure hardship without surrendering dignity, and the audacity to rebel against inherited injustices. By centring subaltern female voices and their embodied experiences, this study argues that *Sangati* subverts dominant narratives of victimhood and foregrounds a radical vision of liberation that is grounded in everyday acts of survival and self-assertion. Ultimately, Bama's narrative framework compels a rethinking of both agency and freedom—not as the absence of struggle, but as a dynamic interplay of endurance, identity, and insurgent hope within structures of systemic exclusion.

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Introduction

Bama's *Sangati* offers a powerful and heartfelt glimpse into the lives of Dalit women in rural Tamil Nadu. But more importantly, it also "challenges the commonly held assumption that Dalit women's lives are defined solely by oppression." While caste and gender discrimination are central to the narrative, Bama reveals a lesser-known dimension: "the unexpected freedoms and resilience that Dalit women possess in comparison to their upper-caste counterparts." The collective voice of Paraiya women weaves through personal and shared narratives, forming what Bama calls "the autobiography of a community."

Rebellion through Labour and Mobility

Dalit women, though subject to systemic oppression, experience a relative mobility and freedom compared to upper-caste women. "Unlike the rigid and stifling codes of 'respectability' that often bind upper-caste women," Dalit women traverse public spaces as labourers and breadwinners. As Bama writes, "Their lively and rebellious culture... their self-confidence and self-respect... enable them to leap over threatening adversities by laughing at and ridiculing them" (Bama ix). Their ability to work in the fields, markets, and homes grants them visibility and communal interaction, which is denied to upper-caste women bound by notions of purity and honour. "Because Dalit women frequently work outside the home as labourers or wage earners, they move through public spaces... with a kind of mobility that upper-caste women... are denied."

Reproductive Rights and Classed Motherhood

Sangati starkly contrasts the reproductive experiences of Dalit and upper-caste women. As Paatti laments, "We have to labour in the fields as hard as men do, and then on top of that, struggle to bear and raise our children... If you are born into this world, it is best you were born a man... We only toil in the fields and in the home until our very vaginas shrivel" (Sangati, 7). Dalit women like Pachmuukipillai give birth in fields while cutting grass; upper-caste women deliver children in hospitals with rest and care. "Upper-caste women can afford the luxury of safe deliveries in hospitals," while Dalit women return to hard labour "almost immediately after childbirth, with no rest or support." The control over their reproductive lives is undermined further when "the men argue that they'll lose their strength if they [undergo birth control]," and women fear sterilization because "they will not be able to work in the fields as before."

Marriage, Violence, and "Half-lives"

Through the tragic and poignant stories of Mariamma and Thaayi, Bama lays bare the brutal realities of marriage for Dalit women, portraying it not as a space of companionship or protection, but as a site of entrapment, subjugation, and normalized violence. In Mariamma's case, the act of resisting sexual assault by an upper-caste landowner's son does not bring justice or sympathy—instead, it results in punishment for her. Rather than standing by the victim, the community blames her, fearing social disgrace. The council imposes a fine, and her family forces her into a hurried marriage with Manikkam, a man known for his alcoholism and abusive behaviour. What should

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have been a moment of communal outrage against caste-based sexual violence becomes, instead, a tragic reinforcement of patriarchal control and victim-blaming. The narrator's bitter reflection captures the weight of this injustice: "One should never be born a woman" (Sangati, 42). This line encapsulates the hopelessness felt by countless women who, like Mariamma, are doubly punished—first by the assault itself, and then by the very community that should have supported them. Thaayi's story further illustrates the terrifying impunity with which male violence is enacted and accepted within marriage. A fair-skinned Dalit Christian woman, Thaayi is publicly beaten by her husband with a belt—a cruel and dehumanizing act meant to assert dominance and control. When Karuthamuthu, a cousin, attempts to intervene, the husband asserts his perceived right over his wife's body and life with chilling authority: "She's my wife, I can beat or even kill her as I wish" (Sangati, 43). The public nature of this violence, met with silence and inaction, underscores how deeply normalized such brutality has become. The assault culminates in a symbolic act of humiliation—Thaayi's long hair is cut off by her husband and hung on the doorway, transforming her suffering into a grotesque public spectacle. This act is not just one of domestic violence; it is a calculated form of social shaming, designed to strip her of dignity and mark her as disgraced. The tragic aspect of both stories lies in the acceptance of suffering as an inevitable part of womanhood. As the narrator's grandmother, Paatti, reflects with weary resignation, "Once you've put your head in the mortar... No, she must continue to suffer" (Sangati, 44). This proverb captures the entrenched belief that once a woman is married, her life—regardless of how abusive or unbearable it may become—is no longer her own. She must endure silently, even if it costs her health, dignity, or life itself. Paatti's statement echoes a cultural ethos where a woman's endurance of pain is seen as virtue, and her attempt to escape it is seen as dishonour. By including these stories without melodrama or overt sentimentality, Bama emphasizes how such violence is not exceptional but systemic. These women are not portrayed as anomalies but as representatives of a larger pattern of domestic abuse, sanctioned by both patriarchal and casteist ideologies. What makes these narratives even more devastating is the casual, matter-of-fact way in which they are recounted—showing that within the community, such suffering is routine, expected, and, tragically, normalized.

Vocal Resistance and the Power of Language

Dalit women, as portrayed in *Sangati*, do not suffer in silence—they fight back with voice, defiance, and unflinching honesty. In a society where physical resistance is often curtailed by systemic oppression and social vulnerability, language becomes their most potent tool of survival and rebellion. This is vividly illustrated in the episode of Rakkammaa, a woman who endures brutal domestic abuse at the hands of her husband, Pakkijaraj. Unlike many women who are forced into submission, Rakkammaa chooses a different path. She screams, shouts, curses, and exposes herself in public—a radical act of resistance within her conservative community. The narrator notes: "She screamed and shouted and behaved like that" (Sangati, 62), and only then does the violence cease. This moment is powerful not because Rakkammaa escapes violence entirely, but because she reclaims agency through her refusal to be a passive victim. Her resistance, though chaotic and unconventional, is a clear assertion of her right to dignity. Such expressions are not anomalies in the world of *Sangati*. Dalit women's language—often raw, abrasive, even abusive—is not framed by Bama as crude or immoral, but as a form of social protest and emotional ventilation. It is a

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reaction to the multiple layers of exploitation they face: caste, patriarchy, poverty, and neglect. Their speech, unlike the silence imposed on upper-caste women, allows them a channel to articulate suffering and anger. Bama draws a sharp contrast: “Upper-caste women, though, keep it all suppressed; they can neither chew nor swallow. They lose their nerve, and many of them become unstable or mentally ill” (Sangati, 68). This comparison sharply critiques the ideal of feminine “refinement” upheld in upper-caste households. While silence and submission may be construed as virtues in those contexts, Bama exposes their destructive psychological consequences. The cost of repression, she suggests, is not only internalized trauma but a life of suffocation and erasure. The narrator’s scorn for upper-caste ideals of femininity and respectability is expressed in biting satire. She mocks the romanticization of domesticity and refinement, drawing attention to the physical and emotional labour that Dalit women perform every day: “Ask them to do all that we do in a day—care for the children, look after the house, and do all the chores. They’ll collapse after a single day of it, and that will be the end of their big talk and their fat arses” (Sangati, 66). Here, the speaker not only ridicules the fragility of upper-caste women but also underscores the unacknowledged strength and endurance of Dalit women. In another metaphor rich with subversion, she tears down the illusion of upper-caste femininity: “It looks a stylish hair-knot, decorated with screw pine flowers; but it’s all lice and nits within” (Sangati, 67). This imagery exposes the deep hypocrisy in caste-based notions of purity and beauty, showing how appearances mask inner decay, repression, and misery. The external glamour of upper-caste life, built on aesthetic and ritualistic superiority, hides psychological distress and gendered bondage. In contrast, Dalit women’s world, though marked by toil and hardship, is a space where truth is spoken openly, pain is vocalized, and dignity is reclaimed through speech and solidarity. Their loudness, their unfiltered expressions, and their vulgarities become acts of defiance against both patriarchy and caste hierarchy. In refusing silence, Dalit women demand to be heard—not only within their own communities but in the broader discourse of gender justice and social reform.

Dowry, Widowhood, and Cultural Contrasts

In *Sangati*, Bama foregrounds the distinct marital customs and gender norms of the Paraiya community to highlight the contrast between Dalit and upper-caste social structures, especially in relation to women’s agency. One of the most striking examples is the practice of *parisam*, or bride price, where the groom offers compensation to the bride’s family—a reversal of the upper-caste dowry system that commodifies women and often results in violence and humiliation for brides. As Bama asserts, “In our streets, there is no snatching and grabbing in the name of dowry and such-like” (Sangati, 89). This practice grants a measure of dignity and value to Dalit women, reinforcing the idea that a woman is not a financial burden but an individual whose marriage warrants mutual respect and recognition. However, Bama is equally critical of the creeping desire within her community to imitate upper-caste traditions, a mimicry she finds both futile and self-destructive. She writes, “Whatever rituals we copy... they, for their part, always rate us as beneath them” (Sangati, 89), underscoring the reality that social status cannot be altered by superficial adoption of dominant caste customs, and that such attempts only reinforce the existing hierarchies. This tension between cultural authenticity and aspirational conformity is further explored through the treatment of widows. In upper-caste communities, widowhood is often marked by

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dehumanizing restrictions and public shame, but in the Paraiya community, remarriage is normalized and accepted. “Some women marry a second time after the death of a husband. That is quite normal among us... On the other hand... the indignities suffered by widows” (Sangati, 90), Bama writes, highlighting the stark difference in how autonomy is extended to women depending on caste. The text even presents cases where women remarry while their first husbands are still alive, such as Pecchiamma, who casually shares, “Yes, she was born after my second marriage... I have two children from my first” (Sangati, 91), indicating a radical space of marital and sexual agency rarely available to women in more dominant caste and religious groups. The narrator, reflecting on these freedoms, acknowledges their liberatory potential: “Because it meant a woman need not spend her entire life, burning and dying, with a man she dislikes” (Sangati, 93). In doing so, Bama presents the Paraiya community not as a passive recipient of caste-based oppression alone, but as a culture that, despite material poverty and social marginalization, holds within it subversive, liberating possibilities for women—possibilities that defy both Brahmanical patriarchy and institutionalized religion.

Shared Labour and Gender Flexibility

In *Sangati*, Bama highlights how Dalit community practices often blur rigid gender roles, offering a contrast to the highly stratified gender norms of upper-caste society. Tasks are not strictly divided by sex; instead, there is a spirit of shared responsibility, as seen in the statement, “Everyone will go to the graveyard, both men and women... Everyone does everything” (Sangati, 89). This flexibility, born out of necessity, fosters a sense of collective participation often absent in patriarchal upper-caste settings. However, this egalitarianism exists alongside harsh realities—women return to work just days after childbirth because “They don’t have the means to pay for hospital care. And neither nurses nor doctors will come into our streets...” (Sangati, 90). In contrast, Nagamma Kizhavi criticizes the restrictive lives of upper-caste women: “Those women submit to their men all the time and are as shut in and controlled, like snakes locked up in boxes” (Sangati, 111). Echoing this sentiment, Marypillai expresses an unexpected but powerful conclusion: “When I see all that, I often think... I’m actually lucky to be born into the Paraiya community” (Sangati, 113). These reflections reveal how, despite poverty and caste oppression, Dalit women experience certain social freedoms and communal dignity that are denied to their upper-caste counterparts.

Celebrating Dalit Identity: Beauty, Joy, and Everyday Acts of Defiance

In *Sangati*, Bama challenges caste-based aesthetics and reclaims the cultural identity of Dalit women, emphasizing their unique expressions of beauty and dignity. The narrator observes, “The way we wear our saris... and knot it to one side—all these have their own beauty. But... we have wanted to copy upper-caste ways and customs” (Sangati, 113), pointing to the internalized shame imposed by dominant caste ideals. Yet, rather than succumbing to this erasure, the narrative reaffirms the vibrancy, resilience, and pride embedded in Dalit customs. This reclamation extends beyond appearance to everyday acts of joy and quiet defiance. In a moment of reflection, Rendupalli questions the lack of freedom among upper-caste women: “Do they have freedom to come and jump into water and swim?” (Sangati, 117), highlighting the restrictions faced by women supposedly more privileged. Her mother adds with pride, “At least we don’t have such customs...

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both the sexes go to work and earn a livelihood. So why should boys be valued more?” (Sangati, 115). Through these observations, Bama illustrates how, despite economic hardship and systemic marginalization, Dalit women find spaces to live freely, express themselves openly, and celebrate their identity without the suffocating weight of patriarchal and casteist norms.

Conclusion

Sangati is not just a story of suffering; it is a manifesto of resistance. Dalit women, despite double oppression, create their own spaces of freedom—whether through song, work, speech, or solidarity. They “don’t kill their daughters in fear of dowry,” they remarry without stigma, and they “refuse to let the world define [their] worth.” “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). These women “laugh together, grieve and move forward, and make their voices heard—even when the world tries to silence them.” In doing so, they remind us that freedom is not a privilege granted but a right lived—in resistance, in resilience, and in sisterhood.

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